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The Internet, social networking Web sites and political participation research: Assumptions and contradictory evidence *by Isidoropaulo Casteltrione*

Abstract

Over the last decade there has been a proliferation of academic studies addressing the relationship between the Internet and politics, with an increasing number of publications focusing on the impact of such a medium on political participation. Within this specific sub-field research has produced contrasting evidence and generated an intense academic debate. Some scholars stressed the positive impact of the Internet on political participation (*i.e.*, optimists), while others minimised its mobilising power, emphasising its tendency to reinforce existing participatory trends (*i.e.*, normalisers) or highlighting its limited or even negative influence on political participation (*i.e.*, pessimists). Similar findings also emerged in relation to social networking Web sites (SNSs), digital platforms that have been the subject of much research in recent years. This paper discusses how two assumptions characterising many studies focusing on the Internet, SNSs and political participation have contributed to the contradictory findings produced by optimists, pessimists and normalisers. The first assumption is the consideration of political participation as an activity aimed exclusively at affecting governments' actions, either directly or indirectly. This conceptualisation has arguably prevented scholars from grasping the multidimensional nature of political participation and from assessing how the influence of the Internet on this phenomenon can vary according to the different types of political activity. The second assumption is the perception of the Internet as a homogeneous platform and an over-generalised notion of Internet usage. This, in turn, has led researchers to concentrate on the online/off-line distinction and to overlook the impact of different digital tools and various usage practices. This paper argues for a shift in the ways political participation, Internet and SNSs usage are conceptualised and operationalised in academia. It suggests moving away from the polarised debate between optimists, pessimists and normalisers, and adopting a more differential approach through which examining the effects of digital technologies on political participation.

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Introduction: Defining political participation

Over the last decade there has been a proliferation of academic studies addressing the relationship between the Internet and politics (Chadwick and Howard, 2009; Holtz-Bacha, 2004; Wang, 2007). Several streams of research have emerged covering a diverse array of issues including: the credibility of online political information; media ownership; commercialisation of cyberspace; online political campaigning; and citizens' political activism and participation (Tedesco, 2004). These developments in scholarship are linked to several current trends in societies such as: the progressive integration of the Internet into the lives of many individuals, social and political organisations (Baym, 2010; Chadwick, 2006; Chadwick and Howard, 2009; Papacharissi, 2011; van Dijck, 2013); the growing detachment of citizens from the political process (Dalton, 2004; Hay, 2007; Norris, 2011; Pharr and Putnam, 2000); and the changing social, psychological, technological and economic conditions (Bennett and Iyengar, 2008).

Among recent studies assessing the impact of the Internet on the realm of politics an increasing number of publications have focused on how this medium can affect citizens' political engagement

and participation (Anduiza, *et al.*, 2009). Investigations falling within this strand of research seem to all attribute a positive connotation to political participation. The idea that political participation is beneficial to both citizens and democratic institutions has been supported by several influential political scientists, such as Barber (1984), Evans (2001) and Fischer (2003). In line with Barber's (1984) notion of strong democracy, Evans (2001) argued that political institutions can be considered democratic only when citizens participate in the resolution of the issues affecting their lives. Along the same lines Fischer (2003) regarded citizens' participation as "*the cornerstone of the democratic political process*" [1] and stressed how citizens have both the right and the obligation to participate in the public decision-making process. This stance, however, is not universally recognised. For instance, as stressed by Norris [2], the realist school led by Schumpeter (1952) contended that, as long as there are fair and free elections held at regular intervals, limited public involvement was sufficient to guarantee stable and accountable government.

Nonetheless, the purpose of this paper is not to embark in an exploration of the value of political participation in democratic systems, but rather to shed light on the capability of digital technologies in supporting and promoting citizens' political participation. In order to do so the development of a clear definition of political participation is required. One of the most influential and utilised theorisations of this phenomenon is the one developed by Verba, *et al.* (1995), which has been adopted in many studies focusing on the impact of the Internet on political participation (e.g., Calenda and Meijer, 2009; Dimitrova, *et al.*, 2014; Dutta-Bergman and Chung, 2005). Verba, *et al.* (1995) described political participation as the "*activity that has the intent or effect of influencing government actions — either directly by affecting the making or implementation of public policy or indirectly by influencing the selection of people who make those policies*" [3]. According to them, the ultimate purpose of political participation is mobilisation, namely influencing governments' actions, either directly (e.g., contacting public officials) or indirectly by influencing citizens. However, by focusing only on mobilisation-related activities, such a conceptualisation appears too narrow in that it excludes activities like following political events in the news or discussing politics among friends. These activities have been described by Christy (1987) as communication activities and have been the focus of numerous Internet and political participation studies (e.g., Brundidge and Rice, 2009; Morris and Morris, 2013). Communication activities are intrinsically different from the ones considered by Verba, *et al.* (1995) as they do not aim to influence governments but rather reflect individuals' interest and psychological involvement in politics.

