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Scott Wright

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Scott Wright

University of East Anglia, UK

Abstract

The suggestion that new media might revolutionize politics persists as one of the most influential and popular discourses. There has been a burgeoning scholarly response, often framed through the polarising ‘revolution’ and ‘normalization’ ‘schools’ (Davis, 2009; Margolis and Resnick, 2000). This article argues that the schism between revolution and normalization has negatively influenced subsequent empirical analyses of political conversation online (and of e-democracy studies more generally). First, it will argue that many scholars have failed to consider the nature of revolutionary change in any detail, tending to frame and interpret their research findings with the very technologically determinist accounts of revolutionary change of which they are so critical. Second, it will argue that the revolution/normalization frame has led researchers to disproportionately analyse existing political institutions and practices, often using narrow definitions of politics and normative underpinnings that simply may not be relevant in the context of new media. Finally, the article argues that the revolution/normalization frame may have led researchers to interpret their empirical data in an unduly negative way. Combined together the revolution/normalization frame can shape the selection of cases, the choice of research questions and how subsequent results are interpreted – with the danger that researchers are being unduly pessimistic about the prevalence and nature of political debate online. The critique will lead to a series of suggestions about how scholars can take online deliberation research forward.

Keywords

e-democracy, normalization, online deliberation, political communication, politics as usual, revolution

Corresponding author:

Scott Wright, School of Political, Social and International Studies, University of East Anglia, Norwich, Norfolk NR4 7TJ, UK

Email: scott.wright@uea.ac.uk

Introduction

Researchers have studied political debate on the internet for around 20 years. Right from the earliest days – a time of Usenet and Listservs – claims abounded that the internet would ‘revolutionize’ political conversation and debate because it was thought, amongst other reasons, to have a democratic structure that would facilitate deliberative conversation. Rheingold (1993: 131), for example, believed that discussion forums were a ‘democratizing technology’, while Corrado and Firestone (1996: 17) argued that Usenet would create a ‘conversational democracy’. The notion that the internet might have a revolutionary effect on politics, and particularly that it might facilitate the creation of a deliberative virtual public sphere, has sparked an intense and at times acrimonious theoretical debate between the so-called ‘revolutionaries’ or cyber-optimist school and the so-called ‘normalization’ or cyber-realist school, associated with the work of Margolis and Resnick (2000).

This article argues that the schism between the revolution and normalization ‘schools’ has negatively influenced subsequent empirical analyses of political conversation online (and of e-democracy studies more generally). It will argue, first, that many scholars have failed to consider the nature of revolutionary change in any detail, tending to frame and interpret their research findings with the very technologically determinist accounts of revolutionary change of which they are so critical: the either/or dichotomization of revolution/normalization is false. A more nuanced understanding of ‘revolution’ and ‘normalization’ is required, one that places it in the context of a broader range of potential impacts, if we are to fairly assess how new media impact politics, and deliberation in particular.

Second, this article argues that the pre-eminence of this debate has led scholars to focus research on how existing institutions, such as political parties and government, use new media – often during major political events such as elections – when they are not necessarily best placed to exploit the potential. Moreover, it has encouraged unduly narrow, traditional definitions of politics (Hay, 2002, 2007), with normative underpinnings that may not hold in the context of new media (Graham and Harju, forthcoming; Papacharissi, 2010).

Third, the article argues that the revolution/normalization debate influences how researchers interpret their empirical findings. One example from my own work will illustrate this: I have previously operationalized a Habermasian notion of idealized deliberation to study an EU-run online discussion forum about a new treaty (Wright, 2007). While this in itself is interesting, the concern is that (a) using such a model of deliberation sets an unrealistic goal and measure for debate online and that (b) much political discussion on the internet occurs in non-official spaces.

Put simply, the revolution/normalization framing of debates shapes the selection of cases, the choice of research questions and how subsequent results are interpreted – with the danger that researchers are being unduly pessimistic about the prevalence and nature of political debate online. The critique will lead to a series of suggestions about how scholars should take online deliberation research forward.

