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Leetocracy

Political participation, social network sites and inequality

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Leetocracy

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Political participation, social network sites and inequality



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Nils Gustafsson

Lund Political Studies 169
Department of Political Science



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Till Maria och Tage

Table of Contents

Acknowledgements	11
List of papers	13
1. Introduction	15
2. Summary of the articles	19
2.1 Article 1: Are Social Network Sites Reducing Inequality in Political Participation? (2013)	19
2.2 Article 2: This Time it's Personal (2010)	20
2.3 Article 3: Leetocracy (2011)	21
2.4 Article 4: Mainstreaming the Alternative (2010)	22
2.5 Article 5: The Subtle Nature of Facebook Politics (2012)	22
2.6 Article 6: An Awkward Tool (2013)	23
2.7 How they fit together	24
3. Political Participation	27
3.1 What is political participation?	27
3.2 What brings about political participation?	31
3.2.1 Background factors	32
3.2.2 Resource factors	33
3.2.3 Collective incentives	35
3.2.4 Selective incentives	35
4. Social Network Sites	37
4.1 Web 2.0 and its friends	37
4.1.1 New media	37

4.1.2 Web 2.0	37
4.1.3 Social media	39
4.1.4 Social network sites	40
5. Social Network Sites and Political Participation	43
5.1 Optimists, pessimists and technological determinism	43
5.2 The mobilisation hypothesis	46
5.2.1 Effects on costs	47
5.2.2 Effects on benefits	48
5.2.3 Evidence for the mobilisation hypothesis	48
5.3 The reinforcement hypothesis	49
5.3.1 Effects on costs	49
5.3.2 Effects on benefits	50
5.3.3 Evidence for the reinforcement hypothesis	50
5.4 The use of the hypotheses in this dissertation	50
6. Methodologies	53
6.1 A note on studying an exploding field	53
6.2 Studying social media online and offline	54
6.3 Methods employed in the articles	55
6.4 Sweden as a critical case for studying the effects of social media use on political participation	57
7. Conclusion	59
7.1 The general argument	59
7.2 Limitations	59
7.2.1 Space	59
7.2.2 Time	60
7.3 Further research	60
7.4 Policy implications	61
References	63

Socrates. At the Egyptian city of Naucratis, there was a famous old god, whose name was Theuth; the bird which is called the Ibis is sacred to him, and he was the inventor of many arts, such as arithmetic and calculation and geometry and astronomy and draughts and dice, but his great discovery was the use of letters. Now in those days the god Thamus was the king of the whole country of Egypt; and he dwelt in that great city of Upper Egypt which the Hellenes call Egyptian Thebes, and the god himself is called by them Ammon. To him came Theuth and showed his inventions, desiring that the other Egyptians might be allowed to have the benefit of them; he enumerated them, and Thamus enquired about their several uses, and praised some of them and censured others, as he approved or disapproved of them. It would take a long time to repeat all that Thamus said to Theuth in praise or blame of the various arts. But when they came to letters, This, said Theuth, will make the Egyptians wiser and give them better memories; it is a specific both for the memory and for the wit. Thamus replied: O most ingenious Theuth, the parent or inventor of an art is not always the best judge of the utility or inutility of his own inventions to the users of them. And in this instance, you who are the father of letters, from a paternal love of your own children have been led to attribute to them a quality which they cannot have; for this discovery of yours will create forgetfulness in the learners' souls, because they will not use their memories; they will trust to the external written characters and not remember of themselves. The specific which you have discovered is an aid not to memory, but to reminiscence, and you give your disciples not truth, but only the semblance of truth; they will be hearers of many things and will have learned nothing; they will appear to be omniscient and will generally know nothing; they will be tiresome company, having the show of wisdom without the reality.

Phaedrus. Yes, Socrates, you can easily invent tales of Egypt, or of any other country.

Plato, *Phaedrus*.

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List of papers

Article 1: Gustafsson, Nils (2013). ‘Are Social Network Sites Reducing Inequality in Political Participation?’ Submitted to *Journal of Information Technology and Politics*.

Article 2: Gustafsson, Nils (2010). ‘This Time It’s Personal. Social Networks, Viral Politics and Identity Management’ in Riha, Daniel and Maj, Anna (eds.) *Emerging Practices in Cyberspace and Social Networking*. Amsterdam/New York: Editions Rodopi, pp. 3-24.

Article 3: Breindl, Yana & Gustafsson, Nils (2011). ‘Leetocracy: Networked Political Activism or the Continuation of Elitism in Competitive Democracy’ in Araya, Daniel, Breindl, Yana & Houghton, Tessa J. (eds.) *Nexus. New Intersections in Internet Research*. New York: Peter Lang, pp. 193-212.

Article 4: Askanius, Tina & Gustafsson, Nils (2010). ‘Mainstreaming the Alternative. The Changing Media Practices of Protest Movements.’ *Interface: a journal for and about social movements*, 2(2): 23-41.

Article 5: Gustafsson, Nils (2012). ‘The Subtle Nature of Facebook Politics. Swedish Social Network Site Users and Political Participation’, *New Media & Society*, 14(7): 1111-1127.

Article 6: Gustafsson, Nils (2013). ‘An Awkward Tool. Social Media and Norms of Communication in Political Parties.’ Unpublished manuscript.

1. Introduction

In the spring of 2008 I interviewed a woman about political content on Facebook. At that time, Facebook had very quickly already attracted a large number of users in Sweden. In the media, there were already discussions about the political implications of the rapid growth of social media. A group supporting the democratic movement of Buddhist monks in Burma had rapidly attracted over half a million members globally. In Sweden, a young man who would go on to become a Member of Parliament for the Conservative party, Anton Abele, had started a protest group called ‘Stop Street Violence’ in response to a well-publicised case where a young man had been killed in a fight. Commentators were divided. Optimists claimed that social media were ushering in a new era of participatory politics; pessimists expressed fears of lazy young people substituting real engagement for pointless clicking.

One answer I got to my questions belonged more to the pessimist camp. In 2008, the company responsible for public transport in Stockholm had sold advertisement space in the metro to an organisation critical of same-sex marriage. Some people found this provocative and they started a Facebook Cause to criticise the decision.

I let myself get carried away by the Cause ‘Stop SL’s homophobic ads’ when the organisation Save the Marriage got spots in the underground. On second thought I felt that was just a statement and not really what I wanted, so I contacted SL directly and told them that I didn’t agree with the judgements of their ad sales agency concerning this ad and for example the film poster of ‘Ken Park’¹. So straight out of the Cause and getting in touch with SL directly! (Gustafsson and Wahlström 2008)

The incident is a reminder of how quickly people started to use social network sites like Facebook for political purposes. It was obvious that it provided a valuable information infrastructure. But the reason I tell this story is that when researching the effects of social network sites on political behaviour, or on differences between online and offline participation, the lines tend to become blurred. For the woman who talked to me, the event was proof that Facebook was no good for political purposes and that ‘real’ engagement mattered more. On the other hand, she was activated

¹ In 2002, SL stopped the poster for the film Ken Park, as it was deemed to be too sexually explicit.

because one of her Friends alerted her on Facebook. And that offline action left no digital trace.

Furthermore: does it matter if we know that this particular woman is a highly educated person in her mid-30s who has a large portion of self-confidence? Does it matter that she probably could have done the same thing without resorting to the medium of social network sites? How should we value the opportunities of more inclusive forms of participation when it is still the usual suspects who take advantage of them? Do social network sites herald the dawn of more participatory politics, or are they ushering in an era of leetocracy, where a small tech-savvy elite, or ‘leet’², as some of them call themselves, gain influence at the expense of the majority?

The concept of leetocracy as it is used in this dissertation should not be understood as a society where leetspeakers, or indeed any group of technological masterminds who organise through the internet, whether it be in the form of DDoS attacks from the Anonymous network or semi-traditional lobbying from a group like La Quadrature du Net, supersede old power elites. Nor should it be interpreted as an alarmist warning that digital media are threats to democracy. Leetocracy should foremost serve as a reminder that human political organisations are never free from hierarchies or elitist tendencies. Rather than creating egalitarian politics on their own, digital media reproduce existing hierarchies and give rise to new ones (like the leet), even if the way of organising might be different. Human societies have always been characterised by elite rule – or leet – but the power balance between different groups might shift. The new groups that organise primarily on the internet do not bring anything radically new to politics, at least not in that respect.

This dissertation is about whether social network sites have the potential to bring about more equal participation. It deals with a phenomenon that has changed the underlying infrastructure of how millions of people communicate with each other. It studies the way the use of social network sites affects communication within existing political organisations in addition to networked campaigns. And it goes beyond digital content analysis to use a broad range of methods in order to capture behaviour and attitudes offline as well as online in a contextual setting.

In this dissertation I want to make the following points. First, social network sites have not brought about any greater equality in political participation (Article 1). Second, using social network sites does not in itself lower the thresholds for participation, as increased accessibility does not outweigh the underlying factors of participation and political interest (Article 5). Third, political participation *is* changing, but what is changing is not related to equality of participation. Instead, the existing system is put under pressure by what I refer to as *viral politics* and the emergence of *temporal elites* (Articles 2, 3), and by the undermining of established norms of communication (Article 6). An additional goal of this dissertation is to show how the develop-

² Spelled ‘1337’ in a certain type of Anglo-American internet slang called leetspeak.

ment of political participation in relation to social network sites can be better understood through the framework of competitive elitist democratic theory than through that of deliberative democratic theory (Articles 2 and 3). A methodological goal of the dissertation is to show how a combination of quantitative and several different qualitative methods applied on a set of different empirical cases can be used to yield a fuller illumination of the overarching research aim.

This dissertation is an ambitious attempt to study the effects of social network site use on several different forms of political participation. It contains the first representative study of political participation in social media in Sweden and the first study of intra-party use of social network sites in parliamentary parties in the world. It develops new and useful concepts and models for describing and analysing the mode of participation described as viral politics and the emerging elites that are called temporal elites in this dissertation. It goes beyond the Swedish case to show that the theoretical and methodological tools can be applied successfully on other settings.

Apart from the specific contribution to the literature on social network sites and political participation, this dissertation offers input to the general literature on political participation. The story of participation research is the story of constantly shifting concepts, as societies and the political activities of their populations have changed. With the advent of social network sites, not only have new types of activities been made possible, but also an entire new arena of politics – a fascinating and distinct subset of internet politics.

After this short introduction, the individual articles are summarised (chapter 2). Three theoretical chapters follow. Any serious study of political participation in relation to the use of social network sites must be grounded in general theoretical work on political participation and democratic theory. The introductory essay continues with a discussion about the role of participation in democratic societies, about how the concept of political participation is used in the dissertation and, lastly, about what is thought to cause political participation. In chapter 4, the research field of social network sites and the conceptual relationship to new media, web 2.0, social media and other neighbouring concepts are discussed. In chapter 5, there follows a discussion about the relationship between social network sites and political participation is discussed, and two competing hypotheses, the mobilisation hypothesis and the reinforcement hypothesis are explored and related to empirical research. The chapter on methodological considerations explicate how the mixed-methods approach is used in the dissertation (chapter 6). The three theoretical chapters and the chapter on methodology (chapters 2-6) should be read as the theoretical and methodological basis of the articles and the dissertation as a whole. Since space in the individual articles is limited, the basic arguments of the dissertation are presented here in a coherent manner and should be kept in mind while reading the individual articles. The introductory essay ends with a recapitulation of the general arguments put in the dissertation and continues with notes on limitations, directions for further research and an observation on the policy implications of the dissertation (chapter 7).

