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The Rise of Digital Media and the Retooling of Politics

It is June 2015 and the famous American reality-TV personality Donald Trump announces his bid for the Republican nomination to the 2016 race for the US presidency. Journalists, Republican donors, and prospective voters now have to decide if they should take his bid seriously. The history of American presidential campaigns is littered with celebrities and third-party candidates who tried to capitalize on their fame or success by entering politics. While some like Ronald Reagan, Arnold Schwarzenegger, or Michael Bloomberg proved to be successful, most celebrity candidacies turned out to be mere blips in the history of American politics. How should observers decide on whether Donald Trump's bid fell into the first or the second category? The Trump campaign portrayed their candidate as being in touch with the long-forgotten people lacking a voice in US politics (Green 2017), a group that the campaign of the Democratic frontrunner Hillary Clinton helpfully labeled "deplorables" (Chozick 2016). To assess the validity of Trump's claims, journalists decided to take to social media as a source of how well his message resonated with the public.

True to his past as a controversial reality-TV star, Trump regularly posted highly controversial and provocative messages on Twitter, agitating against immigrants, denigrating opponents, and taunting the media (Barbaro 2015). This meant breaking protocol with established campaigning styles and contradicting expectations of appropriate behavior for presidential candidates. But publicly visible interactions with tweets in the form of retweets, likes, or mentions allowed the campaigns and onlookers to assess the relative popularity of the claims. Reportedly, this made Trump's tweets a weather gauge for the campaign to assess the fit of messages for their intended audience (Green 2017, 128). Journalists read these publicly visible metrics as signs of Trump being in touch with Americans. Let us for the moment ignore whether social media metrics indeed offer a true reflection of public opinion; in 2015 their use

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as such helped transform a reality-TV personality into the Republican presidential candidate and ultimately into the US President.

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It is spring 2016, but in Britain politicos of all stripes are not enjoying the first sunny days on the sceptered isle. Instead, they are hard at work. On June 23, British voters are called to decide in a referendum on Britain's status in the EU. Loose coalitions across party lines work overtime trying to convince Britons of "Britain Stronger in Europe" or that they should "Vote Leave" (Shipman 2016). Although both campaigns were well funded, could rely on seasoned campaigners, and were aligned with powerful political parties and factions, they still faced a common challenge: How to contact voters? Established parties and other political organizations, such as labor unions and nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), spend years on building contact lists. They collect names and contact information of members, sympathizers, and people who get in touch with the organizations. These lists allow an organization to contact people directly at a later point, to mobilize them to vote, to protest, or to provide them with pertinent information on current events. In the past, the power of established parties and political organizations has in no small part rested on their being the only actors who were able to quickly reach a significant subset of the population (Bimber 2003). But how should an organization such as "Vote Leave," that was founded only a few months earlier, develop a list of people and establish how to contact them?

"Vote Leave" ended up using two different approaches. For one, the campaign went to where likeminded people already interacted: the Facebook pages of eurosceptics. By running targeted ads to people who had liked well-known eurosceptic Facebook pages, "Vote Leave" reached users sympathetic to their message and tried to have them register in the campaign's database. Facebook's ad manager tool even allowed the campaign to identify users who shared characteristics with users who had liked eurosceptic pages but had not liked these pages themselves, thereby allowing "Vote Leave" to move beyond the eurosceptic core (Shipman 2016, 416f.). In addition, on May 27, four weeks before the referendum, the "Vote Leave" campaign announced a prize of 50 million pounds to everyone who correctly predicted the winner of all 51 matches in the Euro 2016, an international soccer tournament held in France that summer. Participants were asked for their names and contact information. Some 120,000 people responded. The contact list of "Vote Leave" had just grown significantly at no cost to the campaign as the odds of winning this bet were tiny and nobody won the prize. The list was later put to use by the campaign in an intensive outreach blast over the last 24 hours of the campaign, when half a million text messages were sent reminding people to vote (Shipman

2016, 407; Cummings 2017). We can debate the question of how significant this effort was in face of 17.4 million votes in favor of Britain leaving the EU (Editorital Team 2016). But given that only 1.3 million fewer voters favored remaining in the Union, any small edge could have been decisive.

