

THE ARTIST USED THE LAYOUT OF GLOBALLY RECOGNIZABLE LOGOS OF SOCIAL MEDIA SUCH AS YOUTUBE, TUMBLR OR FACEBOOK, ADDING TO THEM IDEALISTIC SLOGANS. SHE ALSO COMBINED THE SCIENTIFIC DISCOURSES IN THE MEDIA WITH THE ACTIVITY OF SOCIAL MOVEMENTS AND RESISTANCE INITIATIVES. BY CONFRONTING NEUTRALLY FUNCTIONING COMMERCIAL HALLMARK SYMBOLS OF THESE BRANDS WITH EXTREMELY UTOPIAN CONCEPTS - TRUE, INSUBORDINATION OR TRUCE – AGNIESZKA POKRYWKA PROVOKES REFLECTION NOT ONLY ON MULTIFUNCTIONALITY OF SOCIAL MEDIA, BUT ALSO ON THE ROLE THAT WE - THE USERS – ASSIGN TO THEM, AND WHICH WE MOLD TO OUR NEEDS: POLITICAL, ECONOMIC AND PERSONAL. HER WORKS ARE NEITHER PRAISE NOR CRITICISM OF SOCIAL MEDIA. THEY MAY BE RECOGNIZED AS AN ATTEMPT TO CAPTURE THE SIMPLE THOUGHT: SOCIAL MEDIA IS A TOOL (OF CHANGE OR PRESERVATION) AND THE HOW-TO-USE-THIS LIST IS CERTAINLY LONGER THAN ANY EXTENDED MANUAL.

~ AGNIESZKA FILIPIAK



by A. Pokrywka

SOCIAL

MEDIA AND SOCIAL INNOVATION A COMPLEX ECOLOGY

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essay

IN THESE LAST YEARS, A GROWING AMOUNT OF ATTENTION HAS BEEN PAID TO THE USE OF DIGITAL COMMUNICATION AS A TOOL FOR INCREASING PARTICIPATION AND CIVIC ENGAGEMENT. RESEARCH EFFORTS HAVE MULTIPLIED TO UNCOVER HOW ONLINE COMMUNICATION IS BECOMING THE ORGANIZATIONAL BACKBONE OF PARTICIPATION FROM BELOW. IN THIS CONTEXT, LESS ATTENTION HAS BEEN DEVOTED TO EXPLORE HOW DIGITAL COMMUNICATION, IN PARTICULAR VIA SOCIAL MEDIA, CAN BE STRATEGICALLY EXPLOITED IN TERMS OF SOCIAL INNOVATION, I.E., FOR THE DEFINITION AND THE CONSOLIDATION OF NORMS GUIDING DEMOCRATIC AND PARTICIPATORY POLICY-MAKING PROCESSES.

In fact, if social media seem to provide new channels for fostering and revamping political participation (although the debate on the importance of online political engagement is very lively and polarized around radically opposite views), collective action from below remains tightly intertwined with the persistence of state-centered governance activities deployed at the local and at the supranational level.