2. Summary of the articles

The goal of this dissertation is to answer the following overarching research question: does the use of social network sites reduce inequality in political participation? This goal is attained by studying how established theories of participation can explain the participation that takes place in the social network sites themselves. In all articles, the focus is on the participatory act; what makes people participate and how they do it. The variance is in the methods used (focus group interviews, individual interviews, case studies, surveys) and in the populations studied.

2.1 Article 1: Are Social Network Sites Reducing Inequality in Political Participation? (2013)

Decades of research into political participation have shown that there are strong socio-economic forces that determine who participates. Often, however, the advent of a new communication technology has been heralded as a magical machine to solve problems of democracy and inequality in human society. This is also the case as regards social network sites; fitting nicely in the anarchic-egalitarian ideology that has always been common on the internet, in the public debate it sometimes seems as if social network sites can bring about popular revolutions and a more democratic polity on their own, as an independent force. The idea that social network sites might form a basis for drawing previously unengaged citizens into political action has much to say for it. Social network sites reduce the costs of participation, offer a more efficient information structure, and allow for faster recruitment processes. The inherent sociability of social network sites might make people inclined to participate because of social desirability. This article is an attempt to test that hypothesis against extensive data material. On the basis of the 2010 SOM survey of a representative sample of 1653 Swedish individuals, a study is made of the differences in socio-economic status and other characteristics, as between people who participate using social network sites and those who participate by means of more traditional methods. The results show that even though, in theory, participation via social network sites should lower thresholds and make it more appealing for people with for instance lower education, in practice this idea does not hold up. Resource factors such as education are more important for explaining participation through social network sites than for

explaining participation by other means, although there might be a possible exception for engagement in political organisations. There is strong evidence of social network sites emerging as a common, and in some respects even a dominant, way of channelling political engagement, especially among young people. Participating through social network sites will become more common and possibly change the way that people communicate with the political system, but it will not necessarily change the inherent inequalities in political participation.

2.2 Article 2: This Time it's Personal (2010)

The previous article having set the point of departure, the following articles in the dissertation go on to explore why social network sites are not making participation more equal and how they are affecting existing political actors. This primarily theoretical article explores the social information system that forms the basis of the allegedly new forms of political mobilisation and recruitment often associated with social network sites. Combining existing research from communication studies and political science, it introduces a series of novel concepts that are applied to the empirical field in later articles. An argument is made that will recur in subsequent articles: social network sites and the media and information system associated with Web 2.0 are not incompatible with the elitist competitive representative democracy described by Schumpeter and Downs. As the wealth of readily available information increases and the range of choice for individual media consumers widens, the type of information that reaches the individual is dependent on two things: personal interest and social network. In the broadcast media ecology, media consumers were left with fewer choices: network television tended to broadcast evening news, and so people watched the evening news regardless of individual interest. In a post-broadcast democracy, individual preferences bring about a widening knowledge gap: those who are interested know more and those who are not interested know less (Prior 2007). However, social network sites function as a *media filter*: news items, video clips, songs, and other types of media are shared among personal contacts. The system of sharing information in the social network is the precondition for *viral politics*: the political campaigns and calls for political action that are virally shared, sometimes with repercussions such as changed elections outcomes, public protests and even revolutions. Viral politics does not come like a bolt from the blue. It is difficult to foretell which attempts will be successful, but in the model of viral politics explained in the article, political entrepreneurs (cf. Laver 1997: 68-88) are the prime movers of campaigns. The political entrepreneurs can come from the political establishment but can also operate without any organisational or financial basis: their position as opinion-makers is dependent on their social skills and knowledge. In the article this group is defined as *temporal elites* in that they constitute a new type of elite in the power system of the competitive democracy. They are temporal in the sense that their powers are often

fleeting and insecure, and frequently restricted to an individual issue or a set of issues. Often they are invisible, lost in the crowd. Think about the ‘leaders’ of the protests of the Arab Spring, or of the Occupy movement, or indeed of the European internet freedom lobby, studied in the subsequent article. Viral politics should not be seen as mass participation but as elite participation. It has little to do with fulfilling the ideal type of the networked public sphere deliberative democracy and more to do with the competing power elites of competitive democracy.

2.3 Article 3: Leetocracy (2011)

‘Leetocracy’ is an attempt to put the concepts of the preceding article to work. This article, co-authored with Yana Breindl, examines the French advocacy group La Quadrature du Net (Squaring the Net), which deals with intellectual property rights. The empirical base for the article is the interviews with members of the advocacy group and staff in the European Parliament which were conducted in 2008 and 2009. If any movement is to embody the egalitarian ideal of utopian networked society, where the wisdom of the crowd produces collective intelligence (Levy 1997), it must surely be a movement bent on preserving precisely that ideal of a free, anarchic, egalitarian internet. La Quadrature du Net moves beyond the right-left spectrum and takes a technocratic view of politics: its members try to ‘hack’ into the European Parliament in order to solve problems in the most efficient way. However, as we show in this case study, La Quadrature du Net is a hierarchical network consisting of an inner core of believers, working relentlessly for their cause, and concentric circles of activists and sympathisers with less knowledge and engagement and consequently less power. George Soros’ Open Society Institute funds them. In fact, La Quadrature du Net can be seen as a least likely case for hierarchical structure, in the way that Robert Michels saw the German Social Democratic Party as a least likely candidate for developing oligarchy. Leetocracy, itself being a pun on the existence of an internet elite, or 1337 (leet), a self-styled subculture, can in this sense be seen as a oversimplified description of a society where power still resides in the hands of elected representatives, lobbied by strong interests, but where intra-parliamentary and extra-parliamentary influence is channelled by issue networks not necessarily grounded in formal organisations. Classical elite theory (Michels, Pareto, Putnam) and democratic theory (Schumpeter, Downs, Miller) are used in contrast to thinkers more in the utopian line of Web 2.0 egalitarians (Lévy, Rheingold, Shirky, Benkler) in order to explain that the ways in which the social media make viral politics possible do not imply an egalitarian model of organisation. [Yana Breindl carried out the fieldwork for this article and Nils Gustafsson provided the theoretical ground, to form the basis on which the two authors combined to write the analysis.]

2.4 Article 4: Mainstreaming the Alternative (2010)

Moving from a networked campaign designed to influence the bureaucratic workings of the European Parliament, this article compares the use of social network sites by two very loose activist networks: the protests before and after the eviction and destruction of the Copenhagen Youth House in 2007-2008 and the protests during the 2008 European Social Forum in Malmö. Here, the puzzle is why radical counterculture networks that in the 1990s were proud of their use of independent digital media, have outsourced their communication infrastructure to the monopoly capitalists Google, Facebook, MySpace, YouTube and Twitter. The empirical material consists of profile pages, groups pages, video clips, and so on, associated with activists in the two cases. The reason why these radical groups move over to mainstream social media is that they are succumbing to environmental pressure: their audience is already there, and the infrastructure is easy to use, as well as free, so in spite of handing over all information to the ‘enemy’, even revolutionary groups find using commercial social network sites beneficial. The article also shows that the use of commercial services has unintended consequences: for instance, provocative radical messages get juxtaposed with advertisements, and support groups and YouTube clips get invaded by vitriolic comments from antagonists. The article presents tentative evidence for the homogenisation of political action in an age of ubiquitous monopolist commercial social media services. [Tina Askanius and Nils Gustafsson contributed equally to all parts of this article.]

2.5 Article 5: The Subtle Nature of Facebook Politics (2012)

The three previous articles laid out a theoretical model for how new elites might take advantage of social media in order to engage in viral politics and detailed an example of what those new elites might look like. Now, this article studies the way in which people who actively engage in political issues experience the political content of social network sites, as compared with those who have no such active engagement. Three categories of Swedish Facebook users – members of political parties, members of interest organisations and ‘non-actives’ – were interviewed in online and offline focus groups in 2009 and 2010. If the focus in Leetocracy was a least likely case of an organisation turning out to be organised around hierarchical principles, here the focus is on a most-likely case: young, urban, well-educated people in a societal context where political interest is high and civic engagement is encouraged. Social network sites present lower thresholds to participation and, all other things being equal, they should attract new groups of previously inactive citizens. Yet those who are non-active in politics remain so. Why is that? From the interviews it transpires that whereas the

interest group and political party members generally have a positive view of the possibilities offered by viral politics and the dissemination of political content via social network sites, the non-actives are wary. They do not engage in politics on Facebook for a variety of reasons: they are afraid of the harsh language of political debate online, they do not want anyone else (employers, friends) to know about their political views, they do not see Facebook as a proper arena for political discourse and engagement, and they have a derogatory view of 'clicktivism'. They see a lot of political content and they receive appeals for participation, but they refrain from engaging. In contrast to this, members of interest organisations and political parties tell stories of how social network sites make communication in their organisations more efficient. But even the members of the interest organisations stay away from expressing views on Facebook that might be associated with the political left-right spectrum or party politics. They choose to convey views limited to the point at issue associated with their affiliations (human rights, environmental issues, etc.). They constitute temporal elites of sorts, potentially influential in one realm of politics but not in the other. Even members of political parties restrain themselves from boring their Facebook Friends with too many ideological talking points. Instead, they choose subtler ways of influencing their social network: linking to interesting news items; talking about a protest coming up, but not making direct calls for action. This article shows in detail why there is no reason to believe that previously inactive members of society might suddenly step up and take political action. However, it also stands clear that even the non-actives receive political information from their social network. Although not participating, the political content provided through their media filter shapes their understanding of the political world.

2.6 Article 6: An Awkward Tool (2013)

Throughout through the articles it is consistently claimed that the advent of social network sites should not be interpreted as a threat to the existing model of representative democracy, but rather as an augmentation of the system. Whereas a lot of research involving political uses of social network sites consists of case studies of social movements, networked campaigns, extra-parliamentary activists, revolutionaries and so on, this dissertation additionally aims to focus on the formal political organisations of the representative system. The effect of social network sites on the internal dynamics of political parties is an almost completely unexplored field. One of the most interesting findings of the previous article was the way that members of existing organisations claimed that social network sites had changed the internal communication structure and the way that they received information and engaged with fellow members. In this article, the non-temporal elite is studied. Interviews carried out in 2012 with members of the Swedish Social Democratic Party (the SAP) parliamentary group

are analysed in the study of the effects of social network site use on the internal norms of communication of the party. The Social Democratic Party is chosen because it is a least likely case for discovering far-reaching changes in the direction of social media-driven individualisation. It is a party with a long tradition of collectivist culture, and the SAP party group is the least social network site-dense group in parliament. However, the interviews reveal that the use of social network sites is indeed seen as an important element in career-building and policy influence, but mostly by lower ranked MPs. Those already more highly ranked are generally sceptical of the usefulness of social network sites in internal power struggles. Still, there does not seem to be a connection between what respondents say they believe and the way they actually use social network sites. The article argues that MPs are caught in a culture war between the standard operating procedures of the party group (internal loyalty, secrecy, collectivism) and the environmental pressures from the surrounding society (external loyalty, transparency, individualism). For this reason MPs are unsure of what constitutes a successful strategy and hence they have widely differing opinions on party norms and social network site strategies.

2.7 How they fit together

One way of visualising how the articles fit together in the overarching research project is to group them according to variance along two dimensions: social network sites and political participation. Article 1 deals with what makes people participate and what makes them participate using a certain channel; the sample includes both people who participate and those who do not, as well as people who use social network sites and those who do not. In this way, it covers all four fields of the matrix. In article 5, the focus is on those who use social network sites and, if so, whether or not they choose to use them for political purposes. The variation is on participation, while social network site use is held constant. By contrast, in article 6, participation is held constant, while social network site use varies. Articles 2, 3 and 4 focus on participation using social network sites and touch only the upper left field of the matrix.