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We could have chosen similar examples from many other countries. The actors and causes may have been less prominent, but the challenges actors faced and the way they addressed them by using digital tools would have corresponded strikingly with these examples. All over the world, politicians, campaigns, NGOs, activists, and citizens are using digital tools in politics. They use them to pursue needs that are as old as politics: How do I get the media to pay attention to me and what I say? How do I get my message out? How do I get people mobilized when it counts? How do I coordinate my team in order to reach as many people as possible? How do I build an organization? How do I decide whom to contact and whom to ignore? All these needs have existed and have been met countless times well before the introduction of digital media. But digital media have changed the way political actors pursue such needs. Digital media have provided political actors with new tools and in turn changed the way some of politics is done: They have retooled politics and through this continue to shape the practice of democracy. This book is about these universal political needs of participants in politics, the way they are pursued by the use of digital media, and the way digital media are retooling the practice of politics in contemporary democracies.

We believe the available evidence does not point to a fundamental transformation of politics through digital technology. Instead, we believe digital media play an essential role in fulfilling a series of universal needs for political actors in the pursuit of their goals in democracies. Digital media change politics, but not necessarily in a fundamental way, overturning established power structures. Instead, change happens in democracies within established institutional frameworks. This first leads to changes in political practices, moving on to processes, and might even result in the emergence of new voices. Yet, as such changes are gradual and embedded in existing power structures and institutions, they will not transform politics fundamentally. They do, however, retool politics, as described in what follows.

Digital media have changed the character and business model of news organizations; many actors have turned into active participants in political communication spaces and are able to push content or commentary in information flows, while audiences have an increasingly active role in determining which stories and perspectives rise to prominence and travel widely. This has

led to the erosion of power and authority of traditional media organizations, allowed for a much more active contestation of political facts, and contributes to the emergence of new voices in political discourse.

This process has changed the channels and routes through which political information reaches people. Political actors have to adapt to the new dynamics of information spaces by establishing new channels to reach people directly, develop relationships with new allies that allow them to reach people indirectly, and to adapt to new rhythms and communicative conventions in these environments. This results in the emergence of new intermediaries in public discourse who until now had no business or institutional dealings with politics, such as providers of digital platforms, while at the same time weakening the influence of traditional intermediaries, such as media companies.

The move into new communicative environments and use of new technologies has impacted the type and strength of effects political information has on recipients. Depending on your point of view, this might lead to a growing divide between politically interested and uninterested audiences, political polarization, or strong persuasive effects of information shared by friends online. Yet any discussion of effects has to remain conscious of the social and motivational embeddings of digital media that might weaken or offset any direct effects. Moreover, technological change in digital media makes establishing cumulative evidence over time difficult as different developmental stages of digital technology differ in likely effect patterns.

Digital tools have changed the way political actors coordinate supporters and collective action. Allowing people to coordinate quickly and at low cost has been seen as an important element in strengthening democratic movements in autocracies and vitalizing Western democracies in giving protest movements voice and presence in public discourse. While true, this optimistic view tends to emphasize the role of digital media in collective action, allowing the coordination of people already willing to participate. While important, this is only one element in collective action. Often the more difficult part is getting people to cooperate in the first place, and here digital media's contribution is limited.

Digital media have been also charged with deep impact on political organization. By taking over central functions of organizations in politics – such as the keeping of membership lists thus allowing for the coordination of collective action and the publication and dissemination of information – digital media are seen by some as making political organizations superfluous. Success stories of decentralized issue-driven protest movements, such as #MeToo or #Occupy, are often raised to illustrate the potential for politics without central organizations. Yet these accounts often skip over the short duration of these

movements, their difficulty in exerting political change beyond an initial capturing of the public agenda, and the troubles that come with informal hierarchies. So, while digital media probably will not lead to the end of formal political organizations, they initiate adaptation processes with regard to funding, membership types, and networks of allied organizations and groups for traditional political organizations.

