



Challenging Citizenship: Social Media and Big Data

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Information technology affords that almost all aspects of our lives can be translated into data, data that are used for forecasting, assessment, real-time tracking, targeted advertising and polling. The practice of digitization and the role of electronic information media technology affects to various degrees almost all aspects of everyday life. Web platforms, such as popular social media are constantly generating data through simply recording almost all user activities. In a way the user generated content, is less the individual posts, comments, selfies and cat images the platform's users create, upload and distribute, but rather the data generated while using the platform's interface and interacting with other users. This 'datafication' affects our public sphere as much as our consumption behaviour. A datafied public sphere changes the practices of opinion polling, political debate and civic action. As a result, our understanding of citizenship, democracy, public sphere, and public space is fundamentally transformed.

Social media have been often described as a means for balancing power asymmetry and fuelling political change (e.g. Shirky 2011). However, the enthusiasm has cooled down since the heady early days of Web 2.0: the attempts for political change did not empower democratic activists who were brutally crushed by repressive regimes in the Near and Middle East while the Snowden revelations taught Western societies that mass surveillance was part of their lives, too. Critical voices emphasized that the very same web platforms that were celebrated as means for civic emancipation were also platforms for executing control (Fuchs 2009) and could be easily used to stifle political activism (Morozov, 2011). In a recent publication Elmer et al. emphasize the contradictions data practices and social media constitute (Elmer et al. 2015, p. 1). On the one hand governments rhetorically applaud the potential for citizen participation through social media platforms and open data repositories. On the other, they interfere with information sharing platforms such as Wikileaks (Benkler 2011, pp. 331–332). They embrace big data as means for efficient public management and security but are evasive about the political consequences and the social impact of these practices. The political debates on these issues have yet to move from expert communities and political activists to the parliaments and national debates that inform society-wide deliberation. It appears evident that the emergence of social

media platforms and data practices challenges our traditional understanding of citizenship.

This special issue investigates telling examples of this process and aims at mapping the various actors of change. Exploratively, the papers describe how social media and data repositories provide possibilities or challenges for civic action, investigate their potential for expanding the media sphere from corporate news coverage to commentary and debate in the blogosphere or address issues that arise through the intensified possibilities of data analysis.

In “Genomic Big Data and Privacy: Challenges and Opportunities for Precision Medicine”, Frizzo-Baker, Chow-White, Charters and Ha explain how the collection and the access to genomic data is affecting the practices of researchers and clinicians while simultaneously constituting critical issues concerning patient privacy. They show how advancing technology for scientific research is not only changing the very field of research but also affecting the field of its application. Here the notion of informed consent and networked privacy is revisited in order to outline recommendations for best practices of applying clinical genomics to the healthcare system.

Looking at the city of Amsterdam, Niederer and Priester investigate citizen participation through apps and websites. In “Smart Citizens: Exploring Tools for the Urban Bottom-up Movement” they analyse forty apps and websites that aim at helping citizens to organize activities or interact with each other in their neighbourhoods, facilitate public engagement and connect various stakeholders from citizens to city officials. Their paper provides a view on the widely diverse range of tools that use open data and the web to enable citizens. It also raises the question to what extent citizens can step in when (public) institutions withdraw from their traditional tasks in supporting communities and individuals.

Using the example of expense declaration sheets investigated by The Guardian, Handler and Conill, explain how the use of game mechanics enabled the British newspaper to crowdsource the enormous effort of reviewing the declaration forms. Their paper “Open Data, Crowdsourcing and Game Mechanics. A Case Study on Civic Participation” shows how investigative journalism can benefit from user participation through gamification and open access to data, but emphasizes also the importance of journalism to contextualize, interpret and present findings.

In “Bloggers’ Responses to the Snowden Affair: Combining Automated and Manual Methods” in the Analysis of News Blogging, Elgesem, Feinerer and Steskal analyse how Snowden is discussed on English-language web blogs. Their paper gives insight

into the vast blogosphere as an extension of mainstream media and shows how it comments upon and expands news coverage.

With their contribution “From Publics to Communities: Researching the Path of Shared Issues through ICT”, Ludwig, Reuter and Pipek develop a model for following the various issues through connected publics. Their operational model could inform practitioners of digital methods who collect data from web platforms and through the application programming interfaces of social media platforms. But more importantly, Ludwig et al. aim at informing public debate itself through connecting audiences interested in the same issue to a larger community in order to further processes of political debate and deliberation beyond fragmented audiences.

While these papers do not only show how data practices and social media affect citizenship, they also demonstrate how it changes research. It is a twofold process where scholars increasingly make use of data gathered from web platforms or other sources. These data reveal empirical evidence of social interaction, the distribution of issues online and the dynamic of debates across various platforms. But this also calls for a critical reflection concerning how the new data resources can be used for research, to what extent they are representative and how they constitute issues for research integrity. With reference to David Berry’s notion of digital humanities, it also raises the question to what extent the use of novel analysis tools affects the epistemic process (Berry 2012). In presenting examples of the transformation of citizenship through social media and data practices, this special issue inherently tells also about the transformation of scholarship and research through novel data resources.

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