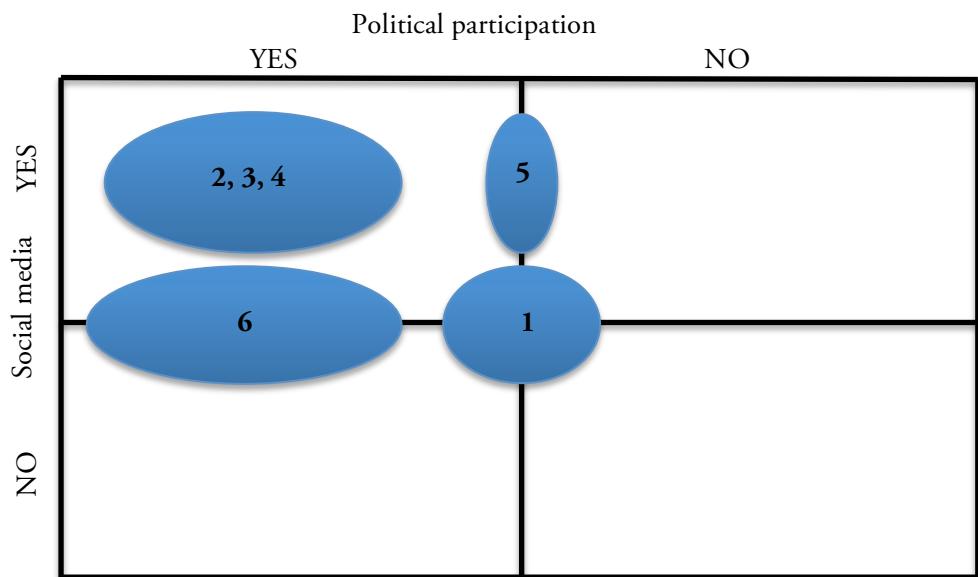
In this way, the articles focus on different aspects of the research question. Studying both participants and non-participants, social network site users as well as non-users, the ‘new’ networked campaigns as well as the ‘old’ political organisations, and the ordinary activists as well as the top politicians, the fullness and complexity of the question are explored.

Or to express it differently: if the research question is put like this: ‘Do social network sites contribute to more equality in political participation?’ – then the articles answer that question in different ways. Article 1 answers the question: do social network sites lead to more equal participation as to what concerns *who participates*? The rest of the articles answer the question: do social network sites lead to more equal participation as to what concerns *how people participate*? Articles 2-4 deal with how

people participate in *networked campaigns* and articles 5-6 how people participate in *political organisations*.

In addition, the articles speak to and augment different literatures. Articles 1 and 5 belong to political participation literature. Articles 2 and 3 integrate democratic theory, elite theory and communication theory with political participation literature. Article 4 is situated in social movement literature and article 6, finally, in party literature.

Figure 1: How the articles fit together.



3. Political Participation

In this chapter, a brief overview of the concept of political participation and participation research is provided.

3.1 What is political participation?

The main schools of democratic theory all agree that a democratic society benefits from political participation by its citizens. Beyond the simple act of voting, there is no fixed and clear prescription for what acts of participation are necessary and desirable for a well-functioning society. Indeed, there is absolutely no consensus about what constitutes political participation (Anduiza et al. 2009: 862).

In *Participation in America*, political participation is defined as ‘those activities by private citizens that are more or less directly aimed at influencing the selection of governmental personnel and/or the actions they take’ (Verba and Nie 1972: 2). In Brady (1999: 737) and in Verba et al. (1995: 38) we find similar if not identical definitions, which also include actions also outside the formal political system, i.e. going beyond the minimalist definition, to embrace working in community organisations directed towards political issues, or persuading someone to vote for a particular party or candidate. Political attitudes, political learning, and political knowledge are ruled out, as are attempts to influence other parts of society than the formal political system. This can be taken as a mainstream version of a more restricted view of political participation. The basis of the definition is actions, ordinary citizens, politics and influence (Brady 1999: 737).

In this dissertation the decision is made to practise a semi-narrow definition of political participation, drawing on Brady’s definition. The basis is *actions* that are devised to exert *influence* in the *political* field. What actually constitutes an act of influence is discussed in some of the articles. *Ordinary citizens* include spare-time politicians. In article 6, I move beyond the ordinary citizens to study full-time politicians. The discussion below will elaborate how the concept of political participation has developed and what special difficulties one faces when studying participation in social network sites.

These four parts of the narrow definition can serve as a starting point for discussing a broader definition. As for *actions*, in the narrow sense, what is actually con-

sidered as an action in the political sense has been problematised. In her dissertation on the ‘politicization of thoughtless action’ Alexandra Segerberg (2005) claims that definitional disputes over what constitutes political actions are usually centred around what is political, but that disputes over what an action is are equally salient (ibid: 33). Chouliaraki (2006), studying cosmopolitanism and television news coverage of distant catastrophes, discusses the borders between action, communication and spectatorship. For her, political action in relation to ‘the spectatorship of suffering’ takes the form of ‘effective speech’, that is, denunciation or empathy (ibid: 201). Even the ‘silent whisper’, as a reaction to horrible news, can be seen as an example of agency (ibid: 45). *Ordinary citizens*: Brady (1999: 738) excludes the actions of political elites from political participation, but the limit between the actions of a rank-and-file party member and a top politician is not always clear. *Politics*: A broader definition might include actions directed towards private corporations, or against political organisations beyond the nation state. The reasoning behind this is that an increasing number of political issues are no longer solidly under state control (Conge 1988: 344f; Norris 2002; Micheletti 2003). For instance, consumer action in the form of boycotts or boycotts could be conceptualised as political behaviour (ibid.). Also regarding *influence*, the definition can be broadened. Is influencing people and public opinion rather than politicians directly considered political participation? And if we accept that political persuasion, citizen to citizen, can be an element in participation, where do we draw the line as regards what can be considered persuasion? Is expressing an attitude to be considered political persuasion? As is shown in article 5, the ways of influencing Friends can be very subtle, especially with regard to the actions that people take while using social network sites.

Pateman (1970: 1) laments that the popularity of the concept during the 1960s had deprived it of any precise meaning. Generally, the development of the concept goes along two dimensions. One is related to inclusivity versus exclusivity. As Teorell (2006: 788) notes, definitions of political participation depend on the ‘normative model of democracy to which one adheres’. Some sort of minimalist definition of political participation (along the lines of elitist democrats like Schumpeter 1946) might be to vote in an election. This excludes many actions that might usually be thought of as political acts. A maximalist definition includes a wide range of actions, directly or indirectly influencing the government, voluntary or involuntary, conscious or unconscious, and also including information seeking or information-sharing, consuming media, expressing attitudes, etc. A ‘strong’, ‘participatory’ or ‘direct’ model of democracy would point to more direct involvement for citizens in decision-making, for instance through workplace democracy (Pateman 1970).

The inclusive-exclusive dimension and political participation can also be posed as an evolution over time, connected to democratic theory but also to societal change. From a definition comprising only actions directly oriented towards influencing the selection of candidates for office by participating in an election campaign, donating money, voting, and so on (Schumpeter 1946 and Downs 1957), over time, competitive democrats gradually acknowledged various types of intermediate groups and ac-

tions between the elites and the mass and the need to study participation beyond the ballot box (cf. Leighley 1995: 181). As early as the 1950s and the 1960s, pluralists such as Robert Dahl (1956) expanded the theoretical model of competitive democracy to include also interest groups of various kinds as intermediaries (cf. Held 2006: 158f).

Verba and Nie (1972) widened it to encompass both ‘governmental personnel and/or the actions they take’ (*ibid*: 2; cf. Verba et al. 1995: 31), that is, their definition went beyond voting and into ways of influencing government policy (cf. Teorell 2006: 789). Verba and Nie identified four modes of participation: voting, campaign activities, citizen-initiated contacts (contacting elected officials and civil servants), and cooperative participation (work in issue-oriented voluntary organisations or informal networks) (Verba and Nie 1972: 47).

The temporal dimension of political participation is also related to the increased prevalence of new types of participation, paired with a reduction in participation levels in the formal representative system, from the 1960s and onwards. ‘Conventional’ and ‘unconventional’ are the concepts applied by Barnes and Kaase (1979). Oser and Shalev (2011: 5) list some of the various concepts that have since then been used to describe this dichotomy between electoral and extra-electoral political participation, including ‘a loose division between ‘old’ and ‘new’ participation, as well as more detailed descriptions such as ‘elite-directed’ vs. ‘elite-challenging’ (Inglehart and Catterberg 2002); ‘electoral engagement’ vs. ‘political voice’ (Zukin et al. 2006); ‘citizen-oriented’ vs. ‘cause-oriented’ (Norris 2007); ‘duty-based’ vs. ‘citizen-engaged’ (Dalton 2008); and ‘traditional’ vs. ‘emerging’ (Stolle and Hooghe 2011).’ Brady (1999) distinguishes between electoral and non-electoral activities and further categorises non-electoral activities into ‘conventional’ (contacting and working in organisations) and ‘unconventional’ (signing petitions, protesting, etc.) (cf. Zukin et al. 2006: 51).

Citing a few examples of what ‘new’ engagement can mean and the difficulties of categorising various types of participation, Zukin et al. (*ibid.*) talk of engagement rather than participation and categorise a large variety of actions as political engagement, civic engagement, public voice and cognitive engagement. The categorisation is not completely lucid; canvassing for a political campaign is considered an expression of public voice, whereas persuading voters is put in the political engagement category (*ibid*: 57f). For Dalton (2008), duty-based citizenship is associated with voting, whereas citizen-engaged citizenship is associated with ‘more direct means of influencing policy makers, such as working with public interest groups, direct contact, contentious political action, political consumerism and similar methods’ (*ibid*: 85). That is, voting is put in one category and most other types of political actions are put in the other category. Norris (2002) notes the popularisation of protest politics and engagement (*ibid*: 216, 221) in new social movements, but also claims that the decline of electoral participation has been exaggerated and that younger generations are moving away from traditional agencies like political parties, ‘and [are] more likely to

express themselves through a variety of ad-hoc, contextual, and specific activities of choice' (*ibid*: 222).

The idea behind the dichotomisation of political participation is associated with the preconception that there is a fundamental difference between 'old' and 'new' forms of participation. The old, institutionalised forms of participation first described in mid-20th century political research are incrementally augmented with newer and newer forms of participation, including various types of protest behaviour, petitions, expanding into new arenas. This is also the case with participation made possible by new forms of communication technology. Since the 1990s, 'online participation' has come to be used as a catchall term for a very heterogeneous set of practices (cf. Oser et al. 2013). 'Offline participation' is, likewise, a term that only makes sense in relation to online participation.

When measuring political participation, one of course has to have a clear definition of what is meant thereby. However, even by restricting oneself to the definition given by Verba and Nie – actions that are directed at influencing the formal political system – it is difficult to know exactly what is an action devised to influence the political system. For 'online participation' and the political use of social network sites, the definitions are put to yet another test: there are some actions you can take online that are roughly equal to actions you can take offline – and then there are actions that are very dissimilar from actions listed as items in previous survey questionnaires aimed at measuring political participation (Anduiza et al. 2009: 862).

For instance, signing a petition – an 'unconventional' way of participation, according to Barnes and Kaase (1979) – can obviously be done both on paper and on a web site. But where is the limit between contacting a public official – say by posting a comment on a Facebook status – and political discussion? Because of the semi-public nature of engaging in political discourse in social network sites, could it even be seen as a means of persuading other citizens who might read the exchange of views? Although the nature of political influence could be seen as fairly stable, it is also evident that these new forms of public intercourse will force political research to further develop measurements of political participation (but most likely not along the lines of 'online' and 'offline' participation).

