Foreword: ‘ideologies’ and ‘utopias’ in the discourses and practices of digital politics

Simeon Yates

# Introduction

As Alex Frame notes at the start of this volume the development and implementation of new media digital technologies is a core element in economic and social change in many spheres of society. This dynamic, dialectic and sometimes simply confusing process often moves on at a pace that is hard for social researchers to keep up with. This has felt ever more the case in over the last two decades in which new communications media forms and technologies appear to arrive almost constantly. It is in such circumstances that volumes such as this are important. First, the media ‘revolution’ that is underway needs to be documented – both the changes themselves and perceptions of them. Second, at some future point our use of digital media will be as general and ubiquitous as writing and print are now (or rather were in the late 20th century). We will need points of reference such as this volume to remind us of the stages, conflicts, possibilities and concerns that made the digital world.

All the contributions to this volume speak to the great promise that lies in the use of the Internet and digital media for new forms of politics and for the regeneration of existing political systems. Indeed, for those of us with long memories, many pages of academic research and many hours of conference discussions in the early 1990’s focused on the benefits and potential of the use of the Internet for deliberative politics. This was exemplified by the journalistic enthusiasm over online fora such as the WELL whose activities underpinned Howard Rheingold’s (1993) seminal study “The Virtual Community”. Digital media could seemingly address issues of political disengagement and maybe deadlock in our ‘analogue’ representative democracies. At the same time, long before the web or social media were mainstream, others were documenting the darker sides of digital media. Their use to control, limit and survey debate is examined in Shoshanna Zuboff’s (1988) “In the Age of the Smart Machine”. The potential for digital media to polarize behaviour and opinion, and foster conflict can be found in one of the first ever studies of online interaction - Keisler, Seigel and Macquire’s (1984) “Social Psychological Aspects of Computer-Mediated Communication”. As Frame points out in the introduction, current academic debate is still engaged in an exploration of these two themes – though with more nuanced takes on the arguments and with ever greater amounts of empirical data to hand. Politicians and the political process are of course aware of these debates, from activist movements to the slow change of UK parliamentary process. For examples, the recent UK Speaker of the House of Commons Commission on Digital Democracy (<http://www.parliament.uk/business/commons/the-speaker/speakers-commission-on-digital-democracy/>) engages with the possibilities and pitfalls of digitally mediated politics.

In this brief foreword I would like to argue that we see debate and conflict around the ‘ideologies’ and ‘utopias’ of digital politics in both examples of digital media use and in their analyses. Mannheim’s (1936) foundational sociological work “Ideology and ‘utopia” set up a particular model in which ‘ideologies’ and ‘utopias’ were ‘ideas’ held by different social groups; ways of seeing the world or how the world could be. Importantly he argued that ‘ideologies’ function predominantly to explain, justify or reinforce present social and political structures, and that ‘utopias’ were the forward looking ‘hoped for’ visions of a society that had changed or transcended current forms. Mannheim’s work has of course been heavily criticized and discussed in the interceding near century – but I wish to use this specific idea of ‘ideologies’ and ‘utopias’ to explore the understandings we have of the transformative potential or actuality of digital media. In this analysis the idea of ‘ideologies’ and ‘utopias’ (note the lowercase form) refer to systems of ideas invoked to reinforce or to challenge contemporary social structures and norms – they are ideas about what is and what should be as articulated by different social groups. Such a definition encompasses the grand ‘ideologies’ ‘utopias’ of the last decade from Liberal Democracy to Socialism. It also applies to contemporary political debate and action from environmentalism to LGBT rights and on through to the more reactionary political groups of the Far Right or religious intolerance. I also want to distinguish between ‘ideologies’ and ‘utopias’ of ‘the digital’ and these political ‘ideologies’ and ‘utopias’ of the kind Mannheim himself analysed. Of course, and I will return to this later, many contemporary social and political ‘ideologies’ and ‘utopias’ invoke the digital in various ways.

What do I mean by these distinctions? More importantly how do rather grand ideas such as ‘ideology’ and ‘utopia’ play out in the realities of everyday political action? We are often told in both academic and public discussions that the potential of digital technologies has been ‘hyped up’ – taken beyond the reasonable to provide visions of unrealistic futures. It then often feels like the ‘hyped up’ reality becomes the actual reality as the technology arrives in our homes. I would argue that we are today surrounded by ‘ideologies’ and ‘utopias’ of the digital. In which both those with great power in the digital realm provide ‘ideologies’ of its use and others point to the ‘utopian’ potentials of the technology. We are presented ‘utopian’ visions in the possibilities that it may bring to all aspects of life – inside and outside of politics – from the freeing up of access to information and education, new routes to political engagement, limitations to state and religious power, greater opportunities for free speech and so forth. We also see the growth of particular individualised, consumerist forms of digital media – not least Twitter and Facebook – whose formats and ‘ideologies’ of interaction underpin much of our everyday engagement with digital media. True or not, buried within such visions is a strong sense of technological determinism or at least technicism as described by Grint and Woolgar (1997) – the assumption that the future of our society is being determined by technology implementations. The idea that technology might not be the determinant of our social futures, that it is not the prime mover nor the solution, does not usually enter this discourse.