Another element to consider in Verba, *et al.*'s (1995) theorisation is the orientation of political participation. In their account, political participation aims to affect governments' actions and, consequently, is a government-oriented activity. However, in the last couple of decades citizens' participatory repertoire has been subject to a restructuring and expansion due to changes in the ways citizens perceive politics and relate to political institutions, and to the rise and diffusion of new channels of participation like the Internet. In this sense, Norris (2002) spoke of a democratic phoenix and argued that the disengagement from traditional forms of political participation has led to the emergence of new and unconventional participatory practices. Along the same lines, considering Bennett's (1998) notion of *lifestyle politics* which refers to the tendency of citizens "*to organise social and political meaning around their lifestyle values and the personal narratives that express them*" [4], Papacharissi (2011) called for a reconsideration of the *praxis of citizenship*. Accordingly, in his study on Facebook groups and activism, Marichal (2013) suggested that political participation on social networking Web sites (SNSs) should be intended "*less as intentional efforts to promote social and political change and more as a discursive performance designed to express a political identity*".

Considering the rise of new and more individualised forms of participation, and the fact that political activities can be driven by different purposes (*i.e.*, mobilisation vs communication), a more modern and up-to-date definition of political participation is developed in this paper. Political participation is intended here as "*a set of activities influencing or aiming to influence governments' actions and other individuals' political behaviours, and/or reflecting individuals' interest and psychological involvement in politics*". Such a definition covers a wealth of political activities. It includes, as per Verba, *et al.*'s (1995) conceptualisation, mobilisation activities oriented to governments, but in line with the notions of lifestyle politics and communication activities, it also embraces more personalised and communicative forms of political participation (e.g., consumption of political information or political consumerism).

The debate between Internet optimists, pessimists and normalisers

As emerged in the previous section, political participation is a widely investigated subject and numerous publications examined the contributions of the Internet to this phenomenon. Within this strand of research it is possible to identify three main schools of thought that have generated a lively academic debate, still very much alive today. At one end of the continuum there are the *optimists* who speak of *mobilisation* and argue that the Internet promotes political participation by offering additional and convenient pathways to participation, by generating new forms of political engagement and participation, and by engaging audiences traditionally characterised by

lower levels of political engagement and activity such as young people, individuals with lower socio-economic status or isolated citizens (Bengtsson and Christensen, 2012; Borge and Cardenal, 2010; Boulianne, 2009; Delli Carpini, 2000; Gibson, *et al.*, 2005; Hamilton and Tolbert, 2012; Johnson and Kaye, 2003; Kavanaugh, *et al.*, 2008; Kim and Kim, 2007; Krueger, 2002; Morris and Morris, 2013; Rojas and Puig-i-Abril, 2009; Tolbert and McNeal, 2003; Ward, *et al.*, 2003).

An example of a study endorsing the optimists' stance is that of Bengtsson and Christensen (2012) who, focusing on the case of Finland, established that the Internet helped to mobilise a considerable size of the population not engaged in politics. Hamilton and Tolbert (2012) confirmed the mobilising potential of the Internet and suggested that online information gathering and participation may influence political participation and engagement also for those citizens who are uninterested in politics, with the Internet leading in certain cases to accidental mobilisation. The role of information as a mobilisation agent for audiences characterised by limited levels of political activity has been also highlighted by Rojas and Puig-i-Abril (2009), who found that digital technologies offered additional pathways to information stimulating political behaviours in the off-line domain. Similarly, Morris and Morris (2013) showed that in the early stages of the 2012 American presidential campaign greater levels of access to the Internet were associated to greater political knowledge and engagement for individuals with low socio-economic status. They attributed this link to the incidental learning occurring during high-profile political events.

At the other end of the continuum, there are the *pessimists* who describe the Internet as a distracting medium which can contribute to civic decline by inducing citizens to engage in Web activities and taking them away from more meaningful forms of participation (Nisbet and Scheufele, 2004; Scheufele and Nisbet, 2002; Zhang and Chia, 2006). This perspective has been inspired by Putnam's (1995, 2000) work on social capital. Putnam (2000) documented the erosion of social capital, which refers to "*connections among individuals — social networks and the norms of reciprocity and trustworthiness that arise from them*" [5], in the American society over the last few decades. Putnam (2000) argued that this decline was associated with a growth in the viewing of entertainment TV which displaced time that could be invested in civic or political activities. Several authors applied the time displacement hypothesis to the online environment, and suggested that the Internet generated passivity by absorbing energies that citizens would, otherwise, invest in political or civic activities (Diani, 2001; Kraut, *et al.*, 1998; Lusoli and Ward, 2004; Nie and Erbring, 2002; Rash, 1997; Turkle, 1996). This notion has informed the pessimists' stance.