Empirical studies on political participation are grounded in normative preconceptions about what participation is, and what is its value to society (Teorell 2006). Studies of the internet and social network sites in relation to political participation are often founded on normative assumptions of what the rightful place of the internet and social network sites should be in a democratic society. As a result, an abundance of scientific work has been done on the political implications of the internet from a direct-democratic or deliberative democratic perspective. Deliberative democrats interpret digital communication as a 'virtual public sphere' and concentrate on whether ideals can be fulfilled online (Negroponte 1995; cf. Papacharissi 2002). Participatory democrats are instead interested in how digital technology can be used for coordinating direct democracy in voting, drafting legislation, and other types of decision-making (Lévy 1997; Coleman 2005).

But because the empirical reality so often seems disappointing when compared with democratic ideals, these studies are either easy to criticise for ignoring this reality, or for producing trivial results. The preconceptions of political participation and its place in democratic societies and of social network sites and their place in democratic societies in this dissertation are influenced by competitive elitist democratic theory. This ‘ideal’ is arguably closer to the reality, because it acknowledges the hierarchical structures of society, and therefore using it as a framework helps when investigating the way politics play out in social network sites (Article 3).

In this way, instead of focusing on whether hierarchies are disappearing in democratic societies, more work can be put into investigating whether hierarchies are changing. The introduction of the concept of temporal elites (Article 2; Article 3) is a way of moving beyond the hope for digital communication as an egalitarian silver bullet to solve the fundamental inequalities of our societies.

3.2 What brings about political participation?

The basis for democratic political systems is that people do participate. Depending on what we define as participation, the answers differ, as they also do over time and space. It is difficult to provide causal explanations for political behaviour, as for human behaviour in general, because the motives for it are so many and varied. On an individual level, reasons for people to engage in politics might seem either clear-cut or haphazard. To a certain extent, all individuals are idiosyncratic. It might be easier to discover causal patterns on a larger scale, and that is what social scientists usually do. A common answer to the challenges of multicausation is to reduce the premise of research to an axiomatic model. Treating individuals as rational actors is one such strategy: although individuals have motives that are most certainly not rational, explanations of human behaviour are made more logical and easier to handle in a scientific endeavour. In this dissertation, it is postulated that individuals have motives for acting (that can be interpreted as rational in a limited sense of the word): and that these motives are shaped by social structures surrounding the individual.

As Verba et al. 1995 put it, why do people NOT participate? They elegantly summarised their answers: because they cannot, because they do not want to, and because nobody asked them to (*ibid*: 16). From decades of participation research, it is possible to identify a set of recurring patterns: although democracies are formally equal, participation in the broader sense is not. People can participate because they are endowed with certain skills and resources as well as individual reasons for participating, and these resources and motives are not evenly distributed in society.

It is possible to categorise the factors influencing the probability for an individual to participate into background factors, resources, and incentives. A selection of

factors will be briefly discussed here to show what factors can affect the decision to participate. Chapter 5 discusses how the use of social network sites can affect these factors.

3.2.1 Background factors

Socioeconomic status has long been known to predict political participation, as have also other types of more general background factors. In this section, age, gender, ethnicity and family background are briefly discussed.

There are life-cycle and generational aspects of political participation. The life-cycle aspect is related to socialisation, social integration and general life situation. Young people are busy with growing up, finding their place in life and figuring out how society works. They generally participate to a lesser degree than middle-aged people. As years pass, the young people get jobs, form families, and are drawn into societal issues; they pay taxes, have children in schools, and so on. As a result, they participate more. Later in life, as people retire, participation levels are reduced. For this reason, age is often found to have a curvilinear relationship with participation (Verba and Nie 1972: 138-148; Armingeon 2007: 362). The generational aspect of participation is connected to the formation of political interest at young age (see below under 3.3.4 Selective incentives). As a result, levels of participation vary between generations, as behavioural habits formed at young age are stable over life.

In patriarchal societies, women are discouraged from engaging in politics. Politics is seen as a male arena. The result has been generally lower levels of political participation for women than for men in most democratic societies (Verba et al. 1995: 250f). When women's suffrage was introduced in Sweden in 1921, female voter turnout was much lower than for male turnout. With rising levels of gender equality during the 20th and early 21st centuries, the gender bias in participation has slowly begun to recede. In the Swedish case, the gender bias on overall citizen participation has been shown to be small (Adman 2009).

Immigrants participate in politics to a lesser degree than native citizens. This is due to a lack of social integration and on average a lack of resources and skills (lower income, language difficulties, lacking political knowledge, etc.) (Myrberg: 2011). This is similar to the situation of racial minorities in the United States (Verba et al. 1995: 522).

Early socialisation is an important predictive factor for participation. People growing up in politically active families or where politics and social issues are discussed have a higher propensity for becoming politically active later in life. Since such families are often middle or upper class families, people with working class backgrounds are underrepresented among the politically active (Amnå 2012: 618, 621; Verba et al. 1995: 458f; Zukin et al. 2006: 148f.).

3.2.2 Resource factors

The resource factors discussed in this section are education, time, political knowledge, and social capital.

Education is a special case. In empirical studies of political participation, no matter what type of action is studied, educated people show consistently higher levels of engagement. Why this is so is a matter of dispute. The mainstream explanation has for a long time been that education endows skills necessary for successful participation on students: organisational skills, writing and speaking/rhetoric skills, as well as knowledge of the political system (Verba et al. 1995: 305, Zukin et al. 2006: 147-154). Since an objective of most education systems in democratic countries is to install a sense of civic duty, it can be hypothesised that especially civics classes can have an effect on this (Zukin et al. 2006: 139). However, lately this notion has been challenged. The claim has been put forward that it is not education in itself that creates the resources necessary for participation, but that education is rather a proxy for early political socialisation. Children who come from a certain type of background and who are predisposed to engage in politics later in life, are also more likely to attain higher education. This might explain the absence of rising levels of participation even in societies where levels of education are rising (Persson 2012a). If this is true, education is not a cause of political participation, but a proxy.

Having spare time for activities outside of school, work, or the family is an important resource for political participation. Individuals who spend their days either working or child-rearing with little or no time for leisure activities have less possibilities to give up more time for engaging in political activities (Verba et al. 1995: 289). Free time is not evenly spread across the population: both at the top and at the bottom of the income spectrum can be found people who have very little time to spare (*ibid*: 293).

Political knowledge is a resource of specific importance for political participation (Verba et al. 1995: 347). By knowing a lot about the political system, the discussions of the day, and how in practice to go about influencing the system, citizens are more likely to have enough self-reliability to take action. It is, of course, very closely related to political interest: people who are interested in politics know more about politics, and vice versa. But political knowledge does not depend only on political interest. Markus Prior (2007) compares the media ecology in the United States in the 1980s to the media ecology in the early 21st century. Media choice was relatively limited in the 1980s. There were three large television networks and people formed the habit of watching television rather than watching specific programmes. As a result, when all three networks showed news programmes in the early evening, most television viewers watched the news regardless of whether they were interested in current affairs or politics. In a media ecology including an abundance of cable television channels and internet sources, where choice is much more diverse, media consumers can easily tailor their consumption to individual preferences. People who are interested in politics

have access to more and better political information, whereas people who are not interested in politics can avoid news and political information altogether. This creates a widening of the knowledge gap between those interested and those not interested.

Political participation is a social activity. Political action is carried out by citizens in consort, and to take the decision to become active in politics, individuals often have to be recruited by an acquaintance as well as to receive continuous support and help from social contacts if a sustained engagement is to be viable (Verba et al. 1995: 369f.). The larger a social network to which a person has access, the greater the chance that s/he will receive a request for participation (Teorell 2003). The various clusters of social contacts, that an individual has access to, create social capital in society. Robert Putnam defines social capital as 'social networks and the norms of reciprocity and trustworthiness that arise from them' (Putnam 2000: 19; cf. Ellison et al. 2011). There is a distinction between different kinds of social capital (Putnam 2000; Resnick 2001:8). Bonding capital emanates from 'strong ties'; i.e. relationships between close friends and family. Bonding capital is associated with closure (ties are reciprocal in a closely knit community). It has been argued that bonding capital is a strong source of collective action (Coleman 1988). Bridging capital, in contrast, is made up by 'weak ties'; i.e. casual acquaintances, colleagues, classmates, fellow members in associations etc. In an influential article, Mark Granovetter studied the importance of weak ties for spreading information in society (Granovetter 1973). Whereas strong ties are characterised by relatively homogeneous sets of people, weak ties make up a more diverse set of backgrounds, experiences and information. The bridging part of bridging capital is the way that weak ties provide bridges to other clusters of social contacts and other sources of experience and information. 'People rarely act on mass-media information unless it is also transmitted through personal ties; otherwise one has no particular reason to think that an advertised product or an organisation should be taken seriously' (Granovetter 1973: 1374; cf. Article 2). Bridging capital and weak ties are not only important for the information that is transmitted but also for the value that recipients put on it.

The idea of bonding capital as a source of communitarian resilience and a force for collective action on the one hand, and the idea of bridging capital as a source of valuable and trustworthy information as well as a network of recruitment to political participation on the other hand, are sometimes seen as being at odds with each other (Resnick 2001: 8).

Voluntary associations have been considered an especially important asset for creating social capital (Putnam 2000; Verba et al. 1995: 390). By engaging in voluntary associations, citizens gain access to social capital and learn organisational and rhetoric skills necessary for successful political engagement (Verba and Nie 1972: 184). In *Bowling Alone*, Putnam (2000) argued that social capital had been reduced in the United States as a result of people exchanging collective activities (like bowling together with friends) for individual activities, conspicuously so for watching television, and that an experienced downturn in levels of political participation could be attributed to this.

But social capital can also arise from informal networks. Putnam's notion of eroding social capital and the link between social capital and social trust has been criticised for several reasons. Most studies trying to measure social capital and social network positions have to resort either to data on association membership (Putnam 2000; Teorell 2003) or to very crude measures of informal networks (cf. Persson 2012b). Studies successfully measuring the totality of social contacts are rare, and as a result, reliable information about levels and types of social capital is generally based on incomplete data. It is also difficult to inter-link the causal direction of social networks and political activity. As Verba et al. (1995: 158; cf. Rosenstone and Hansen 1993: 31) note, 'those who are politically active develop networks of acquaintanceship that lead to additional requests [for participation]'. It is also claimed that social capital and social trust do not have their roots in voluntary associations at all, but in deep cultural differences between societies around the world (Norris 2002: 167).

3.2.3 Collective incentives

In early models explaining political participation from a rational choice perspective, the decision to vote for a certain party was a result of the perceived benefits that the political party would bestow on the individual voter if elected (Downs 1957: 49). Of course, if we assume rationality, the individual voter would only vote if s/he believed the isolated effect of his/her behaviour to be essential for the political outcome (and also to outweigh the cost of voting in terms of time consumed for voting, informing oneself etc.). Discussing other forms of political participation (from signing petitions to joining political parties) rational actors will only participate if they believe that their actions will lead to a preferable political outcome. Collective incentives are associated with the probability of producing an outcome that is not exclusive for the participant, i.e. constitutes a public good (Bäck et al. 2011: 77). Although often discarded in explanatory models of political behaviour, collective incentives are often mentioned as motivations for people who participate in politics (Verba et al. 1995: 120f).

3.2.4 Selective incentives

Given the possibilities to free ride on the endeavours of others, it seems irrational to participate (Olson 1971: 2). The cost of participating will almost always be greater than the (collective) benefit received by the individual. Instead, the reasons for participation have to be found elsewhere. Olson (*ibid*: 51) introduces selective incentives, i.e. benefits that are available only to those who participate and not to the larger group of people that benefit from political outcomes.

In this section, a selection of selective incentives will be discussed. They include complying with social norms, expressive (or emotional) incentives, entertainment value, social benefits, and material benefits (cf. Bäck et al. 2011: 77f; Verba et al. 1995: 111f; Olson 1971: 60f).