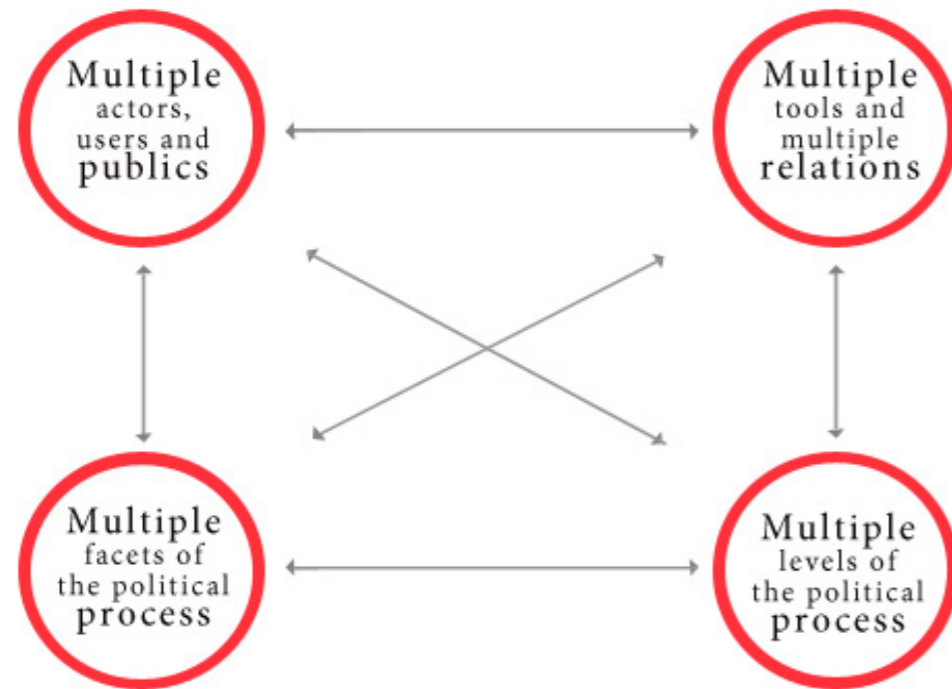
It is very evident that states have not been replaced as the ultimate authorities in the conduct of public affairs. However, it is equally evident that they continue to suffer from a multifaceted deficit, in terms of legitimacy, knowledge and access.¹ In this sense, states depend on an increased extent from external material and symbolic resources, owned by a myriad of individuals, citizens, public and private organizations to elaborate policies that can face the challenges in terms of increased levels of diversity, dynamics and complexity characterizing our societies. That can be widely accepted as the normative foundations of our daily lives.

The space of flows generated by internet communication enables the wider and easier circulation of ideas that state actors need to accomplish their tasks today. In this sense, internet provides the technical infrastructure upon which virtuous collaborations can be constructed amongst governmental and non-governmental actors, collaborations that can translate into, reinforce or imbue multi-actor direct collaborations – such as those in multi-stakeholder forums (let's think of the United Nations World Summit on the Information Society or the Internet Governance Forum) or multi-actor tables and task forces (as the Multi-Stakeholder Joint Programme on Violence Against Women promoted again by the United Nations).

“ THE PEOPLE CONSTITUTE A GROUPING WRITTEN INTO THE LOGIC OF PARLIAMENTARISM, THEREFORE: INTO THE LOGIC OF REPRESENTATION; THE MULTITUDE HOWEVER REMAINS A COLLECTIVE SUBJECT OF DEMOCRACY THAT REJECTS THE IDEA OF REPRESENTATION

¹ Hockings 2006: 13-32.

Social innovation



Despite attempts to promote public-private partnerships that can lead to innovative, democratic and participatory political arrangements, two major obstacles seem to be jeopardizing a fuller exploitation of Internet's connective potential to produce social innovation. First, there are structural constraints to the use of the Internet itself. Digital divides and the unequal distribution of resources end up excluding those who are more likely to be already external to the deployment of governance processes from online exchanges. Second, and perhaps more important, the connective potential that is proper of digital technologies has vanished by an overall lack of that "mentality change"² that would be needed to rethink the roles and competences of institutional and non-institutional actors in relation one another, rather than as alternative or, more often, opposite.

More broadly, many of the multi-actor experiments realized so far, especially those substantially supported by the employment of digital communications, have suffered from a monolithic conceptualization of both the policy process and of the Internet, as if all digital communication tools could benefit in any case from the complex intertwining of processes that

² Padovani 2005: 264-272.

go under the "governance" label. In other words, while these experiments were trying to cope with increased levels of diversity, dynamics and complexity, they actually did not translate these challenges into constitutive features of a framework where social media and digital communications can be strategically exploited to create genuine multi-actor collaborations.

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IN FACT, IN THE ONLINE WORLD, THE CONCEPT OF "PUBLIC" IS BROADENED AND REDEFINED: IT STANDS FOR THE POSSIBILITY OF THIRD PARTIES IN GENERAL TO ACCESS INFORMATION AND ELABORATE A JUDGMENT, AN OPINION

In fact, using social media for social innovations requires us to consider and act within a complex ecology of elements, which not only should be evaluated on their own but, more importantly, in connection with one another. We try to summarize this ecology in the figure below.