The ‘internet revolution’

Attempting to measure the apparently revolutionary impact of technologies upon government and society is an issue that has vexed academics and commentators. From the

telephone to the television, and from the printing press to the radio, it seems as though each new technology is met with claims that it might somehow have revolutionary effects. People who believe in the potential of new technologies to revolutionize politics and society think that there will be wholesale changes to the functioning of the political system. Effectively, technology deterministically generates a democratic state of affairs – however conceived – because the characteristics of new technologies overcome barriers to ‘idealized’ direct or deliberative democracy. Such ‘believers’, and it is often presented in such religious terms, are often accused of a blind ‘faith’ – an almost cult-like obsession, detached from the reality of how technologies are experienced and used in society at large.

The most common complaint put forward is that wildly speculative claims are made about new technologies and how they will create wholesale, revolutionary changes. For example, Naisbitt (1991: 160) has argued that:

along came the communications revolution and with it an extremely well-educated electorate. Today, with instantaneously shared information, we know as much about what’s going on as our representatives and we know it just as quickly. The fact is we have outlived the historical usefulness of representative democracy and we all sense intuitively that it is obsolete.

The second, but less widely made complaint, contradicts the first one: relatively small changes are marked out as being revolutionary. Consider this claim, made in the *Guardian* newspaper from the 2008 US Presidential election:

Barack Obama’s campaign offered fresh examples yesterday of the power of technology to transform electoral politics, unveiling plans to text and email supporters when he decides on his vice-presidential candidate, and to incorporate voters across the country [using online chats] in the proceedings at the Democratic party’s convention ...

The question raised by critics here is quite simple: will such activities really ‘transform electoral politics’? The two examples highlight the complexities of assessing the impacts of technology on political communication.

Deterministic thinking is very unpopular amongst scholars who see its ‘causal technicism’ as ‘a simple-minded approach to socio-technical analysis which assumes a unilinear technological “impact” that places the ‘social significance of the information age’ on ‘the technology and its characteristics’ (Bellamy and Taylor, 1998: 2). This school of thought, known as the Social Construction of Technology (SCOT), places emphasis on how technologies are adopted and used by people, and the institutional, political, economic and other factors that suppress radical potential (Winston, 1998).

It is my contention that technology does not determine human behaviour, though it can influence and constrain political action (see Winner, 1980; Wright and Street, 2007). The salient point here is that the technological determinism evident in so many revolutionary accounts has sometimes distracted researchers from focusing on the actual impact of technology upon politics. The revolutionary *potential* of technology does not lie in some innate quality that forces human beings to behave in a particular way. The revolutionary *potential* lies, instead, in how technologies are designed, exploited and adopted (or not) by humans in particular social and political contexts.

In response to these debates, there has been an empirical turn in the literature (see, for example: Davis, 1999, 2005; Gibson and Ward, 2000; Gibson et al., 2003; Wright, 2006a, 2006b, 2007, 2008) sometimes referred to as cyber-realist (Shane, 2004: xii). One of the most important early contributions in this field was Michael Margolis and David Resnick's seminal book *Politics as Usual*.

Politics as Usual

In *Politics as Usual*, Margolis and Resnick (2000) argue that the revolutionary potential of politics will be normalized by the socio-political reality. Their theoretical work is cited extensively but, I believe, researchers often do not fully appreciate their actual argument. If anything, more has been read into the normalization hypothesis than is actually suggested; it has been extended and mixed in with broader arguments such as those put forward by Winston (1998). Margolis and Resnick do not, for example, argue that normalization of the internet means it 'will make no difference' (Muhlberger, 2003: 107): the internet 'certainly will have an influence on offline political life ...', it is simply that:

The utopian vision of a worldwide agora that would revitalize democracy has to confront the harsh reality of lawsuits and regulations, commerce and entertainment, political parties, organised interest groups, political activists, and, most important, masses of bored and indifferent citizens. (Margolis and Resnick, 2000: 14, 22)

One explanation for this confusion is that their discussion of these non-revolutionary effects is limited, and must be read in the context of the prominent politics as usual mantra that rather contradicts this more nuanced position. Another explanation is that Margolis and Resnick fail to provide a clear definition of revolution. Instead they somewhat vaguely outline a picture of how the internet, and the types of politics that occur on it, evolved:

- Intra-Net Politics: predominant in the pre-WWW world. Internet users regulated themselves independent of state and other 'interference';
- Politics that Affects the Net: refers to the actions, policies and regulations of (largely) nation states;
- Politics on the Net: how the Net is being used for political ends (Margolis and Resnick, 2000: 8–21).

