Social Media, Democracy, and Democratization

Introduction

#SOTU. Those five characters have become a shared space where citizens join together to participate in one of the key political events of the United States. The State of the Union Address is broadcasted and commented in traditional media, but they are social media that allow the President to offer not a speech but an enhanced multimedia experience; they also allow politicians, pundits and citizens alike to react and comment on his words. In 2015, #SOTU spurred about 2.6 million tweets, and they painted a detailed picture of the Twittersphere's reaction to the topics covered by Obama[1].

This is just one of many examples of the blending of social media and politics. This and other cases are used to support the alleged potential of social media to empower citizens and boost democracy, and to illustrate the feasibility of gauging the pulse of public opinion from social media. However, there also exist worrisome counter examples where social media are used as repression tools.

On this light, one could think that social media are neither good nor bad. Unfortunately, they are neither neutral; social media are products of communicative capitalism [1] and their goal is not to boost political action, but to commoditize individual communication and monetize it. Certainly, social media operators care for the interests of their users –including free speech, but only to the extent they do not affect their investors or the laws under which they operate, no matter they are just or not. Facebook, for instance, can claim *"Je suis Charlie"* in the US on one day and ban pages in Turkey on the grounds of blasphemy the other day.

In fact, the confluence of social media with political action is a complex field raising important questions: Are social media a realm for democratic deliberation? Can we ascertain public

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[1] http://twitter.github.io/interactive/sotu2015/

opinion from them? How are people using social media for political participation? Can social media boost democracy in authoritarian regimes? Which is the future ahead for social media and politics? I will try to shed some light on them.

Are social media a realm for democratic deliberation?

Deliberation is crucial in modern democracy. However, although *"dialogue is preferable to violence, and good dialogue is preferable to poor dialogue"* not every conversation qualifies for democratic deliberation. Proper democratic deliberation assumes citizens are equal participants, opposing points of view are not only accepted but encouraged, and the main goal is to achieve *"rationally motivated consensus"* [5]. Unfortunately, there are strong arguments against social media discussions being deliberations of this kind.

To start with, not all social media users are equal. Indeed, political, corporate and media elites have "colonized" social media. Such users are the most central actors in political social networks; they interact mostly among them and very rarely with regular users; and their contents –with a clear agenda-building objective–are favored by most users over those from non-elite users.

Regarding ideological diversity, social media users are not isolated in echo chambers. In fact, they have certain degree of exposure to cross-cutting ideas –even users that are clearly partisans– and interaction among users with opposing ideas is not uncommon. However, most social media users prefer to avoid such discussions [11], and when encountering conflicting arguments they do not propagate them within their network. Moreover, political homophily is a strong force weaving and unweaving online social networks [11].

Finally, when political discussions occur they are not rational and democratic deliberations for a number of reasons:

- Political information in social media generally lacks quality and strong arguments, is usually incoherent and highly opinionated.
- Social media users have a propensity for humor and goofiness that has made gaffes and zingers central points of political "discussion". Although anecdotal, it is pitiful that Big Bird or *"horses and bayonets"* were central points during the first US presidential debate in 2012.
- Live-tweeted debates, like #SOTU, are increasingly common but they are not real deliberations. They are guided discussions indirectly driven by the agenda set by the media and the political actors. Moreover, it is not uncommon in those situations that elite users, such as official accounts from parties or candidates, try to rebut the criticisms by regular users.
- Finally, social media are best suited for *"blinkered deliberation"* where users are not talking to each other but posting messages for all others to read (or not). That is not *"public deliberation but deliberation in public"*.

Because of those issues, social media fail to fulfill the criteria that Kellner [8] suggested for cyberspace being a public sphere. In that regard he said: *"computer technologies [should] be used to serve the interests of the people and not corporate elites [...] to inform and enlighten*

individuals rather than to manipulate them [...] to articulate their own experiences and interests, and to promote democratic debate and diversity, allowing a full range of voices and ideas to become part of the cyberdemocracy of the future." From that point of view it is clear that social media are not a realm for democratic deliberation.

Social media and public opinion

We must distinguish public opinion as the collective outcome of rational deliberation on issues of common interest, and public opinion as the aggregated results of surveys administered to a sample of a given population. As discussed above, the first variety does not currently exist in social media; however, social media brim with opinionated messages and that material is distilled into the second variety of public opinion. Unfortunately, that sort of public opinion suffers from some weaknesses:

1. Every single social message is considered equally valid no matter its provenance (i.e. regular or elite user, spammer, automated account, etc.), or the certainty that a substantial amount of them are misleading, even manipulative (e.g. astroturfing and smearing posts).
2. Only observable data can be processed, and, thus, non-responses are not weighted in. Therefore, when studying public opinion in social media we are actually observing the opinion of a very vocal minority [11]. This, joined to the "spiral of silence" effect, should be a major concern when mining opinion from social media.
3. Social media users are not monolithic; even purportedly homogenous ideological groups react differently to different topics. Social media opinion departs from public opinion and it does it differently depending on the topic: sometimes, social media opinion is very liberal while others it is very conservative.
4. On top of that, social media users are not a random sample from the population: men, youth and urban people are overrepresented. Given that all of those features are important with regard to political choices, such non-randomness of social media is another problem.