At the same time the everyday of political life, of conflict and resolution, elections and law making continues. In this context ideas of what is the political, how it should function, who has or should have power, and how it is exercised are still under debate. Here we find political ‘ideologies’ at work in the context of national and international politics – be they about spread of democracy, neo-nationalisms, economic policy, personal freedom, privacy and so forth. We may also identify Mannheim’s ‘utopias’ in the discourses of marginalized groups, activists and even in the arguments of reactionary political groups. Today the digital operates as a dissemination route for such ideas outside of the obvious control of states and national governance. At the same time the digital operates as a tool for states to survey and curtail debate, as well as a route for the dissemination of dominant ‘ideologies’. It is in this complex interplay of both digital **and** political ‘ideologies’ and ‘utopias’ that contemporary **day-to-day political participation** takes place. As is noted in the introduction to this volume what is key here is how citizens make use **and** sense of contemporary political practices within online and offline frames of reference. Yet the realities of these day-to-day uses point out the limitations, both social and technical, of digital media use in politics and the extent to which politics as a social system determines the implementation and uses of technologies.

To borrow from Bakhtin (1981) there seem to be forces acting on the ‘voices’ of both those who use and those who study digital political media. Bakhtin argued that utterances are inflected with the ‘centripetal’ forces that seek to expand beyond existing norms, and the ‘centrifugal’ forces that seek to constrain to given norms what is said. When articulating our understandings of contemporary political action – as researchers and as citizens – we too may find in our arguments the tension between the ‘utopian’ centripetal and ‘ideological’ centrifugal forces at work in contemporary debates. We can visualise these tensions as creating different spaces of political action in the context of digital media, as suggested in Figure 1.



Figure : A model of digital and political spaces of action

To return to Grint and Woolgar, they provide us with the argument that many claims about the ‘specific’ impacts of technologies are themselves socially constructed accounts of social processes that for one reason or another foreground the role of technology. Such foregrounding of technology may act to make claims about the inevitability of social change, or it may serve to reinforce the current social structure. As researchers we therefore need to keep an eye to how claims about the impacts of digital media on politics and political action are themselves ‘ideological’ and/or ‘utopian’ assertions about what politics or the digital should or can do. This point reinforces the need for volumes such as this that capture argument, debate, data, and examples as digital media are integrated into political life. We also need to highlight how different groups are utilising their constructions of the impact of the digital as part of the their on-going political action. These three themes of: ‘ideologies’ and ‘utopias’; technological determinisms and social constructions; and tensions between change and stasis can be found in all the studies presented in this volume.

The first part of the book addresses the participation and communication in the context of politicians and parties. In the introduction Frame points out that actual use is “explained by the different forms and logics of online activity which have developed within the political arena” He also notes that actual uses are often critiqued by scholars and commentators for failing to meet more ‘utopian’ models of citizen engagement or deliberative interaction. Indeed Sharon Haleva-Amir concludes Chapter 1 by stating that: “Facebook is first and foremost a political marketing tool”. Importantly the paper highlights how the ‘utopian’ hopes of voter interaction – underpinned by a deterministic view of technology and media effects – plays out against the realities of contemporary managed political communication. Haleva-Amir points out that this represents a “maturing” of digital political communication by Israeli MKs and their parties.

Chapters 2 and 3 look to the use of Twitter. Guido Di Fraia and Maria Carlotta Missaglia point out that despite the possibilities of direct engagement provided by Twitter, its use by politicians has become integrated into existing political communication structures. They point out: “If the platform had been used with a “social” mind set, it could have contributed to encouraging equal and bi-directional public debate that would have certainly brought citizens closer to politics and stimulated participation”. Yet their research finds “a strong orientation towards mass media [t]raditional media logic is re-applied and re-adapted to the new environment; the content shows a *propagandist style* and the communication flow is *broadcast*”. As a result they describe clearly how Twitter functions as a route for politicians to interact with the media and not directly with citizens in a classic two-step flow model. In Chapter 3 Mario Anastasiadis, Jessica Einspänner-Pflock and Caja Thimm point to the potential changes that Twitter brings to the political process. First, they highlight how temporary ‘publics’ or ‘audiences’ can form around hashtags. Second, they note that debate and discussion do happen on twitter, potentially nor between candidates and citizens, nor necessarily greatly deliberative. Third, that this debate is public, it is visible to many in ways that prior debate – at work, at home, in the pub, at the school gate – may not be. We have here an example of the extent, and potential limits of the ‘new possibilities’ set against the constraints and structures of existing political practice.