They start their account of the internet's evolution by arguing that there was a brief revolutionary golden age, akin to a Lockean state of nature. The driving logic was altruism rather than money; every person was free and equal; and behaviour was regulated internally, without interference from government. The position builds on a libertarian tradition (the 'Californian ideology' – see Barbrook and Cameron, 1996). But, as with Locke's State of Nature, this 'golden age' quickly wilted in the face of state and market regulation:

Cyberspace has become a focus for contending social and political forces that wish to tame it. When it comes to governance, the age of laissez-faire and selfregulation belongs to the past of the Net; the future belongs to government.

The problem with their ‘golden age’ account is, first, that it is based on a slightly distorted picture of reality: the internet does face more external regulation, but has always experienced regulation, such as US government policies barring commercial activity. Second, their positive normative view about the desirability of a libertarian state of affairs is implicitly (and perhaps explicitly) set up as being *the* measure by which to determine whether the internet was having a revolutionary affect – but with insufficient detail as to why this was normatively appealing, and how it would be operationalized. In so doing, other potential revolutionary – and non-revolutionary – changes that did not meet this libertarian ideal are effectively cut off and this frames their pessimistic analysis:

Far from revolutionizing the conduct of politics and civic affairs in the real world, we found the internet tends to reflect and reinforce the patterns of behavior of that world. Politics on the Internet is politics as usual ... (2000: vii).

There has since been more detailed theoretical and empirical analysis of such discussion spaces. The weight of evidence suggests that, in contradiction to the libertarian ‘ideal’, regulation is often necessary to generate freedom, and that established institutions can play an important role (Budge, 1996; Coleman and Blumler, 2009). These arguments have been supported by empirical analysis of the Usenet discussion forums that were central to the ‘golden age’ account (Davis, 1999: 167; Linaa Jensen, 2003; Wilhelm, 2000). Research has emphasized the importance of moderators (Wright, 2006a) and how website design can influence the nature of the debate that occurs (Noveck, 2004; Stromer-Galley and Martey, 2009; Wright and Street, 2007). If this is correct, moves to a more governed, pluralistic internet may facilitate a vibrant public sphere.

At the start of their book, Margolis and Resnick (2000: 1) present a less-demanding account of the internet’s revolutionary potential, grounded in their third category, Politics on the Net. They state that: ‘Not long ago, the Internet was heralded as a technology for creating new forms of community, empowering citizens, and challenging existing power structures’. This account probably adds to the confusion mentioned above. It is, however, important: if we use their first picture as our yardstick for measuring the internet’s revolutionary impact it could readily be dismissed. But, if we choose the latter, the picture is far more confusing – and interesting. This discussion has already begun to highlight some of my concerns, but it is necessary to state them more explicitly.

The problem with the revolution/normalization frame

There are three principal concerns with the revolution/normalization frame. First, many researchers, when attempting to measure whether the internet is revolutionizing politics, ground their empirical analysis in the very revolutionary accounts of which they are so critical. In other words, they broadly accept the terms of the debate put forward by the so-called ‘revolutionaries’. To note that the internet: ‘has not had nearly the effects on society that either its proponents or its detractors predicted’ (Margolis and Resnick, 2000: 1–2) too willingly accepts their frame of analysis, and in no way means that the internet is not having deeply significant – and perhaps even revolutionary – impacts. Two of the most important works of recent years (Davis, 2009; Hindman, 2009) tend to fall

into this trap: they produce often extensive and important empirical data but use this to debunk the hype as a myth. Analysing whether the internet achieved what it was 'supposed' to do according to its proponents mirrors Edgerton's (2006: ix) lament that: 'too often the agenda for discussing the past, present and future of technology is set by the promoters of new technologies'. As Hindman (2009: 5) himself notes, 'popular enthusiasm for technology has made a sober appraisal of the internet's complicated political effects more difficult'. Yet *The Myth* is firmly placed within the broader research framework that Hindman (2009: 8) himself appears to criticize: 'Scholars of the internet have generally been more cautious than public figures and journalists, but they too have focused on claims that the Internet is democratizing politics.'¹