Finally, there is a third school of thought whose advocates are referred to in the academic literature as *normalisers*. The normalisers paint a picture in which the Internet has supplementary effects on political participation and engagement reinforcing current participatory trends by aiding those citizens already interested in politics (Calenda and Meijer, 2009; Calenda and Mosca, 2007; Dutta-Bergman and Chung, 2005; Kenski and Stroud, 2006; Kim, 2006; Krueger, 2002; Moy, *et al.*, 2005; Norris, 2001, 2002; Polat, 2005; Wang, 2007). Online political activities are perceived in this sense as an extension of off-line ones (Calenda and Mosca, 2007), with the Internet, rather than operating as a game-changing technology, simply providing politically interested citizens with further ways to engage and participate (Tedesco, 2004). In the normalisers' conception even if the Internet has, in part, transformed the way of doing politics, it did not change who participates in politics (Bimber, 2003). Among this group of scholars there are academics who perceive the reinforcement role of the Internet in a negative light. They believe that, by strengthening existing patterns of political engagement and participation, the Internet fortifies established power structures and widens the knowledge gap between politically active and less active citizens making the rich richer and the poor poorer (Bimber, 2001, 2003; Bonfadelli, 2002; Brundidge and Rice, 2009; Delli Carpini and Keeter, 1993; Lindner and Riehm, 2011; Schlozman, *et al.*, 2010; Tedesco, 2004; Weber, *et al.*, 2003).

A similar mixed picture emerged in relation to the contributions of SNSs to political participation. SNSs can be described as "*Web-based services that allow individuals to (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), and in recent years many investigations have examined their impact on political campaigning, engagement and participation (Ancu and Cozna, 2009; Gustafsson, 2012; Holt, *et al.*, 2013; Kim and Geidner, 2008; Marichal, 2013; Mascheroni, 2012; Vitak, *et al.*, 2011; Warren, *et al.*, 2014; Xenos, *et al.*, 2014). This type of enquiry has further flourished with the explosion of the Arab Spring, a pro-democracy wave of rebellions occurred in the Arab world between the end of 2010 and 2011, and SNSs have become a hot topic in academia (Khamis and Vaughn, 2012; Lim, 2012; Papacharissi and de Fatima Oliveira, 2011; Tufekci and Wilson, 2012; Wulf, *et al.*, 2013). As said, similarly to what has emerged for the Internet, research has produced contrasting evidence also in relation to the impact of SNSs on political participation. Some scholars stress the positive impact of SNSs on political activity whereas others minimise their mobilising capability, emphasising their tendency to reinforce existing participatory patterns or highlighting their limited or even negative influence on political participation.

A pioneering study within this subject area it was that of Williams and Gulati (2007) who, investigating the relation between candidates' number of Facebook friends and vote shares in 2006 U.S. midterm elections, established that Facebook support has a significant effect on

candidates' final vote shares and that SNSs are capable of affecting the electoral process. However, a limitation of Williams and Gulati's study is that they focused exclusively on the aggregate level without examining and explaining the processes behind users' voting behaviour. Their approach has been criticised by Kim and Geidner (2008) who attempted to fill this gap and indicated that SNSs usage enhanced voting probability by increasing individual and collective voting rewards such as social capital, civic duty and political efficacy, and that these platforms were particularly relevant for young voters who are, in general, relatively alienated from politics. These two investigations identified a positive relationship between SNSs usage and voting but, by concentrating solely on this activity, they left the rest of the political participation spectrum untouched. Other more comprehensive enquiries confirm that SNSs can aid citizens' political participation (Gil de Zúñiga, *et al.*, 2012; Halpern and Lee, 2011; Holt, *et al.*, 2013; Tang and Lee, 2013; Towner, 2013; Xenos, *et al.*, 2014). Replicating what Bachman, *et al.* (2010) find in relation to online media in general, Holt, *et al.* (2013), Towner (2013) and Xenos, *et al.* (2014) provide evidence in support of the mobilisation hypothesis and argue that SNSs could serve as a leveller of political participation between younger and older citizens as youths' high usage of SNSs can compensate their limited usage of traditional media for obtaining political information.