In spite of that, there are plenty of efforts to gauge public opinion from social media, and we can distinguish three main approaches [1].

The first one is the "vox pop" approach which consists of using an assorted selection of tweets to illustrate some issue. It is not uncommon in journalism but it should not qualify as public opinion.

Another one is the quantitative approach which consists of aggregating social media metrics for a given topic, usually defined on the basis of users' profiles, keywords or hashtags. For instance, it has been common to report the number of followers or friends a candidate has got, the growing number of tweets regarding a topic, etc.

This approach has been refined in two different ways. In one of them, researchers use social media data to produce a time series that aims to represent the public's mood. With long enough data it is possible to determine if a given peak in mood is abnormal and, in that case, mine social media contents to obtain keywords related to that unexpected peak.

One major problem with this approach is that it only employs social media data and, thus, results can be inconsistent. That is, the height of the peaks does not always correspond to the actual reaction of the public: sometimes social media seem to overreact, others to underreact.

This is solvable by correlating the time series obtained from social media with others obtained from actual public opinion polls. This has been tried, for instance, to nowcast consumer confidence or presidential job approval [12]; or to forecast elections using pre-electoral polls for the "training" phase.

Finally, we have so-called "semantic polling", that is, *"mining and natural language reading of textual data such as Tweets to draw conclusions about public opinion"* [1]. This would be the closest approach to open-ended surveys and, given the available background in topic detection and tracking methods, it could be an interesting line of research. However, because of social media biases towards fast pace and tech related topics [1], we risk taking "trending topics" as public's opinion. Moreover, although methods based on time-series could "discount" to a certain amount misinformation and disinformation, semantic polling would fall prey to such misleading data, as would also suffer from sample biases.

Therefore, despite the claims on the feasibility of gauging the pulse of public opinion with social media data there are still many challenges ahead, and "traditional" public opinion surveys are alive and kicking.

Social media and political participation

Self-expressing one's political views and discussing them with others are some of the most common ways of political participation which are also common in social media although, as aforementioned, they do not contribute to an especially highly reflective discourse [11].

Both actions, along with voting, mobilizing others, contacting elected officials, volunteering in a campaign, or running for office are forms of conventional political participation. Public demonstrations, rioting, refusing to obey unjust laws, uprisings or revolutions are examples of unconventional or contentious political action. Both ways of participation have been observed in social media.

Regarding conventional participation, we must note that at the beginning of the then called Web 2.0 it was argued that it would boost political engagement of the population at large, and of the youth and other uninvolved groups in particular.

Unfortunately, social media users are not more politically engaged than non-users; and, as discussed earlier, those that are politically active are no better informed because of using social media (quite to the contrary).

Moreover, they are similar in terms of gender, income and education to politically-active citizens who are non-users of social media [11]. The age is the only real difference between both groups, but youth people who are politically engaged in social media tend to indulge in slacktivism [11].

Regarding previously uninvolved citizens, they do not seem to use social media for conventional participation; however, as I will discuss later, contentious political actions are increasingly important and social media is playing some role on them.

It is political campaigning, however, one of the fields where social media have been more extensively used [5]. For instance, to announce a candidate is running for election; to make the candidate look more authentic and accessible; to organize the campaign's staff, recruit supporters, volunteers and get funds; to mobilize voters; and of course to spread the candidate's message.

It is interesting that, although politicians have praised the possibilities that social media offer for deliberation with citizens, they tend to use them as one-way communication tools, and they very rarely engage in discussion with other users, particularly regular citizens. After being elected they also fail to engage with their constituency, using social media to keep them informed but not to discuss their policies [16]. Indeed, social media are used as a permanent campaign tool to keep politicians on the users' radar.

After the successful Obama's campaign in 2008, many credited his results to social media usage; however, the truth is that the outcome strongly depends on the candidates, their message, their staff, and their ability to mobilize a large enough part of the electorate [5].

Can social media bring democracy?

Interestingly, the same silver bullet quality attributed to social media when discussing campaigns has been invoked when discussing "social media revolutions". From Moldova to Hong Kong, passing through Iran, Tunisia, Egypt, Spain, Wall Street or Ukraine, there is no single protest, uprising or revolution that has not been labeled as a "social media revolt".