Complying with social norms presupposes that norms exist that sanction political participation: it is desirable and associated with social status to participate in politics. Indeed, certain types of political participation, particularly voting, has been associated with ‘duty-based citizenship’, i.e. voting is something that people do predominantly because it is a duty to do so (Dalton 2008). It is sometimes postulated that these norms of duty-based citizenship are eroding in contemporary democratic societies (*ibid.*).

Expressive or emotional incentives are another way of saying that some people like to say what they think: they enjoy expressing their political views (Bäck et al. 2011: 77f; Leighley 1995: 195; cf. Bennett and Segerberg 2012: 15).

The entertainment value of political participation is connected with this: participating is enjoyable *per se*. This is logically connected with political interest (*ibid.*; Verba et al. 1995: 345). People who are interested in politics and are attentive to political news and care about who wins or loses are also more likely to engage in politics themselves. Political interest, in turn, is connected with pre-adult socialisation (see section 3.2.1 above). People develop an interest in politics during adolescence and levels of political interest have been shown to remain stable over the life-cycle (Prior 2010; Oscarsson and Persson 2010).

Social benefits or social gratifications are related to social norms, expressive incentives and entertainment value: people like to do things together, spend time with people they like, get appreciation from people they like and answer positively to invitations or recruitment attempts from people they like and respect (Verba et al. 1995: 117; Olson 1971: 60). This is also an important reason for people to engage in politics. Of course this becomes self-reinforcing: after a while, the people you like are also the people you engage in politics with.

Material benefits, finally, relate to career opportunities, job offers, pecuniary compensation and so on (Verba et al. 1995: 111).

4. Social Network Sites

4.1 Web 2.0 and its friends

The public and academic debates on the societal implications of social network sites are bespattered by a sometimes confusing terminology. In this section, I discuss some common related concepts before discussing social network sites.

4.1.1 New media

Sometimes the term ‘new media’ is employed to describe a vague collection of media that feel new. That new media is of little use as a scientific concept is inherent in the term: what was new 40 years ago can hardly be said to be new today, except in a relative sense. Using the term ‘new media’ can also wrongly lead people to believe that what they do and the ways that they can be used are also essentially new. This tends to obscure the continuity of structures and patterns in society. Indeed, as Peters (2009: 18) notes, most media pass through five periods: technical invention; cultural innovation; legal regulation; economic distribution; and social mainstream. It can be argued that social media are still in the first period, but have legs in all subsequent periods, and are in some countries already becoming social mainstream.

4.1.2 Web 2.0

Web 2.0 is an umbrella term, coined by Tim O'Reilly in 2004 for services and applications that ‘make possible more dynamic interactions between clients and servers, more engaging webpage displays and applications and ultimately more direct, interactive and participative user-to-user interactions than heretofore experienced on the web’ (Harrison and Barthel 2009: 157). It includes social media, but also for instance commercial sites like the book retail site Amazon.com, the travel site Tripadvisor, and Google Maps, where customers can interact with the site, post reviews, get recommendations based on previous choices, apart from making purchases. The services are built on software such as JavaScript, Cascading Style Sheets, Extended Mark-up Language, and so on, that makes it possible for users to perform actions and engage in

behaviour that would have demanded a high level of technical skills in earlier online environments.

Supposedly, the Web 1.0 was top-down, hierarchical, static communication, whereas Web 2.0 is more dynamic, and where content is created by ‘everyone’ (Beer and Burrows 2007). This is not a completely correct way of dichotomising the internet into a first and second phase, the second being substantially different from the first. Mass collaboration and opportunities for participation have always been associated with the internet (Harrison and Barthel 2009: 158). However, this is not to say that the Web 2.0 environment entails nothing new on communication. Deeply embedded in the concept of Web 2.0 is the idea of an ‘architecture of participation’, that is, the services and applications are built around users actively participating and contributing content (Anduiza et al. 2009: 868). Instead of the owner of a service providing content, the model implies the active input of users. A video-sharing site like YouTube would be pointless if its users did not upload new video clips; the articles in the ‘free encyclopaedia’ Wikipedia are created, edited, and evaluated by its readers. The roles of producers and consumers merge into the ‘prosumer’ (Toffler 1980), or the ‘produser’ (Bruns 2008) and a new model of organisation is made possible ‘without relying on either market signals or managerial commands’, which Benkler (2006: 60) calls ‘commons-based peer production’. Whereas the earlier paradigm *allowed* for participation and collaboration, the Web 2.0 paradigm *requires* participation in order to function.

The ideological emphasis on participation and collaboration should not obscure the fact that production and consumption of content in Web 2.0 services and applications are still grossly biased. Input to collaborative projects seems to follow a power law distribution, where a small fraction of users contribute a lot of content, whereas the vast numbers of consumers do not contribute at all (Shirky 2008: 122-130; cf. Hindman 2008). This is also true of social network sites: a small number of people post and upload a lot of content, whereas passive consumption is a much more common practice (Gustafsson and Höglund 2011: 513). The blog audience is vastly larger than the number of bloggers and, furthermore, a few blogs have very large audiences while most blogs have very small audiences (Hindman 2008: 128).

Thus, there is an inherent paradox in the discussion on Web 2.0: on one hand, the models of services and applications are built around actively participating users (or produsers), yet the characteristics of services and applications still seem to amplify the hierarchical tendencies in society. This notion will be a recurring theme in this dissertation, because, as will be shown, the realm of political participation is not so different from the production and consumption of encyclopaedia articles or travel recommendations.

4.1.3 Social media

Although it is difficult to discern from popular discourse, social media can be seen as a subset of Web 2.0 services. Like 2.0, the concept that has grown increasingly vague as the nature of the internet has changed from the mid-2000s. No authoritative definition exists. Popularly associated with social media are services that mediate information, and where the social component is prominent. Howard and Parks (2012: 362) attempts a definition of social media that not only contains the software and services themselves, but also the content as well as the producers and consumers of this content:

social media may be defined in three parts, consisting of (a) the information infrastructure and tools used to produce and distribute content; (b) the content that takes the digital form of personal messages, news, ideas, and cultural products; and (c) the people, organizations, and industries that produce and consume digital content. (Howard and Parks 2012: 362)

A narrower definition is found in boyd (2008b: 92), who uses it as an ‘umbrella term that refers the set of tools, services, and applications that allow people to interact with others using network technologies’. This is arguably a more useful term and it is the definition used in this dissertation. Expressions of social media that are usually mentioned are social network sites, video sharing sites (like YouTube), picture-sharing sites (like Flickr or Instagram), music-sharing sites, blogs, and so on. But social media already existed even before the 2.0 paradigm began to be used. Examples of early forms of social media include e-mail, bulletin board systems, chatrooms and online fora (*ibid*: 93). The social aspect is inherent in the do-it-yourself, sharing, many-to-many, horizontal type of communication that is usually associated with the services. This however obscures the fact that the media always have had a social element. To put social media in opposition to traditional mass media is a fundamental misunderstanding of what social media are. Social media are communication tools that can have different uses, in which the dissemination of news and entertainment forms only a small part. Social media should be compared with more general technologies rather than with journalistic arenas. The convergence of various channels of communication and types of media (Jenkins 2006) and the spread of social media elements in large swaths of contemporary society make boundaries between ‘social media’ and other forms of media increasingly blurry. Even at an early stage news organisations already incorporated social media features in their regular content. A newspaper will publish some content on paper and some content on the web and put additional content on the web in the form of video clips, blog posts, and so on. Commenting on an article might force you to log in with your Facebook account. The newspaper has profiles, usually several, on Facebook, Twitter, YouTube and so on, and so have their journalists and other staff. In this way, the journalists, other staff, and the audience have multiple opportunities to engage with each other. The production of content and the

discussion takes place across multiple platforms, as news items are shared and discussed in readers' personal networks. Indeed, the nature of digital communication at large in the 2010s is an example of social media. As a result, if everything is turning into social media, social media might not be a good and well-defined concept for analytical purposes. This is not surprising – when new technologies spread in society and become pervasive, they become so ubiquitous that they become invisible and, as a consequence, difficult to study, at least as independent variables affecting a social phenomenon (Beer and Burrows 2007; Shirky 2008: 105).

This dissertation is written during a period when a small number of social media sites attracted large numbers of users on a global scale, to the extent that they attained a near-monopoly status for their respective uses. Especially the social network site Facebook and the micro blogging site Twitter recur in this dissertation as specific examples of social media sites. When studying the internet and digital communication, a field that has often been called a moving target, where user patterns change rapidly, services come and go, and innovations create unforeseen effects in the offline world, it is difficult to find concepts and definitions for what, exactly, is the object of study. Definitions have to be precise and non-trivial enough, but must still be, at least to some extent, generalisable beyond the context of the specific site in order to be useful for posterity. In this dissertation, I am primarily occupied with the concept of the social network site.

4.1.4 Social network sites

The classic definition of a social network site is the one provided by danah boyd and Nicole Ellison in their seminal 2007 article:

[W]eb-based services that (1) construct a public or semi-public profile within a bounded system, (2) articulate a list of other users with whom they share a connection, and (3) view and traverse their list of connections and those made by others within the system (boyd and Ellison 2007).

The term social network site is mostly undisputed in scholarly literature, although other terms have now and again been proposed.³

The first social network site was SixDegrees.com, which was active between 1997 and 2000. It allowed users to create profiles, connect to Friends⁴ and search

³ Martin Berg (2012) suggests 'social intermediaries' .

Friends' profiles) (Donath and boyd 2004: 71). In the 2000s, a large number of social network sites surfaced, among them Friendster, LiveJournal, Orkut, Lunarstorm (predominantly in Sweden), MySpace and Facebook (boyd and Ellison 2007). Whereas numbers of users quickly rose and fell, Facebook emerged as the largest social network site globally. Originally an internal site for Harvard students, it gradually expanded its target group, until by 2006, anyone could join. At the time of writing, it has above one billion users, which makes it the largest social network site. Throughout the period when the empirical studies in this dissertation were being undertaken, Facebook was the best known and most widely used social network site in Sweden, and when respondents talk about their use of social media or social network sites, they are generally referring to Facebook.

Early research on social network sites tended to take a general sociological starting point, analysing who the users were and the way people used the services (e.g. Hargittai 2007). It also tried to describe in what ways social network sites were different from other types of digital media (e.g. boyd and Ellison 2007). As time and research progressed, different academic disciplines within the social sciences and the humanities started to research social network sites within their own frameworks and research agendas.

Before the advent of social network sites, internet research often focused on the anonymous character of internet conversations and the ways that users developed relationships with likewise anonymous strangers and formed a digital identity separate from their offline relationships (e.g. Bell 2001: 113-136; Thurlow et al. 2004: 95-106). Online relationships were seen as separate from offline relationships. Often, the opportunities to form a virtual identity in cyberspace were seen as a moment of liberation. However, an important characteristic of social network sites like Facebook is that people generally are not anonymous: it is not encouraged by the user interface, and users generally use their real names. Of course, anonymous conversations still exist on the internet, in online discussion fora and in other places, and there is still the possibility of creating fake profiles, but the trend in the 2.0 age has generally been against anonymity. Social network sites also reinforce the trend towards using digital media to manage offline relationships rather than form essentially new relationships online (Ellison et al. 2011). This changes to a certain degree the basis for online political behaviour, because 'online' relationships are often provisional, whereas offline relationships managed online are not (Silverstone 2007: 117).

⁴ Following boyd and Ellison (2007), in this introductory essay the term Friend is used to denote contacts in social network sites to distinguish it from the more colloquial understanding of what a friend is.