Second, the revolutionary frame can influence what research questions are adopted and which aspects of the internet are analysed. Considering all the hyping of the internet's revolutionary implications for politics, the revolution often appears silent. But as Jenkins and Thorburn (2003: 2) put it: 'maybe these disappointed observers were looking in the wrong places, searching for some decisive moment that would embody the new power of digital media – the contemporary equivalent of Roosevelt's "fireside" chats on radio or the Kennedy–Nixon debates on television'. On my reading, a preponderant amount of research has been conducted into the impact of the internet on political parties and their elected representatives.² It is relatively easy to identify their blogs or Facebook profiles compared to ordinary activists or the politically minded blogger who may comment infrequently or indirectly about politics. This may explain the heavy research focus here (my own included – see Wright, 2008, 2009). It would also appear that, in the attempt to assess whether politics is being revolutionized, there follows a 'logical' jump that this should be determined by looking at existing political institutions, using existing political (and other) theories. The concern is that analysing the Facebook profiles or blogs of political parties and elected representatives, while *prima facie* interesting, may be missing the point (Graham and Harju, forthcoming; Papacharissi, 2010). It may be the case that more democratically important political and social changes occur amongst the interactions of ordinary citizens (Coleman and Blumler, 2009; Graham and Harju, forthcoming) and may not be political acts as understood by more traditional definitions (Coleman, 2005; Van Zoonen, 2005: 123–142). As Hay (2002: 4–5) notes:

The clear danger is that the conclusions of our analyses may increasingly come to depend upon externally generated assumptions whose empirical content we do not regard ourselves worthy to judge. [...] That implies a political analysis which refuses to restrict its analytical attentions to obviously political variables and processes ...

Following the work of Ray Oldenburg (1999), the political changes may occur in what we might call Third Places (Chadwick, 2009: 30) or, perhaps more accurately, Third Spaces (Wright, under review).

Third, the revolution/normalization frame distorts how researchers make sense of their empirical findings by creating undue expectations, and this could lead them to be too pessimistic in their analysis of the impacts of technology on politics. In the face of all the hyping of technology, there is a danger that an implicitly pessimistic mindset is adopted; Margolis and Resnick (2000: 202), for example, are self-affirmed sceptics. Consider the following examples.

Citing survey results of political website readership, Schifferes (2006) stated in a public lecture that: ‘only 17% of people had visited the Conservative Party website’. On what basis or expectation is this finding interpreted as ‘only 17%’? If we were to reframe this finding, the fact that 17 percent of people made the effort to look at the Conservative Party website could be considered surprisingly positive. Similarly, Harris Interactive interpreted a survey finding that 44 percent of Americans read political blogs ‘several times a year’ or more with the following headline: ‘More Than Half of Americans Never Read Political Blogs’.³ Again, one has to question what the expectations were when this interpretation was made. Richard Davis has published several widely cited books that analyse the impact of the internet on American politics. Having found that the promise of Usenet was hollow and not very democratic (1999: 167), he returns to the subject in *Politics Online* (2005: 67), concluding that: ‘people often talk past one another when they are not verbally attacking each other’. Tables 1a and 1b contain the empirical data on which the analysis was built.

I would argue that, in a relatively ungoverned and poorly designed space such as Usenet, these are actually surprisingly positive results that suggest people were engaged in debate (especially when one considers that a number of posts would be seeding new discussions). At what level would responses to other posts have to be for them to be considered positive? While there was evidence of flaming, these particular groups are generally considered to be some of the most vitriolic on Usenet and cannot be extrapolated into a broader commentary of Usenet debates as Davis did (Stromer-Galley, 2003). The research findings were interpreted through the utopian, cyber-optimist argument that

Table 1. Select characteristics of political newsgroup messages.

1a

	Responses to other posts (%)	Flaming (%)	Attack on third party (%)	Evidence references (%)
Constitution	68	37	28	9
Radical Left	90	62	37	13
Republican	94	33	20	10
Clinton	87	11	8	12

Source: Davis, 2005: 59.