In contrast to these findings, there are other studies which painted a picture of limited or even negative effects of SNSs on political participation (Ancu and Cozna, 2009; Baumgartner and Morris, 2010; Fenton and Barassi, 2011; Valenzuela, *et al.*, 2009). In their study exploring the reasons why members of the public visited MySpace profiles of 2008 U.S. primary candidates, Ancu and Cozna (2009) determined that users were attracted to MySpace mainly because they desired social interaction with other like-minded individuals, a type of usage negatively related to campaign involvement. Fenton and Barassi (2011) provided an interesting explanation of the negative influence that SNSs can have on political participation. They contended that in assessing the political potential of SNSs differences between individual and collective forms of participation have to be considered as SNSs tend to promote individualism and personal affairs disconnecting individuals from the public terrain of political participation and guiding them away from the communality of collective political endeavour in favour of the personal politics of self-presentation. Other authors such as Baumgartner and Morris (2010) and Valenzuela, *et al.* (2009) rejected the idea that SNSs affect negatively political participation, suggesting, in stead, that these platforms have limited or no effects on political participation. Baumgartner and Morris (2010) found that SNSs did not increase political interest and participation among young people who employed these platforms mainly to seek out supporting views. Similarly, focusing on the case of Facebook, Valenzuela, *et al.* (2009) stressed the limited contributions of SNSs to youths' political participation and argued that these platforms are not the most effective tool to counteract youths' political disengagement.

Finally, there are a number of other investigations which backed up the normalisers' stance and established that politically engaged individuals get the most from SNSs (Carlisle and Patton, 2013; Gustafsson, 2012; Mascheroni, 2012; Rainie and Smith, 2012; Vesnic-Alujevic, 2012; Vitak, *et al.*, 2011). Focusing on Facebook, Carlisle and Patton (2013) found that during the 2008 primary and general elections people showed a limited engagement in political activity via Facebook and that political interest strongly influenced Facebook political participation. In line with these findings there are also the investigations by Vesnic-Alujevic (2012) and Gustafsson (2012). The first indicated that the more people were involved in politics off-line the more they participated politically through their Facebook profile pages. Similarly, Gustafsson (2012) revealed that members of interest organisations considered SNSs valuable tools for participation, while non-members generally refrained from sharing political views with their friends and, despite being exposed to political content and requests for participation, preferred to remain passive. Finally, there is Vitak, *et al.*'s (2011) study which is arguably one of the most comprehensive efforts in SNSs and political participation research. Vitak, *et al.* (2011) established that Facebook can provide young people with a space to express their political opinions, to search for political information, and to engage in political discussions. They recognised the potential of this specific SNS as a political tool but, at the same time, stressed the strong link between Facebook political activity, political interest and off-line political participation. In this sense, their research can be placed in the normalisers' group, suggesting that those who are already politically engaged seek multiple outlets for their political behaviours and that SNSs alone do not drive previously inactive individuals to political participation.

This section has stressed that there is no general scholarly agreement on the capability of the Internet and SNSs to promote citizens' political participation. Three schools of thought have emerged in relation to this topic: the optimists who suggested that digital technologies can engage new audiences and generate new forms of participation; the pessimists who argued that online platforms draw citizens away from more meaningful political activities or have a limited effect on participation; and the normalisers who believed that the internet and SNSs strengthen existing participatory patterns. The latter stance has found the most support in the literature but there is no conclusive evidence in its favour. This contrasting picture calls for a further review of the studies falling within this strand of research.

Two assumptions in Internet and political participation research

Several factors could contribute to the mixed picture produced by optimists, pessimists and normalisers. The national contexts where the various studies are carried out could, for instance, influence their findings, a thesis supported by Anduiza, *et al.* (2012) who established that contextual elements such as digital divides, media systems, and institutional settings mediate the relationship between digital media and political participation. Another explanation could be the different ways in which researchers have operationalised political participation and Internet/SNSs usage in their investigations. Such a hypothesis is explored in this section through a critical review of research assessing the contributions of the Internet and SNSs to political participation.

A total of 60 studies were included in the review. Investigations which examined specifically the effects of Internet and SNSs usage on citizens' political participation, entailed the analysis of primary or secondary data, and focused on more than one political activity were considered. On the other hand, non-English language papers, studies based on reviews of the academic literature (*e.g.*, Rash, 1997; Tedesco, 2004), focusing on political institutions and parties (*e.g.*, Gibson, *et al.*, 2005; Lusoli and Ward, 2004), and examining only civic participation (*e.g.*, Nie and Erbring, 2002) or one political activity (*e.g.*, Marichal, 2013; Williams and Gulati, 2007) were excluded.