The character of social networks managed in social network sites makes users behave in accordance with everyday self-representative behaviour. They interact with social contacts and try to represent themselves in a favourable way as well as displaying their connections to others (Donath and boyd 2004). However, whereas offline social interaction is corporeal in the sense that people do not have to express themselves all the time in order to make their presence known to others, social network site users must ‘write themselves into being’ (boyd 2008b: 121). This forces users to think about how they present themselves and what parts of their identities they choose to make manifest in their social network site profiles and in the content that they post (*ibid*: 129). Rather than trying to hide as much personal or private information about themselves as possible, self-representation in social network sites is characterised by a tension between the desire to be seen and the need to be secretive, usually in favour of the former (Stutzman 2006; Tufekci 2008). The reason that this balance is often difficult to find is often the result of a lack of context in social network sites: utterances that in offline conversations are made in a context with a certain group of contacts (close friends, colleagues, family etc.) are decontextualised in social network sites, since communication is often visible to the entire network of an individual user (Donath and boyd 2004: 78; boyd 2008b: 34). The audience is invisible, which makes it difficult for the speaker to know what type of language or tone to use (boyd 2007: 8). The semi-public character of social network sites, where different publics are merged and connected, creates a blurring of the private and the public. In the absence of context, ‘public and private become meaningless binaries’ (boyd 2008b: 34). It is also the case that the user interface of social network sites encourage and affect users to ‘fill in the blanks’, i.e. provide the information that the templates of the social network site give you the opportunity to do (Rettberg 2009).

Social network sites allow users to create and maintain very large social networks (Donath 2007). Although there is arguably a limit to how many strong ties (close friends) a person can have, the number of weak ties might be considerably larger, making it possible for social network site users to amass large heterogeneous networks providing them with opportunities and novel information (Granovetter 1973; Donath and boyd 2004; Bakshy et al. 2012).

5. Social Network Sites and Political Participation

5.1 Optimists, pessimists and technological determinism

Popular debates around innovations in communication technology tend to fall into opposing camps along two dimensions: one dimension evaluating what is new with the innovation; and one dimension evaluating whether the innovation will affect society, or democracy, or the economy, or our personal lives, in a positive or in a negative way. In this dissertation I will focus on how this debate has played out in the political field.

The debate over new, digital or social media versus old, traditional or mainstream media can be compared to earlier debates over the invention and spread of telegraphy in the 19th century, as well as the advent of radio, television and so on. Indeed, even the invention of writing seems to have sparked some fears of a deterioration of human relations. In Plato's dialogue Phaedrus, Socrates tells a story of the Egyptian god Theuth, who invented the letters. Theuth presented this invention to the god-king Thamus, claiming that it would make men 'wiser and give them better memories', to which Thamus retorted that by relying on writing, people would become more forgetful and less wise, since they no longer had to know things by heart. (Plato, *Phaedrus*)⁵ Likewise, the invention of telegraphy led some commentators to envision the end of wars, as telegrams would stop diplomatic misunderstandings from developing in a hostile direction (Standage 1999: 90).

The spread of the internet and digital or new media in the 1990s produced similar reactions (Papacharissi 2002; Anduiza et al. 2009: 861; Joyce 2010: 10ff; Karpf 2010; Jensen et al. 2012: 7; Larsson 2012; Oser et al. 2013). Techno-optimists or techno-utopians have claimed that digital technology and the possibility to organise in networks and collaborate on a grand scale would lead to more participation, more equality and more democracy. These commentators have focused on the participatory

⁵ Of course, as Phaedrus puts it in his answer to Socrates' story, it is easy to invent tales. That is why we have science: to invent difficult tales.

qualities of digital media and the structures that allow large numbers of people to exchange information and coordinate action, ‘to self-organise and develop individuality’ (Vinken 2007: 51). By combining efforts, users can produce ‘collective intelligence’ (Levy 1997: 13) or the ‘wisdom of the crowds’ (Surowiecki 2004). They can ‘organise without organisations’ (Shirky 2008) and form ‘smart mobs’ (Rheingold 2002) to bring down dictators and fight for consumer rights. A ‘virtual public sphere’ (cf. Papacharissi 2002; Negroponte 1995) or a ‘virtual agora’ (Levy 1997: 57) appears, which serves as a platform for political deliberation and direct, computer-mediated participation. This platform can replace existing structures of representative democracy (*ibid.*: 60). Alternatively, ICT-enabled network structures even make hierarchical organisation impossible and render nation states redundant (Castells 2000: 19). The internet is characterised by a ‘participatory culture’, ‘with relatively low barriers to artistic expression and civic engagement, strong support for creating and sharing one’s creations, and some type of informal mentorship whereby what is known by the most experienced is passed along to novices’ (Jenkins et al. 2009: 3). There is an abundance of anecdotal examples of instances where digital technology indeed seems to have been important in bringing about democratic change. The Arab spring of 2011 sparked a lively debate about what role social media had played in the revolutions and uprisings (e.g. Bennett and Segerberg 2012). An ideal type technoc-utopian would claim that digital communication technologies bring about democratic change and increased participation since they provide the necessary infrastructure to organise people’s existing desires.

Contrarily, techno-pessimists point to ‘the continuity in economic interests, political imperatives and cultural values that drive and shape the ‘new’ as much as the ‘old’ media’ (Lister et al. 2003: 3 cit. in Scolari 2009: 949; cf. Scheufele and Nisbet 2002). According to this perspective, the use of new media does not lead to increased participation, or to increased equality in participation.

Some go further and claim that the emerging media ecology actually reduces levels of participation because of ‘atomization and a weakening of social cohesion’ (see Anduiza et al. 2009: 861, where Davis 1999 and Noveck 2000 are mentioned as examples of this perspective). Yet others claim that the use of digital media reinforces inequalities and hierarchies since power can be wielded on a grander scale (the reinforcement hypothesis) (Bimber 2000; Best and Kruger 2005).

One problem with these perspectives is that they tend to judge the empirical reality on the basis of normative ideals. For instance, criticism of the deterioration of the public sphere as a result of media concentration, commercialisation and fragmentation, all accentuated by the internet, presupposes that at some previous point there existed a gold standard in the real world, which is obviously wrong (Webster 2006: 199). In the same way, optimistic perspectives on the democratic possibilities of social media seem to suffer from utopian ideals, rather as pessimists are put off by comparing the political realities of social media with the ideal condition.

How should we think about the way that technological innovation might affect human behaviour? A technological determinist perspective maintains that technology

shapes human behaviour and society. In its crudest version, technology is seen as a *deus ex machina* in its effects.

The fundamental fault of some of the early techno-utopians was – apart from basing their lofty speculation on ideals rather than empirical reality – that they failed to realise that human behaviour in digital media is not fundamentally different from human behaviour offline. The idea that digital media – the internet in general or social media in particular – would bring about a more participative, more democratic politics is based on a notion of human beings as not only equal, but also as endowed with equal skills, motives, and interests. It is as if for the utopians, in the offline world people are constrained by societal, hierarchical structures that for some reason magically disappear when they interact in online networks. And it is as if political discourse and action on the internet is like a market where all consumers are producers, have exactly the same purchasing power and perfect information; an online political market that will reach optimal equilibrium thanks to the effectiveness of the platforms. In reality, people have varying skills, motives and interests, information is imperfect and unevenly distributed, and the net is anything but neutral. The market is dominated by a small number of corporate giants like Google, Facebook, Twitter, Amazon, and Apple. The dynamics of the internet leads to a winner-takes-all competition (cf. Hindman's (2008) discussion of 'Googlearchy'). Independent start-ups must relate to the overshadowing power of the oligarchs, as do users and political activists (as Tina Askanius and I show in article 4, even radical movements have all but stopped using independent media and are resorting to mainstream social media for communication). And although information wants to be free, governments and corporations have developed means to control it.

Similarly, there is a tendency among pessimists not to acknowledge that anything changes when it comes to politics, although the emergence of social network sites and other social media has brought about enormous changes to the way that information is disseminated around society.

At times, the study of the effects of digital media on the political sphere has adopted what looks like a determinist perspective. One of the first studies linking the internet with democratic development, Kedzie 1995, tries to establish a causal link between the spread of the internet and the spread of democracy.

Social constructivism offers an opposing perspective on technology. Social constructivism turns the causality around, instead pointing to the way that social factors and existing human behaviour shapes society and, ultimately, technology. But while it is true that technology is always a result of human invention, it is also true that when new technology is in place, it allows people and societies to develop in ways unforeseen, changing the very contextual setting that the original technology emanated from.

Nancy Baym (2010: 44) has suggested a third, middle-ground perspective, which she calls the 'social shaping of technology'. Users' behaviour is shaped by the interface, but exactly in what way users will behave is impossible to predict, and fun-

damentals of human nature and cultural paradigms are not likely to change as a result of new communication technology. That is also the perspective on technology and human behaviour that is used in this dissertation.

The reason that it is interesting to study social network sites isolated from the ‘rest’ of the internet is that social network sites are a fundamentally distinct form of human communication. Whereas people use the internet for a large variety of reasons, looking up train timetables, ordering a pizza, paying bills, and watching television, they use social network sites to connect with their friends and other social contacts. It is possible to engage in social network participation while remaining in the fairly non-specialised and non-politicised setting of the site itself (Baumgartner and Morris 2010: 26). Whereas the forms of engagement in Web 1.0 environments are often limited, specialized and determined by a site owner or administrator, Web 2.0 services, like social network sites, give users opportunities to engage with one another in a more interactive way (Jensen and Anduiza 2012: 80). Social network sites have a ‘participatory architecture’ (*ibid.*), and can ‘support non-hierarchical political forms’ (*ibid.*: 83). The arguments that are associated with the political implications of social network sites are related to this social factor.

In the next sections, the explanatory model that was presented and discussed in chapter 3 will be revisited and connected to the two overarching hypotheses: the mobilisation hypothesis and the reinforcement hypothesis. In the following sections, it should be made clear that when discussing empirical research in relation to the hypotheses, only studies done specifically on social network sites are mentioned.

5.2 The mobilisation hypothesis

The mobilisation hypothesis (or innovation hypothesis) predicts that the internet in general and social network sites in particular should lead to new groups or a larger group of the citizenry being activated in politics. If the decision to participate can be seen as an equation in which the benefits of participation (selective or collective incentives) outweigh the costs of participation (resources), social network sites can have a positive effect on participation if benefits are increased and/or costs are reduced (Article 1; cf. Anduiza et al. 2009: 871; Bäck et al., 2011; Mossberger and Tolbert 2011: 205-207; Xenos and Moy, 2007: 706f; Benkler 2006).

5.2.1 Effects on costs

Social network sites can have no effects on people's social background. They can, however, reduce costs by offering more effective and less time-consuming and laborious ways of participating and obtaining information. Social network sites would not in themselves be a cause of political participation, but merely 'remove the obstacles to it' (Shirky 2008: 159; cf. Article 1).

Social network sites offer a wider palette of participatory activities, allowing for 'flexible participation' (Jensen and Anduiza 2012: 82; Joyce 2010; Park et al. 2009: 729) cf. Article 3: 199). Rather than joining an organisation and attending weekly meetings, social network site users can choose to give a lot of their time or only a small portion, and with the help of asynchronous communication choose a time and a place that suits their schedules (Jensen and Anduiza 2012: 82). Engaging in less time-consuming activities might be considered a form of slacktivism (Karpf 2010), but should be compared with whether someone engaging in low time-consuming behaviour would have participated at all (cf. Article 5: 1119).

That the political knowledge gap is widened as a result of a more diversified media ecology was noted earlier (cf. Prior 2007). People who are not interested in politics can easily avoid political information. However, since people do not go to social network sites primarily for political content but for social exchange, they can be exposed to political content if their contacts chose to post such content. In this way, social network sites can function as 'stealth soapboxes' (Sweetser and Kaid 2008), making people not interested in politics more informed about political affairs and thereby producing 'accidental political mobilisation' (Hamilton and Tolbert 2012: 61; Anduiza et al. 2009: 867; cf. Article 5: 1114).