1b

	Response to other posts (%)	Attack on poster (%)	Attack on third party (%)	Inclusion of other materials (%)
Clinton	86.5	10.6	7.9	11.9
Constitution	68.3	36.7	28.4	9
Radical Left	89.5	61.8	36.9	13.2

Source: Davis, 1999: 157.

Note: tables refers to Usenet forums – evidence references/inclusion of other materials means the use of evidence to support arguments such as quotes and links

Usenet would facilitate idealized models of deliberative democracy and revitalize the public sphere. The problem is that they are precisely that: ideal. If we were to lower the theoretical bar, say placing the emphasis on discussion rather than deliberation, then these results would be interpreted much more positively. This also suggests that careful consideration must be given to the criteria of deliberation that are employed, and how they are operationalized.⁴

As noted, Davis' most recent work (2009) uses the hyping of blogs as its benchmark. A survey of blog focus is interpreted thus: 'Only 11% of bloggers in one survey said that the primary topic of their blogs is politics or political issues' (Davis, 2009: 7). Again, the question is: why 'Only'? Davis cites research suggesting that 133 million blogs had been created by 2008, and were growing at a rate of 120,000 each day (Davis, 2009: 4). If this is accurate, it would suggest there were around 14.5 million primarily political blogs, and a larger, as yet, undefined number of blogs that discuss political issues – and this seems to be a significant and positive finding.

It is my contention that each of these interpretations is informed by the hyping of technology's implications for politics. If we start with the expectation that the internet will lead to particular types of massive change, there are two dangers. First, any changes that are happening will pale into relative insignificance and be assessed as such. Second, other potentially revolutionary changes might be occurring, but they are ignored, dismissed or missed completely. It seems clear that a much more sophisticated model for making sense of the impacts of technology is needed if we are to overcome the burden of expectation that hangs heavily around studies of new media. We must, first, be very clear what we think a revolution would look like, and, indeed, have a clear, nuanced definition of the term: revolution. Combined together, there is a danger that some researchers underplay the significance of the impact of the internet upon politics. Given these concerns, I propose a series of suggestions for how we might take online deliberation research forward. Several scholars have started work in this vein: the proposed agenda draws directly on their work. I will begin by thinking about the nature of 'revolution' itself.

(I) Reconsider 'revolution' and 'normalization'

How to define what constitutes a revolution is one of the great scholarly questions, debated by Marx, Williams and Hobsbawm. Yet, as noted above, many researchers have failed to adequately define what they mean by the term. If we do not have a working definition of revolution, it makes it very difficult to understand what causes one, to determine when one actually happens (or not) and to measure its effects. Within the political communications literature, when revolution is discussed, there appears to be a simplistic assumption that it occurs fast and leads to massive change on a national or international scale. Davis (2009: 186), for example, rather vaguely states: 'The definition of a revolution is debatable, but typically a revolution is associated with the overthrow of an existing regime.' Yet revolutions are complex phenomena. This is highlighted by the agricultural revolution, which took around 100 years: the effects are said to have been revolutionary – it allowed increased population growth and urbanization that laid the foundations for the industrial revolution. But the changes were not fast and there was not

one moment, one technology or one event that marked the change. One only has to briefly peruse the voluminous literature on the agricultural and industrial revolutions to see that our depth of analysis and understanding of the internet 'revolution' is shallow and under-developed.⁵ This is unsurprising: it is questionable whether the agricultural revolution would have been identified as a revolution at an equivalent early stage in its development. It may well be that, in attempting to assess the impacts of new technologies on politics at such an early stage, we are effectively trying to pin the tail on the donkey without really knowing what the donkey looks like.⁶