The studies were selected through a three-step search process, first conducted in November 2013, and then updated in May 2014. In the first step, a search was conducted on six online databases: *ACM Digital Library*; *EBSCO*; *ProQuest Central*; *ScienceDirect*; *Social Science Research Network*; and *Google Books*. The following keywords were used in different combinations: 'Internet'; 'social networking website'; 'social networks'; 'digital media'; 'new media'; 'politics'; 'political'; 'participation'; 'communication'; 'mobilization'; 'activism'; 'information'; 'discussion'; 'citizens'; 'use'; 'usage'; 'effect'; and 'impact'. Next, the reference lists of relevant articles found in the first stage were reviewed. Finally, key journals were identified, and a last search employing the above keywords was carried out through their Web sites.

The investigations examined in this review were classified according to their findings (*i.e.*, mobilisation, reinforcement, and negative or limited effects) as displayed in [Table 1](#).

Table 1: Effects of Internet and SNS Usage on Political Participation

Reinforcement effect	Mobilisation effect	Negative or limited effect
Bimber, 2001, 2003 Brundidge and Rice, 2009 Calenda and Meijer, 2009 Calenda and Mosca, 2007 Cantijoch, 2012* Carlisle and Patton, 2013 Dutta-Bergman and Chung, 2005 Gibson and Cantijoch, 2013* Gustafsson, 2012 Hargittai and Shaw, 2013* Kenski and Stroud, 2006 Kim, 2006 Krueger, 2006 Lindner and Riehm, 2011 Mascheroni, 2012 Moy et al., 2005 Norris, 2001 Oser et al., 2013* Polat, 2005 Quintelier and Visser, 2008* Rainie and Smith, 2012 Schlozman et al., 2010 Storsul, 2011 Vaccari, 2012* Vesnic-Alujevic, 2012 Vitak et al., 2011 Wang, 2007 Weber et al., 2003	Bakker and de Vreese 2011* Bengtsson and Cristensen, 2012 Borge and Cardenal, 2010 Boullianne, 2009 Cantijoch, 2012* Gibson and Cantijoch, 2013* Gibson et al., 2005 Gil de Zúñiga et al., 2012 Halpern and Lee, 2011 Hamilton and Tolbert, 2012 Hargittai and Shaw, 2013* Holt et al., 2013 Johnson and Kaye, 2003 Kavanaugh et al., 2008 Kim and Kim, 2007 Krueger, 2002 Kruikemeier et al., 2013 Morris and Morris, 2013 Oser et al., 2013* Quintelier and Visser, 2008* Rice et al., 2013 Rojas and Puig-i-Abril, 2009 Tang and Lee, 2013 Tolbert and McNeal, 2003 Towner, 2013 Vaccari, 2012* Ward et al., 2003 Xenos et al., 2014	Ancu and Cozna, 2009 Bakker and de Vreese 2011* Baumgartner and Morris, 2010 Fenton and Barassi, 2011 Jennings and Zeitner, 2003 Nisbet and Scheufele 2004 Quintelier and Visser, 2008* Scheufele and Nisbet, 2002 Zhang and Chia, 2006 Valenzuela et al., 2009

*Multiple effects found

The considered studies focused either on the Internet or SNSs. The great majority examined both mobilisation (*i.e.*, aiming to influence governments) and communication (*i.e.*, reflecting individuals' interest and psychological involvement in politics) activities. Single dimension studies were scarce: two for the communication dimension (Brundidge and Rice, 2009; Dutta-Bergman and Chung, 2005), and nine for the mobilisation dimension (Gil de Zúñiga, *et al.*, 2012; Halpern and Lee, 2011; Johnson and Kaye, 2003; Kenski and Stroud, 2006; Krueger, 2002, 2006; Lindner and Riehm, 2011; Oser, *et al.*, 2013; Rice, *et al.*, 2013).

An interesting element emerging from [Table 1](#) is the presence of studies supporting more than one stance (Bakker and de Vreese, 2011; Cantijoch, 2012; Gibson and Cantijoch, 2013; Hargittai and Shaw, 2013; Oser, *et al.*, 2013; Quintelier and Visser, 2008; Vaccari, 2012). To shed light on this matter it was considered whether or not the reviewed investigations distinguished between types of political activities and various Internet/SNSs usage practices (*e.g.*, information, entertainment, etc.) when discussing the contributions of digital technologies to political participation.