Social network sites are well suited for rapidly sharing information with a large number of contacts. In this way, it generally reduces information costs (Ellison et al. 2011: 874). In experimental studies, it has been shown that novel information can spread very quickly in social network sites and that weak ties are especially important as they provide bridges between close social clusters (Bakshy et al. 2012).

Social network sites allow users to maintain larger social networks (Ellison et al. 2007; Donath 2007). The user interface makes it easy to build up a large number of contacts and to keep up interaction with them without spending a lot of time maintaining these contacts. It has been shown that social network sites can help build up bridging social capital by forming diverse networks of weak ties (Steinfield et al. 2008). Social network sites also facilitate mobilisation by making it possible to invite a large number of people to activities (Anduiza et al. 2009: 868).

5.2.2 Effects on benefits

People use social network sites to ‘be entertained and stay connected to others’ (Baumgartner and Morris 2009: 27; cf. boyd 2008a). If they encounter political content and requests for action, they might receive social benefits from interacting with their Friends. Social network sites also lend themselves very well to mediating expressive incentives in the shape of sharing ‘personally expressive content’ (Bennet and Segerberg 2012: 14, cf. Benkler 2006). Discussing politics with Friends and studying political content shared by Friends, as well as learning about their Friend’s political behaviour, might make them more inclined to act themselves. In contrast to online fora, social network site users usually disclose their real names and provide correct personal information on their profiles (Tufekci 2008; Donath and boyd 2004). In addition, they connect with people they have met offline rather than engaging with new contacts they find online, as is the case in online fora (Ellison et al. 2011: 876).

5.2.3 Evidence for the mobilisation hypothesis

One of the most convincing studies providing evidence for the mobilisation hypothesis is (Bond et al. 2012), which carried out a ‘61-million-person experiment in social influence and political mobilisation’. A message was posted on Facebook on the day of the US mid-term election in 2010 which was visible to all Facebook users in the United States over 18 years of age who logged into Facebook on that day, except for a control group of 600 000. The message encouraged people to vote in the election and click an ‘I voted’ button. Except for another control group of 600 000 who only saw the message, the users could also see which of their Friends had clicked the ‘I voted’ button. The results were compared with real-world voting by matching user profiles with actual voter records. The authors found a direct effect on real-world voting from the message alone, but an even stronger effect from strong tie interaction: those who saw that their close friends had voted were more likely to vote themselves. This is evidence that political content in social network sites provide social benefits that make people want to participate.

Schlozman et al. (2010), relying on US survey data, found evidence that social network sites seemed to reduce the underrepresentation of young people in political participation and found some evidence that socioeconomic status was a somewhat weaker predictor for political participation among social network site users, but refrained from drawing any determined conclusions.

Using a survey of 998 US citizens Zhang et al. (2010) found that social network site use had a positive effect on civic participation, which they defined as ‘activities that address community concerns through non-governmental or non-electoral means’ (*ibid*: 76). A weakness of this study was that social network site users formed a very small share of the sample.

Park et al. (2009) surveyed US college students and found that using social network sites for ‘informational purposes’ rather than for ‘recreational’ or ‘entertainment’ purposes was significantly correlated with offline political participation.

5.3 The reinforcement hypothesis

The reinforcement hypothesis (or normalisation hypothesis) predicts that the social realities of the offline world are replicated in online settings and that, as a result no, or only modest, effects of social network sites on political participation should be expected, and if there are any effects, they should be expected to work in the ‘opposite’ direction, that is that already capacitated groups should be more able to use social network sites for political purposes and thus make political participation even more unequal (Hindman 2008; Oser et al. 2013; cf Anduiza et al. 2009: 863).

5.3.1 Effects on costs

Whereas social network sites offer a wider palette of participation and allow for flexible participation, they do not necessarily eliminate the need for rhetoric and the organisational skills required for participation. Livingstone and Helsper (2010: 311) define internet literacy as ‘a multidimensional construct that encompasses the abilities to access, analyse, evaluate and create online content.’ As internet literacy is not spread evenly in the population, social network sites allow those already capacitated for participation to participate and organise over several platforms rather than making it possible for people lacking resources to participate (Anduiza et al. 2009: 866; Ellison et al. 2011: 874; Goode 2010).

Although social network sites can hypothetically allow users to access political information through their Friends, it is also probable that the same structures that make politically interested and active people cluster in the offline world will also transfer to digitally managed social networks. There is also a tendency towards ideological clustering of social networks (Gaines and Mondak 2009). It is furthermore probable that people with access to large social networks will build disproportionately larger social networks online than people with smaller social networks. Lastly, there is evidence that there is a limitation on how many stable social relationships an individual can maintain regardless of technological aid. In fact, there seems to be a curvilinear relationship between the number of contacts in social network sites and social capital levels (Ellison et al. 2011: 878).

5.3.2 Effects on benefits

Social network sites provide opportunities for engaging in rewarding social behaviour with Friends, but whether engaging in political activity is seen as a rewarding activity depends on whether the individual user is inclined to this behaviour in the first place. For politically active users, political participation is a natural part of life and hence it is an activity that is carried out across different platforms. For those who are not politically active, politics can be viewed as an inappropriate activity, something that is of a private nature and not something that should be expressed in a semi-public arena like social network sites (Article 5).

5.3.3 Evidence for the reinforcement hypothesis

Baumgartner and Morris (2010) used a survey on American college students to compare the effects of different kinds of media consumption on political participation. They found that respondents who got their news from social network sites was not more inclined to participate, although social network site users were more inclined to choose online participation over offline participation compared to non-users. A weakness of this study was that only ‘getting news’ was studied as an indicator of social network site use.

5.4 The use of the hypotheses in this dissertation

In this dissertation, most of the articles do not set out to formally confirm or refute the mobilisation and reinforcement hypotheses, with the exception of Article 1, where a version of the mobilisation hypothesis is refuted. Instead, the hypotheses are tools that guide the research and the interpretation of the data.

As is obvious from the summary above, at the time of writing no very large amount of empirical work had been done on specifically social network sites and political participation. And although several of the studies referred above point to a possible mobilising effect of social network sites, they have weaknesses. This goes for the study supporting the reinforcement hypothesis as well. The studies are almost all made in an American context. Most of them use only American college students as research subjects, and they generally yield modest effects.

The argument advocated in this dissertation is that social network sites reproduce existing hierarchies in society and that ‘new groups’ are not suddenly being mobilised into political action, but that the nature of participation and organisation is changing. Instead of continuing the hunt for a communication tool that will help to equalise political participation, scientific inquiry should be undertaken in order to discover *how* social network sites affect political participation and existing political

structures. To walk away from the study of social network sites and political participation simply because they are not generating any quantifiable changes in the level of participation or in the social composition of participants would not only be wrong, but also potentially damaging to the quality of future political research. Not acknowledging the enormous changes that the information and communication systems of the world have undergone in the past decade would produce incorrect conclusions about the development of political participation in democratic societies and grossly underestimate the importance of social network sites for the political development of authoritarian and semi-authoritarian states.

6. Methodologies

This dissertation aims to deal with an emerging research field by employing different methodological strategies to the same research problem. In this chapter, some of the main methodological points of the dissertation are discussed.

6.1 A note on studying an exploding field

During the gestation of this dissertation project, social media and social network sites evolved from being a hyped phenomenon in early adopter tech circles into a regular pastime for a majority of the population. In 2012, Facebook has announced that it now had over one billion users worldwide (Zuckerberg 2012). The choice to carry out the project as a compilation thesis rather than a monograph stems in no small part from the fear that things were moving too fast and that early findings would be rendered obsolete over the course of a few years. Would social network sites in the future look anything like what they did a couple of years ago? Would companies like Facebook and Twitter give way to new services, just as Friendster, LunarStorm, MySpace and Jaiku had done in the past? Looking back, what is remarkable is rather the continuity of social media. Instead, the last five years have been characterised by steady growth of users, increased societal importance, and incremental changes to the platforms themselves. Twitter and Facebook have changed, but they are not completely different in 2013 as compared with their 2007 versions.

Media reporting and the popular debate on social media has often been characterised by hyperbole or contempt. Anecdotal evidence of the revolutionary effects of social media overshadowed the discourse, even in scholarship. This dissertation wants to make a contribution to the growing body of empirical research that can serve to nuance hopes or fears about the new communication infrastructure.

Early studies of the impact of new information and communication technologies on the political sphere were often focussed on evaluating the effects of internet access on political behaviour. As late as in 2007, it could still be claimed that ‘research has not told us much about the internet’s significance in the more modest, everyday life of political engagement’ (Olsson 2007: 188). This dissertation aims to problematize the monolith view of internet use, and put it in context. In order to do this, large-N data is complemented by small-N data. Using a mix of methods is one of the points

of this dissertation. In the following sections, the methodological choices in the dissertation are explained.

6.2 Studying social media online and offline

The use of big data (boyd and Crawford 2012) in studying the political use of social network sites has much to say for it. From the earliest attempts of research in the field, the ease with which large amounts of data can be pulled off the internet and processed in various ways has spurred researchers to study the digital traces of people (boyd and Ellison 2007). However, a weakness with content analysis of social media is that many things remain invisible. Motives, attitudes, and behaviour that leave no traces online are impossible to discover. Indeed, academic studies have sometimes tended to overestimate the importance of digital media on political behaviour and organisation because of the easy access to internet communication (Rucht 2004: 51). When studying interaction in social network sites it must be remembered that social relations go on in a multitude of platforms (Hampton and Wellman 2001). Whereas early research on the internet focused on ‘virtual communities’, it has become clear that social networks consist of people who know each other from offline settings and of people who only know each other through online communication; of people who communicate with each other through face-to-face interaction, text messages, chatting, telephone, letters, e-mail, instant messaging etc., and those who solely communicate with each other through a social networking site or an online forum; of people who use their real names and of people who use nicks, and of people who sometimes and in some places use their real names and at other times and in other places use pseudonyms or are anonymous. That the one-sided focus on manifest uses of social network sites can lead to an underestimation of their true impact in social communication has been noted recently by, among others, the journalist Alex Madrigal (2012). The amount of web traffic that is relayed by social network sites through sharing links and other content is huge, but according to estimates, an even larger amount of sharing is carried out using instant messaging, email and other forms of ‘hidden’ communication. This also implies that social network site users can share information they obtain via social network sites in hidden ways.

For this reason, the empirical studies in this dissertation work mainly with data that allow for studying both online and offline behaviour.⁶ In fact, one could argue that there is a conspicuous absence of online data in some of the articles. The survey data used in Article 1 and the focus group interviews in Article 5 are the result of individuals reporting their behaviour. One the other hand, Article 4 relies heavily on

⁶ For an early account of communicating in different platforms, see Hampton and Wellman (2001).

the analysis of online content separated from the motives and attitudes of originators. In the aspiration to avoid the loss of context, which results from a narrow focus on online data, yet being fundamentally interested in what actually goes on in social network sites, it is difficult to strike a balance. Perhaps only Article 6, which combines interview material with an analysis, however limited, of social network site profiles, approaches that balance.