Social innovation is a process that involves a plurality of actors, both of a governmental and non-governmental nature. When digital media are employed as tools to foster connections amongst these two broad groups we should be aware that Internet access is far from being universal, that competences are differently distributed and so are motivations, agendas and perceptions. In this sense, there is a problem of representativeness: not all interested parties can be actually engaged in online relationships and, amongst those who are involved, there can be a lot of heterogeneity. It therefore becomes important to analyze who these contributors are, their characteristics, their claims and their demands. Moreover, when reaching out to non-governmental entities that possess the knowledge and the resources they need, governmental actors should be aware that their "audience" is not made exclusively by those citizens who are subjected to their formal authority. In fact, in the online world, the concept of "public" is broadened and redefined: it stands for the possibility of third parties in general to access information and elaborate a judgment, an opinion. In this sense, governments' attempts to regain legitimacy should be pursued keeping into consideration the multiplicity of heterogeneous audiences that form online and to whom they must become accountable.

Employing digital communications for creating social innovation requires us also to acknowledge that different tools have different affordances and potentialities. Hence, communication tools should be adopted when they actually allow us to reach out to targeted audiences in the most efficient

way. Opting to inform citizens through a static website is much different than hosting an open confrontation within an online group on a social networking site. In the first case, a modern version of the “one to many” model of communication will be supported; while in the latter, discourses will be created collectively and in participatory ways. Choosing between websites, social media and, amongst the latter, between group-oriented or content-oriented services, determines the type of communicative interaction that will be established amongst participants. It then becomes fundamental to choose the tools that will create the type of community that is needed to complete a task and not, simply, to provide a fake sense of publicity.

Using social media for generating social innovation entails more than accounting for multiple users and multiple tools. It also requires us to adopt a wider vision of political processes beyond policy-making activities to encompass the production of “public purpose” which is “an expression of vision, values, plans, policies and regulations that are valid for and directed towards the general public.”³ Hence, collaborations amongst governments and non-governmental actors should not be understood solely in reference to the actual steering of policies, as it might be, for example, in a direct democracy environment. Enhanced public-private cooperation can serve different political aims, such as the construction of trust relationships, the exchange of relevant information, brainstorming and problem solving and, more importantly, consensus building.⁴ All these actions must be considered as inherently political and necessary preconditions for the formulation of shared policies. Thus, social media and digital communications can provide arenas where trust and common visions can be shaped. The more they will be employed to foster the convergence of orientations on goals, strategies and agendas, the higher their impact on the production of social innovation.

Finally, in the global context in which governments operate today, traditional categorizations of policy domains are progressively dissolved and it is becoming increasingly difficult to bond political action to a neat distinction between domestic and foreign affairs. As recent frictions in the context of European Union prove: the management of national issues reverberates at the supra-national level and vice versa. Scale-shift dynamics, whether they move upwards or downwards, require a flexible organization model, one that allows governments to recognize and adapt to the changes of structural and social conditions in which they operate and to establish trusting and valuable collaborations at all levels. In this regard, Internet and social media provide tools to connect local and supra-national domains of action and

³ Sørensen, Torfing 2007: 10.

⁴ Susskind et al. 2003: 235-266.

their protagonists, thus sustaining multilevel networks of cooperation, which efficiently adapt to the dynamics of policy evolutions.

Social media can be strategically appropriated for the production of social innovation. Governments and institutions can, at all levels and in all domains, try to overcome the structural constraints to their action and exploit the connective potential of Internet and digital communication to promote inclusive and participatory dynamics. Approaching the nexus between social media and social innovation from an ecology perspective might help in outlining more complex action strategies where actors, tools, political dynamics and action levels are considered and evaluated in relation to one another. It certainly requires an additional effort on the side of institutional actors, which often remain skeptical about the possibility to establish genuine collaborations with actors traditionally excluded from governance processes. Yet, the adoption of an inclusive *modus operandi*, which benefits from the inherent connectivity of new technologies, is full of potential for enhancing democracy and fostering virtuous collaboration between public and private constituencies in our societies.

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