Table II: Distinction Between Different Forms of Political Participation and Internet/SNSs Usage Practices

Distinguished between different forms of political participation	Considered different Internet/SNSs usage practices
Calenda and Mosca, 2007 Cantijoch, 2012 Carlisle and Patton, 2013 Fenton and Barassi, 2011 Gibson and Cantijoch, 2013 Hargittai and Shaw, 2013 Johnson and Kaye, 2003 Kavanaugh et al., 2008 Nisbet and Scheufele 2004 Norris, 2001 Rice et al., 2013 Rojas and Puig-i-Abril, 2009 Storsul, 2011 Tang and Lee, 2013 Vaccari, 2012 Vitak et al., 2011 Wang, 2007	Ancu and Cozna, 2009 Bakker and de Vreese 2011 Kim, 2006 Moy et al., 2005 Quintelier and Visser, 2008 Rojas and Puig-i-Abril, 2009 Scheufele and Nisbet, 2002

As shown in Table 2, except Oser, *et al.* (2013), all the authors who found multiple effects had made a distinction between the considered types of political activities and the various ways participants employ digital technologies. This suggests that the contributions of the Internet and SNSs vary according to the different modes of participation and usage practices. Therefore, it can be argued that the different ways in which researchers have operationalised political participation and Internet/SNSs usage have impacted on their findings, and contributed to the contrasting picture produced by optimists, pessimists and normalisers.

By looking at the ways political participation and Internet/SNS usage have been operationalised, two assumptions characterising many Internet, SNSs and political participation studies can be identified. The first assumption relates to the purpose and orientation of political participation which has been often considered as an activity aiming to affect governments' actions, either directly or indirectly. However, as highlighted in the first section of this paper, this conception is too narrow because it excludes more individualised and communicative forms of participation. Political participation is a hydra-headed phenomenon in that it encompasses many different types of activities which, despite falling under the same theoretical umbrella, are very different in terms of the resources they require (*e.g.*, time and skills), their orientation (*i.e.*, government-oriented vs lifestyle politics), and the purposes driving them (*i.e.*, communication vs mobilisation).

Regardless of the complexity of such a phenomenon, as displayed in Table 2, within this specific strand of research only few studies took into consideration the multidimensionality of political participation, with most investigations exhibiting an inclination, often found in academia, towards generalisation rather than specification. A distinction has been often made between off-line and online participation (*e.g.*, Boulianne, 2009; Jennings and Zeitner, 2003), or between traditional and non-traditional participation (*e.g.*, Kruikeimer, *et al.*, 2013; Schlozman, *et al.*, 2010; Townner, 2013). However, in most cases, the differences between the considered activities are not taken into account when assessing the contributions of digital technologies. The limitations of such an approach appear evident when looking at investigations which did the opposite. These studies, in fact, highlighted that the impact of the Internet and SNSs varied in relation to different political activities. For instance, Kavanaugh, *et al.* (2008) showed that citizens with medium/low levels of political engagement participated much less than politically active citizens in online formal political activities such as contacting public officials or contributing campaign donations. However, both groups displayed similar levels of participation with regards to news consumption or political discussion. Nisbet and Scheufele (2004) also emphasised how the effects of the Internet on political participation change in relation to the various political activities. They found that Internet usage had a limited impact on campaign participation while it was positively related

to the exposure and consumption of campaign information. In line with the communication/mobilisation distinction adopted in this paper, Gibson and Cantijoch (2013) identified two dimensions of political participation: participation and passive engagement. The first encompasses six modes of participation (*i.e.*, voting, party/campaign activities, protest activities, contacting, communal and consumerism) while the second dimension includes three modes of participation (*i.e.*, news attention, discussion, expressive activities). They proved that off-line activities falling within the first dimension were replicated online, whereas with regards to more passive modes of engagement new forms of participation emerged. Vaccari (2012) also emphasised the risks of oversimplification associated with a one-size-fits-all approach and, in relation to the links between off-line and online participation, showed that individuals involved in more demanding off-line forms of participation such as attending rallies engaged in similar activities also online, while people limiting their engagement to the consumption of political information on mass media replaced, at least partially, TV with online sources.

With respect to SNSs, Storsul (2011) revealed that these platforms were the main instrument that politically engaged youths employed for organising and coordinating political activities. At the same time, Storsul also indicated that young people were hesitant to use SNSs for political deliberation as they were concerned about the way they presented themselves and did not want to appear very political. However, these findings were not confirmed by Vitak, *et al.* (2011) who showed that young people engaged on Facebook mostly in activities falling within the communication dimension of political participation like expressing political opinions. This inconsistency could be explained with the fact that Storsul (2011) focused on politically active youths, while Vitak, *et al.* (2011) concentrated on young people in general. These two different groups may, therefore, use SNSs in different ways, with the firsts taking advantage of the mobilisation affordances of these online platforms, while the seconds limiting their participation to communication-related activities.