Undeniably, social media and the internet have reduced the need for formal organizations in collective actions, and this has produced the impression that current social movements are horizontal and leaderless. However, not every digitally networked action correspond to such a description and, moreover, they should not be merely described because of the tools they use.

To start with, some of such movements are collective actions using social media while others are connective actions [3]. The difference between both is quite important: in the first case a collective identity arise while in the second one it is not needed. Hence, connective actions are individualized in the sense of Wellman's "networked individualism": participants do not see themselves as members of a group, but as individuals that at a given time connect to other individuals to pursue some concrete objective.

Because of this, connective actions risk to become chaotic and unproductive, and some voices argue that the individualistic participation promoted by social media is not empowering, but a threat for social movements and undermining for the public sphere in the long run [8].

Regarding the outcomes of digitally networked actions, anecdotal evidence is not encouraging: the protests in Moldova, Iran, and Hong Kong failed to achieve their goals; the Egypt revolution brought a regime change, but the new government was also contested by the population and eventually overthrown in a *coup d'état*; Euromaidan brought a government change, but it was

accompanied by war in Eastern and Southern Ukraine; 15-M eventually faded out, although from its aftermath came a new political party (*Podemos*) challenging the *status quo*; and Occupy Wall Street also faded out. Only the Tunisian Revolution can be considered a partial success given that the country is slowly consolidating a democracy.

In spite of such outcomes or, better, because of the hopeful Tunisian result, the question about the democratic catalyzing power of social media in oppressive regimes is unavoidable. In this regard there are conflicting opinions.

Cyber-optimistic scholars claim that social media were crucial for the Arab Spring uprisings and that, although not causing them they greatly facilitated and accelerated the revolutions [9]. Others limit the role of social media to a tactical advantage for coordination purposes, and a few argue that mass media (particularly satellite television) legitimized the social media activists and actually drove the events. Nevertheless, the consensus among most authors toning down the role of social media in the Arab Spring is that there existed prior causes for the revolts such as inequality, unemployment or poverty, and that democratic debate predated social media use in those countries and was being held in other spaces.

Certainly, some support has been provided to consider both internet and mobile phone use as key causes in the revolts, but always combined with other variables and with different importance depending on the country. Indeed, when comparing the outcomes of different "social media revolts" it seemed clear that the success or failure of them had little to do with social media usage and much with each country's context.

In fact, in countries exerting a tight control over the internet social media use can backfire on activists –as was the case of Iran or Syria, or it can be exploited as a "safe valve" by the regime. A prime example of the latters is censorship under China's "networked authoritarianism". Chinese social media users are relatively free to criticize the state, its leaders and their policies without fearing censorship; what is quickly censored is any message (even positive) calling for a collective action.

To sum up, social media are not only inadequate to properly engage in democratic practices, but they are neither democratizing catalyzers *per se*. Instead, they are one of many factors, in addition to great tactical tools, provided the conditions in the non-democratic country are suitable. Moreover, there are many variables which can negatively affect the outcome of any uprising, even if the regime is not tampering with social media. In short, social media do not make people free; people taking risks and organizing themselves do it.

Conclusion

The promises of social media to boost political engagement in democratic countries and promote democracy in authoritarian regimes are unfulfilled, and I am afraid they will remain this way with current social media. This is unsurprising because social media are privately operated mass consumption products, aimed at entertaining an audience, not to allow them to engage in political actions. Indeed, social media may help individualistic participation in contentious political actions, but it fails to help users to articulate concrete and full-fledged political proposals.

However, to improve the prospects of political action in social media there are a number of lines of research we can follow:

- To foster the development of distributed and federated social media systems similar to those by GNU social. Without centralized commercial silos it would be much more difficult for authoritarian regimes to make pressure to ban contents, block users or gather personal data on opposing individuals.
- To develop new user interfaces to improve reflective deliberation instead of the currently pervasive blinkered deliberation. The experience with sites such as E-Democracy could be invaluable to achieve this.
- To continue ongoing work on information provenance in social media, credibility assessment [4], and detection of astroturfing, smear campaigns and socialbot networks.
- To go beyond nowcasting public opinion polls using social media data, and develop new methods to infer the latent issues that constitute the public agenda.

That is, we need to develop technologies not to monetize communication, but to serve the people by letting them to freely express, access trustworthy information, engage in meaningful deliberation and organize themselves, without fear of being commoditized, manipulated, monitored by authorities or, worse, risking coercion.

I am not a dreamer; I know that only a minority of the people in democratic countries would participate in those systems; after all, politics are demanding. However, citizens willing to engage in politics, especially citizens in authoritarian regimes deserve better, and as a community we can do better.

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