6.3 Methods employed in the articles

In article 1, statistical analysis of cross-sectional survey data is employed to discover the general patterns of political behaviour in social media as compared to other channels for participation. This allows for the discovery of general patterns: by comparing the effects of background and resource variables on participation in social media and in other forms, the mobilisation hypothesis is called in question. The large sample makes it possible to discover correlations with a certainty that is not obtainable from for instance small-N interview data. The survey used for the article provided the first empirical data on political participation and social media in Sweden, yet it of course has its limitations. The nature of survey questionnaires does not allow for nuanced answers: we cannot know exactly how respondents interpreted the questions or whether their interpretations were skewed in any systematic way. On the other hand, in contrast to focus group interviews, respondents who fill out a survey questionnaire are not affected by others; it is an individual task that is carried out alone, without an interviewer peering. There is also a problem with the one-shot character of the questions: they have only been asked once, so there is no possibility of discovering trends in the population. If this had been designed as a panel, for instance, it would have been possible to discover how previous behaviour and attitudes would interact with the choice of channels for participation. However, the one-shot survey method allows for quickly getting a broad picture of what behaviour looks like and, above all, for discovering correlations. A huge advantage with the survey that was used in the article, the annual SOM survey, was the large number of questions asked about media consumption, political attitudes, confidence levels, and background information in addition to the question on political participation. The data from this survey could be used for much interesting future research, ideally so if the question were to be repeated in a later survey.

The fact that some people use social network sites for political participation, while others do not, does not necessarily tell us exactly why this is so. In article 5, the reasoning behind using social media for political purposes is studied by using online and offline focus groups. The point with using focus groups in this case rather than single, in-depth interviews, was that it allowed especially people not actively engaged in politics to discuss a relatively new phenomenon – political content and behaviour

in social network sites – with peers, thereby creating a dynamic discussion through the sharing of experiences. This proved to be useful in the interviews, as different opinions and different conceptualisations on what constitutes politics, political content or political participation, could be played out in the discussion, providing for nuanced answers. An essential methodological point in this particular article was to use ‘virtual’ focus groups, i.e. asynchronous, online focus groups, as well as ‘traditional’, face-to-face focus groups. Although there was no space to elaborate on this in the article, there were some interesting differences between the online and traditional groups. Online focus groups allow in theory for more effective, low-cost interviews: participants do not have to travel and so you can put together focus groups regardless of geography; participation is flexible as the conversations are asynchronous and participants can adjust their participation according to their own time schedule. An additional advantage is that participants can write longer, more reflective answers, and can correct their statements afterwards. In the interviews that were carried out online, answers were more eloquent, and participants came from different parts of Sweden. However, the group dynamics that are often mentioned as both a blessing and a plague in focus groups (depending on whether you think that they are of benefit to your research or not) were not at all as marked as in the traditional focus groups (cf. Stewart et al. 2007: 43). Participants directed their answers to the moderator rather than to each other. In the traditional focus groups, by contrast, dynamic interlocution between participants contributed to the discussions to a much greater extent. And although the participants in the online groups had more time to give their answers than the participants in the traditional focus groups, the total amount of data that resulted from the interviews was larger for the traditional groups. In summary, while online focus groups may seem like a cost-effective research method, there is much to say for the traditional focus group. In a pilot study for this article, Facebook itself was tried out as a research platform (Gustafsson and Wahlström 2008). This proved to be disadvantageous, for two reasons: first, that the interviews were limited by the currently applicable rules (concerning how participants could be recruited, how long answers could be, and so on); and secondly, that Facebook claims non-exclusive ownership rights to all content posted on its site (*ibid*: 8f). In summary, online focus groups can be used as a valuable complement to traditional focus groups, but are in no way superior to traditional focus groups.

In contrast to the loneliness of the survey questionnaire and the unpredictable dynamics of focus group interviews, the in-depth interviews employed in Article 6 allowed respondents to elaborate on their answers at length. Interviews were anonymised in order to make it easier for respondents to discuss the culture in the parliamentary group and the party and the behaviour of their colleagues. In-depth interviews are a good way of gathering information about events or, as in this case, different attitudes in a group of people. The combination of the interviews and the analysis of the social media profiles of the respondents proved to be especially interesting, since what respondents said about their behaviour and their actual, manifest behaviour could be compared. In some instances, a clear effect of the interview itself could

be seen on the social media activity of the respondent, which in the article is taken as an indication of how weak and insecure norms of communication still are concerning social media. Originally, a very sophisticated mixed-methods strategy was considered for this article: the in-depth interviews would be complemented by a broader content analysis of the social media profiles and available survey data on Swedish parliamentarians. However, this was not possible, because of time restrictions. It is nonetheless probable that such a strategy would have yielded pertinent information.

The two co-authored articles, 3 and 4, used a diverse set of case study methods in order to encapsulate the structures of networked campaigns. While article 4 is mostly based on content analysis of social media profiles and posts (collected by both co-authors), in article 3, content analysis is complemented by interviews and participant observation (carried out exclusively by Yana Breindl), taking advantage of ethnographic research methods. Paradoxically, networked campaigns, like La Quadrature du Net, who are extremely devoted to a digital activist strategy, become more alive and easier to study and understand when the actual digital content is complemented by talking to and observing the activists themselves.

In this way, the articles allow us to look at the individuals, the organisations, and the collective from different perspectives. Instead of relying exclusively on one set of methods, a broad range of large-N and small-N methods are employed to give a fuller picture of the field. That is also the idea of executing the dissertation project as a series of smaller subprojects, using different empirical material and foci as well as different research methods.

6.4 Sweden as a critical case for studying the effects of social media use on political participation

To begin with, just a reminder: although most empirical data in this dissertation emanate from Sweden and Swedish respondents, Article 3 is set in a French/European context, and Article 4 uses data from both Denmark and Sweden. If anything, this shows that the methods and theoretical approaches employed and the empirical results presented in this dissertation are not exclusively valid for the Swedish case. That being said, there are good reasons for studying political participation and social network sites in Sweden, over and above the obvious convenience of the place of residence of the author.

If new patterns in political behaviour are emerging as a result of social media use, Sweden is an especially interesting case to study, mainly for three reasons. The first is that Sweden is a country with very high internet and social media penetration.

About half the population uses social network sites. Among 16-25 year olds, almost everyone, or 95 %, uses social network sites. (Findahl 2013)⁷. Overall use of social network services rose from 27 % of the adult population in 2008 to 64 % in 2012 (*ibid*). In a global perspective, Sweden has a fairly high level of social network site use. A 2012 study of 22 countries reports that social network site use varies from 3 % in Pakistan to 52 % in the UK (Pew 2012). Regarding Facebook specifically, the penetration rate in Sweden in 2012 was 55 %, which is higher than for the United States (54 %), but lower than for instance Iceland (73 %). In a country where social media have become a pervasive and natural part of daily life for a majority of the citizens, emerging behavioural patterns should be easy to discover.

The second reason is the comparatively fertile ground for political participation in Sweden. Voter turnout is high, at 86 % in the national election in 2010, and there is a high frequency in other political activities (Teorell et al. 2007). The third reason is that Sweden is a fairly small and homogeneous country. This ensures that information can travel fairly effectively through the social networks. Among additional characteristics of Sweden, the extreme degree of individualism and social trust can be mentioned (Zmerli et al. 2007). In this way, Sweden is a critical case: if we are to find evidence that the use of social media affects political participation in any way; that social media might augment or threaten existing political structures and organisations, or that social media allow for new, previously unengaged groups to be recruited, we should find it here.

Of course, the counter-argument can be made that we should indeed not expect any disruptive effects of social media in Sweden, as participation levels are already high and the political system relatively well-functioning and trusted by the citizens, as well as being a fairly economically equal society: those who want to participate are already able to do and the thresholds cannot be lowered any further. The lamented ‘crisis of representative democracy’ seems virtually non-existent in the Sweden of the 2010s, with rising levels of trust in politicians and the political system, rising voter turnout, and rising political interest (Oscarsson and Persson 2010). Instead, we should find more disruptive effects of social media in authoritarian, diverse, and unequal nations.

This is a valid argument, but it means that the Swedish case should be set in comparison with extreme cases at the other end.

⁷ Among senior citizens (over 65 years), the penetration rate drops to about 25-30 %.

7. Conclusion

In this final chapter of the introductory essay I revisit the main arguments of the dissertation. The limitations of the dissertation are discussed, as well as its implications for further research and policy. The chapter ends with some reflections.

7.1 The general argument

This dissertation makes empirical and methodological arguments about the study of social network sites and political participation.

The empirical argument is that the use of social network sites for political purposes does not bring about any increased equality in political participation. However, it does create new forms of participation and influence – such as the subtle influence of sharing political content and interacting with political actors through the medium of social network sites; that social network sites facilitate political mobilisation through the use of viral politics; and that political organisations, formal and networked, seem to undergo a homogenisation process as different organisations adopt the same communication tools and strategies. The methodological argument is that the political use of social network sites should be studied with a mix of methods in order to take account for communication across platforms and effects that are not made manifest in digital content.

7.2 Limitations

7.2.1 Space

A limitation that this dissertation shares with most previous research on the political implications of social network sites is the predominantly national context of the empirical material. Originally, my plan for this dissertation project was to go beyond the national context to study political participation in a global context. This proved to be difficult because of restrictions of time, money and manpower. The resort to a focus

on the Swedish context made data-gathering simpler. Two of the articles use empirical data from other countries. In Article 3, the arena of European politics is studied, and Article 4 compares two cases in Denmark and Sweden, respectively, but with both cases drawing in European and international politics. The global context is also present in the other articles, but it is still a dissertation with a largely national setting. From this it follows that the results cannot necessarily be generalised to other geographical or societal contexts. The argument is made in the dissertation that the Swedish context is interesting due to the structural and institutional peculiarities of the case: Sweden is a country with a high level of social network site penetration as well as a high level of political participation in addition to the individualist character of Swedish society, and for this reason, the Swedish empirical data can be used to make the argument that if there ever was a time or place to look for the dynamic effects offered by social network sites, Sweden would be a good place to look. The general caveat should be that since the cultural context affects political behaviour regardless of the technical tools used, technology might have different implications in other societal and cultural settings.

7.2.2 Time

When I started working on this project, social network sites had just started its penetration of Swedish society (see 6.1). The data collection was made during a time when use and applications were in constant expansion. It is difficult to predict whether the relationships discovered in this material will prove to hold in the future. The nature of social network sites might change and the specific services and platforms referred to might disappear and be replaced with others. But it is the nature of all research in the social sciences that results are provisory and context-bound. This dissertation will not only be useful for those interested to know what social network sites did to political participation in the early 2010s in Sweden, but also serve as a stepping-stone for further research.

7.3 Further research

A general observation made in this dissertation is that social network sites in themselves should not be used as an independent variable and that the search for equalising effects of social network site use in political participation is essentially futile. Further research should instead concentrate on the ways that participation through social network sites affects the policy process and the political system, and how the emerging information and communication system affects policy choices, political structures and forms of influence.

After a series of cross-sectional studies and time-limited interview and case studies, the next step should be to construct methodological designs that can take development over time into account. Apart from panel data, experimental designs might prove to be fruitful to gather valuable information of the effects of social network site use. As has been stated above, these studies should also go beyond the national contexts. The inherent global nature of social network sites alone is a sufficient reason for this.

One of the main methodological points of this dissertation is that designs should employ a mix of methods to catch the seamless flow of information and action through different channels, both manifest and latent.

7.4 Policy implications

The idea that social network sites, and digital media in general, can be a remedy to everything from the perceived crisis of representative democracy in the West to the threat of persistent authoritarianism in other parts of the world, is a danger to actual change. On all political levels, from the experiments of local e-democracy to grand plans of digital development aid, the perception of the digital quick fix risks overshadowing structural problems. In Swedish municipalities, political apathy among voters and political parties losing members will not be solved with a more daring social media strategy. The inequalities of society and the powerlessness of the oppressed cannot be overturned by hashtags and memes.

But that social network sites cannot create political equality should not discourage political actors and governments from using social network sites and other digital tools. They are excellent tools for communication and information, and they allow politicians and officials to communicate in a more efficient and direct way with citizens than traditional mass media.

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