In Chapter 4 Elena Cebrián Guinovart, Tamara Vázquez Barrio and David Sarias Rodríguez again find that twitter accounts are used as broadcast media to detail the activity of politicians and not as routes to interaction. They again note how this fails the interactive and engagement opportunity the technology (potentially) affords. Though in this case their analysis of the audience for these tweets, the followers, points to a desire by citizens to engage. The use of favourites and of posts that raise issues indicates a desire to interact with politicians. The mismatch in topics and the very limited focus on key messages and actions by the politicians give the impression of citizens being ‘talked past’ as their interactive activity clouds the specific and limited communication goals of the politicians or their parties. In all of these cases we can see that the ‘utopian’ potentials of digital media to transform interaction come into conflict with the ‘ideological’ needs of ‘business as usual’ in contemporary politics. Far form the technological determinism of some types of ‘digital ‘utopias’ we have the heavy handed imposition of classic political communication practices, from broadcasting two step flows and press mediation – to which twitter adds another channel but not a transformative nor even a highly disruptive element.

This idea that use of digital media is driven not by the possibilities but by existing political communication norms is explored in Chapter 5 by Angelia Wagner. In exploring the use of social media by local rather than national politicians we find a more nuanced situation. The use of digital media is understood and deployed in terms of utility and risk, just like all media before it. The need to control communication during elections – where the risks around poor or bad communication are high – is contrasted with a more positive and open use when in office. In chapter 6, Christelle Serée-Chaussinand argues that however new digital media forms may seem – in this case the ‘selfie’ – they often are, or can be seen as, building on or be tied to existing media forms and their histories. In this case Serée-Chaussinand considers the extent to which the use of ‘selfies’ by politicians follow on from centuries of portraiture employed by the powerful to manage the presentation of self in relation to their citizens or constituencies. Both of these chapters once again point out that context, history, political communicative goals and the need to manage communicative outcomes provide explanatory tools for understanding the form, articulation and execution everyday digital political practices. The centrifugal forces of prior political norms and processes outweigh the disruptive potential of new media forms.

Darren Lilleker in Chapter 7 continues the debate around social context. He rightly points out the rich complexity of traditional forms of political participation and points to their replication on line. Lilleker also raises questions about how we as researchers understand digital actions – from liking a photo to starting an online campaign. These clearly vary in their forms and levels of engagement and commitment but the chapter argues what is need here is deeper understanding of the meaningfulness and intentionality of these acts by citizens. This returns us to the central point of Grint and Woolgars arguments against the essentialisms of technological determinist arguments and the inherent technicisms of pluralistic interpretations. We cannot treat digital media themselves as value free and impartial actors in our political action and communications. The very technologies themselves – from the Internet itself to specific platforms such as Twitter and Facebook – have their own socio-technical histories that infuse our perceptions, inform our actions and configure us as users – as much as we seek to configure them and bend them to our wills. Lilleker’s plea for researchers to take a deeper look at the social and psychological bases of the digital political actions of citizens reminds us that the focus needs to remain on the political as articulated in a complex multi-media environment.

Jaromír Mazák and Václav Štětka take up Lilleker’s challenge and provide evidence that what have been termed slacktivism or clicktivism may in fact be part of broader meaningful political activity. This result provides for me a critique of the social construction of ‘political engagement’ as something that needs to be material and collectivist, ‘on the ground’ or ‘in the street’ to have meaning and relevance. It also critiques the manner in which digital media are socially constructed as ephemeral and transitory and therefore of lesser value to ‘real’ politics. For me Arnaud Mercier in Chapter 9 continues this theme through a vivid account of the use of digital media to provide a route for voices that creatively seek to challenge contemporary ideological positions by both right and left. It provides a complex account of how social media are appropriated to provide a voice for groups who do not have access to mainstream media. In this context engaging the ‘utopian’ possibilities of digital media in service of their own political visions and ideals.