Considerations on the different uses of digital tools lead to the second assumption characterising many Internet and political participation studies, an assumption that may also play a part in the mixed picture emerged so far. The second assumption is the over-generalised conceptualisation of the Internet, with academics often speaking of Internet effects, ignoring the differences between various online tools and how people employ them. In this sense, Dimitrova, *et al.* (2014) argued that it is a mistake to think in terms of general influence as the effects can vary across different digital tools. Accordingly, they found that while the political use of social media was a strong predictor of political participation, the usage of online news sites seemed to have no effect on participation. Similarly, Yoo and Gil de Zúñiga (2014) stressed the value of such a differential approach and established that Facebook and blogs have different qualities as news media, with the first amplifying inequalities between people with different socioeconomic status, and blogs use associated with an increase in less-educated participants' political knowledge.

However, distinguishing between the various online tools is only the first step to achieve a deeper understanding of how digital technologies can contribute to political participation. The analysis of studies examining different Internet/SNSs usage practices demonstrates the limited explanatory power of the online/offline distinction in assessing a complex phenomenon such as political participation. Also, as highlighted by Moy, *et al.* (2005) and Tang and Lee (2013), it shows the need for an approach which will take into account the different patterns in Internet and SNSs usage. In relation to the specific case of SNSs, in a report of the Pew Research Center, Hampton, *et al.* (2011) explained that there is a great deal of variation in how people use SNSs with usage practices varying according to the types of person and SNSs. These platforms can be employed for relational maintenance (Lampe, *et al.*, 2006; Raacke and Bonds-Raacke, 2008), to establish, to present, and to negotiate identity (Liu, 2007), for social surveillance (Joinson, 2008), and to share information and be entertained (Waters and Ackerman, 2011).

Regrettably, only a limited number of studies examined how different usage practices (*e.g.*, information seeking, entertainment, etc.) can influence political participation (Ancu and Cozna, 2009; Bakker and de Vreese, 2011; Gil de Zúñiga, *et al.*, 2012; Kim, 2006; Kruikeimer, *et al.*, 2013; Moy, *et al.*, 2005; Quintelier and Visser, 2008; Rojas and Puig-i-Abril, 2009; Scheufele and Nisbet, 2002; Tang and Lee, 2013). In relation to the various usages of the Internet, Scheufele and Nisbet (2002), Rojas and Puig-i-Abril (2009) and Bakker and de Vreese (2011) found that employing this medium for entertainment purposes can contribute negatively to political efficacy, knowledge and participation, while informational usage tend to be positively related to such variables. In line with these studies, Kim (2006) argued that the political consequences of the Internet depend on the way the medium is employed and he determined that e-social capital (Hopkins and Tomas, 2004) did not enhance civic participation in politics while e-deliberation increased political interest and participation in online political protests. In addition, Kim (2006) corroborated one of Quintelier and Visser's (2008) findings, namely the positive influence that e-shopping can have on political participation, and observed that this specific use of the online medium tend to be positively related to participation in online political protests, despite having no relationship with political interest. This last result provided an interesting contribution to the debate between Internet optimists, pessimists and normalisers as it indicated that some Internet praxes can lead to an increase in particular forms of political participation independently from individuals' levels of political engagement.

Focusing on SNSs, Ancu and Cozna (2009) showed that campaign involvement was negatively related to the use of MySpace for social interaction and not related to the use of MySpace for

information seeking and entertainment purposes. These results did not corroborate the positive impact of informational usage on political participation. This could be due to the fact that Ancu and Cozna (2009) focused on a very specific type of political activity, campaign involvement, and SNS, MySpace. Instead, the positive link between informational uses of SNSs and political participation has been emphasised by Gil de Zúñiga, *et al.* (2012) and Tang and Lee (2013), who also highlighted that the impact of information was mediated by network size and heterogeneity. These studies confirmed the worth of considering different Internet and SNSs' practices in assessing the influence of these technologies on political participation. This argument has been perfectly summarised by Papacharissi (2009) who observed that the Internet is a tool which does not present in itself the capability to bring social change and that its impact on society, so as its potential to empower or restrict individuals, rests upon the ways in which it is used.

A critical review of the academic literature assessing the contributions of the Internet and SNSs to political participation, suggested that two assumptions characterising many investigations falling within this strand of research prevented academics from shedding light on the capability of digital technologies to promote citizens' political participation. The two identified assumptions are surely not the only ones that can be found in Internet and political participation studies (*e.g.*, positive connotation attributed to political participation), but they emerge as the most likely ones to account for the mixed picture produced by Internet optimists, normalisers and pessimists.

The first assumption is the consideration of political participation as a set of government-oriented activities and the consequent overlooking of the communication dimension of this hydra-headed phenomenon. Such a notion has arguably prevented scholars from looking at how the influence of the Internet and SNSs can vary according to the type of participatory activity. A considerable number of the studies recognising the multidimensionality of political participation distinguished between mobilisation-related activities and communication-oriented ones, validating the conceptualisation of political participation adopted in this paper. They suggested that the Internet and SNSs tend to support mainly communication activities with regards to the general public, while more politically active citizens are likely also to take advantage of the mobilising potential of these technologies.