Finally, through new measurement opportunities and metrics, digital media have changed the way political actors are seeing the world. By increasing data storage and computing power and by collecting ever more data on people's interactions with digital tools and sensors, digital technology has significantly extended the data available to political actors, journalists, and the public. Correspondingly, the hopes and fears associated with data-driven practices in politics have skyrocketed. While some have hoped for an increasing role for data-driven practices, making politics more evidence-based and efficient, others point to the well-known dangers of management-by-metrics, losing sight of what actually matters in favor of what happens to be easy to measure. Yet others point to the dangers of rampant surveillance. While neither hopes nor fears are likely to materialize in full, this is an important area, shifting the way politicians, bureaucrats, journalists, and the public make sense of the world, thus highlighting the need to figure out which part of political reality tends to be emphasized or neglected by digital metrics.

This, in turn, has shaped the way contemporary democracy is practiced all over the world and has given rise to new expectations as to how and what democracy is supposed to deliver. While a radical deepening of democracy with regard to its reach in societal areas and breadth of participation is unlikely to materialize, the impact of digital media on democracies is clearly felt. This impact can be felt in the monitoring of politicians by individuals or institutions, the mediating or unmediating of the relationship between political elites and the public, the reshaping of relationships in the political representation of citizens through politicians and parties, and the fragility of political information environments. This impact is pervasive, albeit not necessarily transformative in changing fundamental characteristics in practiced democracy.

In light of the apparent role of digital media in getting Donald Trump elected, as well as their supposed role in shifting the British electorate toward Brexit and inciting democratic revolutions in autocracies, our claim of a non-transformative impact might feel like a callous provocation. Yet a closer look reveals that although the role of digital media in these events was highly visible and without a doubt instrumental, it was far from decisive in causing the outcome. But we have to be careful. Just because digital media might not

have shifted the balance of political power decisively does not mean they did not have an impact on politics.

To generally declare digital media to have transformed politics is highly simplistic and risks mistaking the presentation of politics for its substance. On the other hand, declaring that digital media have not touched politics at all means being willfully blind to weak or indirect effects of digital media on politics, such as, for example, changing the institutional and organizational foundations of public discourse or collective action. In fact, the practice of contemporary politics is deeply shaped by the use of digital media. They have retooled politics by providing political actors with new ways to pursue their political needs and changed how some of politics is done. Yet, in assessing the role of digital media, we have to take care not to over- or underestimate their impact. This might make for slightly less exciting reading than an inspirational tale of empowering change. It has the benefit, though, of providing an accurate account of the multifaceted and pervasive impact of digital media on politics.

1.1 What to Expect?

We aim to provide a fresh perspective on the role of digital media in politics. We do so by taking a needs-oriented perspective. We start by asking what needs political actors share in the pursuit of political goals in democracies and how they have used digital media to help them. This allows us to examine the role of digital media in politics by focusing on the specific needs faced by political actors and organizations. This needs-oriented discussion allows us to identify areas in politics impacted by digital media and areas remaining more or less untouched. We thus transcend a false dichotomy between transform-ation and stasis and are able to identify effects in unexpected areas and in varying degrees of impact.

We mainly discuss democracies. While we also discuss the role of digital media in the transition from autocratic systems into democracies, we will touch on this fleetingly. In autocratic political systems, politics and communication have a lower impact and do not necessarily follow the same dynamics as in democracies. An additional challenge is that the literature on digital media in politics is very thin on cases from Africa, Asia, Latin America, Russia, and South America (for welcome exceptions see Oates 2013; Livingston and Walter-Drop 2014; F. L. Lee and Chan 2018; Nyabola 2018). This is deeply problematic as digital media are, of course, pervasively used in these regions, which offer different institutional and political settings from those in Western democracies. This makes them very interesting cases for the uses and effects of

digital media under alternative institutional and cultural contexts. Given the underdeveloped state of the literature, this discussion will have to wait for the future.