Lluís Anyó and Iasa Monique Ribeiro in Chapter 10 directly engage with the manner in which the ‘utopian’ opportunities of digital media are deployed in the context of art to articulate political ‘utopian’ voices. The case of digital art provides a particular context in which practitioners are seeking to configure the technologies in novel ways – unlike the more formulaic uses of corporate social media. This points out how political action may also be found in the resistance to or experimentation with digital media forms – some of which are those provided by major corporations. Caja Thimm’s presentation of mini-publics and their ‘polymediated’ political action in Chapter 11 reminds us that contemporary politics have been on a long road to every greater ‘mediatisation’ over the last century. It is interesting to note that digital technologies themselves provide both ‘visible’ data and the tools to ‘visualise’ these data as networked graphs. This use of the technology to collect data, to analyse it and to provide representations of it is a recurrent methodological theme through out the book. As argued above digital media, their creators and their promoters are not neutral actors in the very developments under scrutiny here. The fact that we can now identify online collaborations, map and track political discourses across users, nations and digital formations provides new insights and tools for researchers. At the same time they are tools for the state to monitor and for activists to organise. Evgeniya Boklage takes this argument further through an examination of the Russian LGBT blogging community in Chapter 12. Though the medium of blogging provides both a medium for political debate and action, digital media also provide the information sources for this activism. This allows bloggers to circumvent the structures of highly regulated and controlled media sources. Once again we have an intersection of the digital ‘utopia’ with the ‘utopian’ visions of a political group providing space for a counter voice.

In the last chapter Paula Keaveney once gain points out the nuanced realities of digital media use in everyday politics. By looking at the use of digital media in the practice of political lobbying Keaveney points out how the existing ‘systems’ of political influence are in part changed but also reinforced by new communications channels. Yet the example also point out an odd contradiction, though digital media make emailing, twittering, liking and clicking relatively ‘simple’, navigating the complexities of both political engagement with representatives and the multiplicity of media routes in a networked society may overwhelm citizens, politicians and parties. This provides the opportunity for another group of intermediaries – in this case, organisations such as 38 Degrees or Change.Org – to provide simple tools to support citizens in lobbying. As multiple routes to our political representatives open up, and the flow of messages increase, it begs the question of how much this can be meaningful activity on both sides. As Bolter and Grusin (2000) have pointed out the hope that the immediacy of digital media leads to greater authenticity and closeness in fact leads to the opposite, ever greater re-mediation as we and our agents (newspapers, TV channels, Facebook, Twitter, Change.Org…) seek to manage the mass of information may encounter.

As noted at the start of this Foreword, volumes such as this provide important markers along the road of our engagement with digital media. The examples here provide case studies of how citizens, activists, politicians and researchers negotiate the possibilities and potentialities of digital media in the context of on-going everyday politics. Digital media have the reputation – in fact or in the pubic imagination – of being highly disruptive. As researchers we need to take care with such assumptions. As noted above this argument is technological determinist. It is as much a social construction, a narrative about the impacts of technology, produced by various social actors as any ‘ideological’ or ‘utopian’ claims. The impact of digital media, its potentials and pitfalls, is therefore itself a point of political conflict and debate.

At the start of this Foreword I noted that the academic study of actual uses of the digital media has from the beginning highlighted a tension between the possibilities that digital media may bring and the ability of context, history and power to reassert existing structures and norms. The fact that this tension remains, and can be found in the case studies and examples presented in this volume speaks not to a failure to resolve this though research or debate, but rather that it is inherent to the social appropriation of all novel technologies. Does this mean that I do not believe that digital media change politics? Would I argue that the possibilities implied by the combination of digital and political ‘utopias’ must fail (the upper left of Figure 1)? Or that ‘politics as usual’ will dominate and impose ‘ideological’ forms of both digital and political engagement (the bottom right of Figure 1). The answer to all three questions is ‘obviously not’. I believe, as the papers in this volume demonstrate, the question is not how do ‘digital media’ change politics, but rather: how do we understand the rich dialogic (Bakhtin) or dialectic manner in which politics in various forms interacts in actual everyday action with the digital media and technologies to hand? Returning again to Grint and Woolgar we can ask actual historical and contextual questions about the social and digital systems and histories behind contemporary practices that have been configured by and in turn configured politics.

To conclude, we are in a time of considerable social change in which digital media clearly play a role. It is incumbent upon scholars to explore, understand and document this change. In doing so they still need to be wary of seeing the technology as the determining variable. When we are faced, as we have over the last two decades, with an almost constant development of new communications technologies and media the tension between the possible and the actual becomes very visible. As Frame notes, very often, digital media in political contexts is critiqued by activists or researchers as they see it falling short of its potential to create new forms of deliberative or engaged politics. Such arguments are themselves political acts – they draw upon a specific social construction of digital media, its features, its history and its expected effects. Researchers should also keep an eye to the manners in which constructions of ‘digital media’ – that focus on its possibilities and potentials as well as its threats – are deployed themselves in arguments about what is and should be our contemporary politics. I have tried to use Mannheim’s model of ‘ideologies’ and ‘utopias’ to point out how these socially constructed ideas of what politics and the digital ‘are’ or ‘should be’ intersect in all the chapters presented here, and in the actions of those studied. For those engaged in politics maybe the question is not what can digital media do for our politics, but rather what can **we** do as citizens to make use of digital media to develop **our** politics?

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