The second assumption is the perception of the Internet as a homogeneous platform and of Internet usage as a uniform practice, with numerous academics speaking generally of Internet effects. This over-generalised conceptualisation of Internet usage has, in turn, led researchers to concentrate on the online/off-line distinction and to overlook the impact of different Internet and SNSs usage practices. In relation to the various ways individuals can employ these technologies research which went beyond the simplistic online/off-line distinction proposed that usage *per se* does not enhance political participation. It argued that different usage practices generate different effects, with informational uses promoting participation and entertainment uses inhibiting it.

Conclusion: The need for a differential approach

A careful review of the literature on the impact of the Internet and SNSs on political participation highlighted that the contributions of digital technologies vary in relation to different political activities and usage practices. What has come into light from this paper calls for a shift in the ways academics look at the links between political participation, the Internet and SNSs. As stressed by several scholars, the debate among normalisers, optimists and pessimists arises from the older dichotomy between social determinism and technological determinism (Chadwick, 2006; Anstead and Chadwick, 2009; Calenda and Mejer, 2009). From a social determinist perspective (*i.e.*, normalisers), social and political institution determine the impact of technology, while from a techno-deterministic perspective (*i.e.*, optimists and pessimists), society and politics are shaped by technology. This dichotomous approach has been often applied to Internet and political participation research and it has limited the understanding of the political affordances of such a medium. Given that empowering aspects (*e.g.*, increased access to information can lead to a more informed citizenry) and limitations of this technology (*e.g.*, information overload and tendencies to political polarisation) can be identified, Breindl (2010) stressed the need to go over such a binary division and to interpret the effects of the Internet on political participation as part of a continuum.

In this sense it would be beneficial for the development of this subject area the adoption of a more differential approach through which considering the effects of digital technologies on political participation. In order to do so, firstly, a distinction has to be made between the different modes of participation. In this paper political participation has been described as a set of activities influencing or aiming to influence governments' actions and/or other individuals' political behaviours and/or reflecting individuals' interest and psychological involvement in politics. Such a theorisation encompasses both the mobilisation — influencing or aiming to influence governments' actions and other individuals' political behaviours — and communication dimensions of political participation — reflecting individuals' interest and psychological involvement in politics — and it could be a valuable framework for approaching this phenomenon.

Secondly, the various Internet usage practices have to be considered in order to fully assess the impact of the Internet on political participation. Scholars have developed numerous classifications of Internet usages (Kraut, *et al.*, 1998; Shah, *et al.*, 2001; Katz, *et al.*, 2001; Nie and Erbring, 2002; Moy, *et al.*, 2005; Wang, 2007; Foot, *et al.*, 2009). Their classifications can help in the development of a comprehensive categorisation of the various non-political usages of Internet and SNSs. A possible classification could distinguish, for instance, between three usage dimensions: the information dimension including activities such as news consumptions; the interpersonal communication dimension encompassing activities such as contacting family and friends; and the social recreation dimension embracing activities such as gaming.

The mobilisation/communication theorisation of political participation and the categorisation of Internet and SNSs usages based on the information, the interpersonal communication, and the social recreation dimensions are two examples of differential approaches applied to the Internet and political participation research. These ways of operationalising political participation and Internet usage could be an interesting point of departure to move away from the polarised debate between optimists, pessimists and normalisers and favour the development of the field.

About the author

Paolo Casteltrione has a bachelor's degree in communication sciences and an honours degree in communication, advertising and PR, obtained respectively at the Università Suor Orsola Benincasa (2007) and Edinburgh Napier University (2009). Since September 2010 he is a Ph.D. student at Queen Margaret University and he is now in the final year of his doctorate. His research project investigates the impact of Facebook on citizens' political participation in Italy and United Kingdom. In particular, it aims to establish how different forms of political participation (mobilisation vs. communication activities) have been influenced by the rise of this social networking Web site and whether such a technology is able to promote the participation of citizens with limited levels of political engagement and participation. Paolo's main research interests include social media, the Internet and information, media and political communication, and citizens' political behaviours.
E-mail: icasteltrione[at]qmu[dot]ac[dot]uk

Notes

- [1.](#) Fischer, 2003, p. 205.
- [2.](#) Norris, 2007, p. 629.
- [3.](#) Verba, *et al.*, 1995, p. 38.
- [4.](#) Bennett, 2004, p. 104.
- [5.](#) Putnam, 2000, p. 19.

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