We will rely heavily on cases and findings from the United States. This forces the question of what we can learn from US-based findings. The crux of the matter is that the United States is the democracy in which digital media have developed the furthest, are adopted most widely, and have shown the most obvious effects in politics. Consequently, it is also the country where digital media and their role in politics have been examined most closely. Accordingly, this makes the United States the environment for which we have the broadest collection of well-understood cases. Furthermore, for better or worse, US politics is followed closely internationally. This allows us to refer to cases that most readers of this book can be expected to be familiar with.

And yet the United States is also very different from any other democracy. For one, elections are a multi-million-dollar industry. This has led to the emergence of a rich ecosystem of consultancies willing and able to invest in the development of digital tools and services supporting candidates on any level of politics. Over the last twenty years political discourse in the country has degenerated into a veritable blood sport, with the two sides of the aisle pummeling each other mercilessly. This has led to a weakening of political institutions, rendering them highly vulnerable to challenges by digital media.

Any uncritical generalizations on the role of digital media in politics based on cases and findings from the United States is obviously deeply naive. Yet nor should we ignore what we can learn about the role of digital in politics from US-based studies. Instead, when we discuss US cases and findings we provide the respective context. This allows readers to draw their own conclusions and assess whether or not the cases and findings discussed here travel successfully to other contexts of interest.

1.2 Digital Media and the Needs of Political Actors

When we use the term *digital media*, we combine a broad concept of media as found in sociology and communication research with a technology-centric perspective as found in computer and information science. We refer to institutions and infrastructures that produce and distribute information encoded in binary code. On the one hand, this anchors us with uses of a specific technology: the production, encoding, storing, distributing, decoding, and consumption of information in binary code. On the other hand, it allows us to broadly discuss institutions, organizations, and practices associated with the use of this

specific technology. Thus, in our discussion of the role of digital media in politics, we can address political uses of specific technologies, such as email for political organization and coordination or weblogs as hosts for politically relevant information. We can also address the institutional and organizational settings this technology is embedded in and respective changes – for example, the impact of the widespread use of online ads by sellers and buyers of goods on the newspaper industry, or the consequences of ad hoc issue-based mobilization on the political economy of political organizations.[1]

We also use the terms *digital tools* and *digital services*. By digital tools we mean specific instances of digital technology that, in principle, could be used in the pursuit of specific political needs or goals. This could be websites, e-mail, or social networking sites. With digital services, we refer to processes that enable the embedding of digital tools in structural or organizational environments. Digital services thus allow for the strategic uses of digital tools by political actors. Providers of digital services can be political organizations themselves, for example by way of dedicated divisions, or third-party vendors specialized for political customers, or providers of general-purpose services, such as Facebook, Twitter, or Google. For example, in our terminology databases are a digital tool for political parties and candidates to store and access information on potential voters. The process of conceptualizing populations of interest, translating this into statistical models, identifying corresponding individuals in the database, and making their contact information available to local campaigners on the ground who can then knock on doors is an example of a digital service. This allows us to differentiate between digital technology and the institutional processes governing the actual use of the said technology in politics.

In order to characterize the political effects of digital media we have to differentiate between three elements of the political system: polity, policy, and politics (Heidenheimer 1986). *Polity* refers to the institutional and normative foundations of political systems. Here, the impact of digital media is indirect. If we find polity change associated with digital media – such as a very

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[1] Our definition is a combination of definitions of *media* by Couldry (2012) and *digitality* by Boast (2017). Couldry defines media as "the institutional dimensions of communication, whether as infrastructure or content, production or circulation" (Couldry 2012, 2). In his history of digital technology, Boast emphasizes the nature of digital as encoding wide varieties of information in a uniform format: "what makes the digital, as we use it today, *digital* is that the combination of ons and offs, in very specific albeit complex ways, encodes information. Over the past 150 years these codes have encoded all types of information, including all of our media. Translating or encoding something, a mediation, into a code of ons and offs – this is digital, and this is the foundation of all digital technology" (Boast 2017, 10). Combining both perspectives allows us to account for the social and institutional embedding of digital media as well as the characteristics of digital technology and its role in encoding information.

optimistic reading of the events around the Arab Spring – then it will be realized through politics and changes in the power dynamic between societal interests. *Policy* is the content of rules and decisions of institutions in societies that are collectively binding for each member of society. Here, the impact of digital media can be expected to be felt on the establishment of guidelines for institutions and state organizations on how to use digital media and rules and regulations concerning the public use and provision of digital technology and services. These changes are likely to be gradual and within an existing framework of institutional governance and regulation of technology and services. They are not the subject of this book. Finally, *politics* is the process in which societal interests compete in order to influence the content of policy or to gain representation in institutions of the state which develop, implement, or adjudicate the application of policy. In this competition the impact of digital media on politics should become visible most clearly.

In political competition for positions, influence, or policies actors and organizations have a series of needs:

- they need access to the flow of political information in mass media, online communication, and political talk;
- they need to reach people with their message either directly or indirectly through collaboration with other societal actors;
- they need to change minds in order to convince people of their position or to mobilize them into action;
- they need to coordinate others sharing the same interests or concerns into public expression or into collective action;
- they need to form and maintain organizations; and
- they need to collect data about the world and then interpret and assess that data.

In the pursuit of these needs, digital media provide communicative environments and the degree to which digital media structure communicative environments in politics and allow actors and organizations to systematically improve their relative position shows us the influence of digital media on politics.

Access to the Flow of Political Information

Political information flows through societies like water flowing from a spring into a river, broadening into a delta before spilling into the sea. Information starts at the source by someone covering an event, leaking a story, launching a press release, etc. Most of these initial information inputs evaporate quickly as they fail to attract amplification, whether through prolonged talk or through

media coverage. Amplification through media coverage is crucial for any piece of information to travel far and wide through societies. Without it, information remains limited to a small community of interest without developing larger societal impact. Political actors and activists must find access to this flow of political information, otherwise their public visibility and that of their causes and concerns remains low, making it unlikely that they will be able to mobilize public opinion successfully for their political goals.

In the past, gaining access to the flow of political information meant attracting or influencing mass media coverage. In the age of broadcast television, this meant designing events based on their appeal to television cameras, producing short, catchy soundbites sure to make it into news coverage, or staging a series of events lending themselves to an attractive narrative. On a more mundane level, this could also mean having dedicated staff acting as media liaisons, keeping in continuous contact with journalists or designated talking heads. Attracting media coverage also required adapting to the temporal rhythms of news production, for example by timing one's press conferences, releases, rebuttals, or high points during partially televised speeches exactly in accordance with the production schedules of news programs or newspapers. In this process, a balance between political actors and organizations, journalists and media organizations, and consultants emerged that contributed to and shaped the flow of political information. Digital media have shaken this balance to the core.

Digital media have extended the number of outlets covering politics as well as increased the variance of production modes, coverage guidelines, and business models of political news production and consumption. Gone are the days when only a handful of media organizations decided on what is news and agreed on a set of editorial standards in the coverage of politics. The contemporary media system encompasses any number of outlets covering politics, from lowbrow muckraking to highbrow investigative journalism. The discerning reader can choose freely among many online political news outlets according to her tastes. On the one hand, this means access to information is harder to contain for political elites, so transparency might increase. On the other hand, this also means that journalistic standards are tougher to uphold as sensationalist coverage is only one click away. *In extremis*, the abundance of voices and the difficulty in agreeing on common points of view might lead to epistemic crises over what version of political events or even which facts the public can agree on. Current concerns about purposeful disinformation or so-called fake news are very much a consequence of this development.

The abundant amount of free coverage online makes it harder for news organizations to charge for coverage. Why pay for information that others