Scholars have been quick to dismiss so-called revolutionaries as idealistic and the like. It is undeniable that they *do* have a point. Too often, technology is hyped as having revolutionary potential without a full understanding of what happens in practice; the latter may be very different from the potential. But to completely dismiss the impacts of technology on the altar of a false dichotomy between revolution and normalization is equally wrong. It should be remembered that the revolution–normalization dichotomy is more of a discourse than a coherent framework or analytical tool to help make sense of empirical results. To assess the internet's impact on politics, we cannot just answer the question of whether they are revolutionary, or not. The underlying research goal must be to analyse and interpret what effects the internet has on politics across a spectrum of potential outcomes for different actors and across a range of issues. As I have previously argued (Wright, 2008: 82): 'The smaller, incremental changes that can occur (often at the periphery) remain potentially very important: there is a danger that their significance can be over-looked.' There is a further danger: the semantics of revolution can obfuscate fair consideration of actual impacts. In other words, the term 'revolution' carries so much baggage with it that it is actually unhelpful. However, given the preponderance of the revolutionary rhetoric and its potential to influence public perceptions (Papacharissi, 2010: 8), following Edgerton (2006), I put forward three tentative suggestions to encourage debate:

1. Scale: revolutions can occur on myriad scales from the local to the global;
2. Speed: time is less important than the significance of change;
3. Invention and Innovation: revolutions can take time, and involve a variety of technologies and applications. Thus, we should not look to the latest technology in isolation. The actual technical 'innovation' may not be that innovative – it could, for example, be the tweaking of an already existing format, the mashing together of two different existing technologies, or the discovery of a new way for people to exploit an already existing technology (e.g. email).

Thus, we must be careful to look beyond purely technical 'revolutions'. Following this logic, to claim that the 'process of "normalization" would empty the internet of most of its innovative potential' does not mean the impact will necessarily not be revolutionary (Vaccari, 2008: 2 – summarizing Margolis and Resnick's work).

Studies of deliberation on the internet tend to use synchronic or comparative statics research designs (see Wright, 2006a, 2007). The synchronic approach invariably involves isolating one forum, taking a 'freeze' of it at a particular time and then analysing it in isolation, while the comparative static approach repeats the same procedure at different

times and/or on different websites. While these are important and valid approaches for analysing deliberation, it is problematic to extrapolate this to broader conclusions about the extent and impact of deliberation online, and political change more broadly (Hay, 2002). The analysis above speaks to a historical institutionalist approach to the measurement and analysis of political change, in the diachronic vein. Following the work of Colin Hay (2002: 163), a ‘punctuated evolution’ approach and research design that would draw ‘attention to the cumulative nature of often incremental change’ is one strategy that can account for such complexity.⁷

To this point, I have been more explicit about my concerns with the use of revolution as a concept. But normalization can be equally problematic. Some interpret it as signifying no change, while others see it as permitting the reinvigoration of existing institutions. These are, obviously, completely different – yet, as with revolution, there is often a failure to be explicit, and instead use the term in the most general, and even contradictory ways. My contention is that when technology is applied to existing practices, those practices could be theoretically revolutionized – leading, for want of a better phrase, to a normalized revolution. A normalized revolution is one where new technologies create deeply significant, perhaps wholesale changes to the function of *established* political institutions without overthrowing those institutions. Adopting new technologies, perhaps to neuter their radical potential (Winston, 1998), does not mean that technology is itself completely neutered – it can still have significant, perhaps revolutionary effects, on how institutions operate. Two cases will highlight this.

First, Budge (1996) argued that new technologies made direct forms of democracy more plausible, but within existing institutional structures such as parties and parliament. This could create a fundamental change, but for some within the normalization school it would amount to politics as usual. Similarly, Joe Trippi (2004) predicted of the 2008 US election:

What’s really going on is a political phenomenon, a democratic movement that flows naturally from our civic lives [it] will be the first national contest waged and won primarily online. The Web puts us over the tipping point; it’s democracy’s killer app.

While I disagree with the analysis, the sentiment is of a normalized revolution: it is a fundamental change to existing practice. The key factor with a normalized revolution is, thus, that significant power still rests with elected representatives, but that new technology can help to create stronger *representative* democracy. It revolutionizes the operation of existing institutions and practices.

These are but tentative ideas. While the literature has begun to evolve, the examples previously highlighted suggest that revolution/normalization is still used, and has a broader influence on scholarship. The point is simple: if ‘revolution’ and normalization must be used, the concepts must be considered fully and defined precisely. As Hindman (2009: 5) puts it: ‘Because the language is fuzzy, much of the reasoning has been, too.’

(2) Do not get obsessed with the latest innovation

Drawing on the above arguments, but more explicitly linking them back to the literature about political communications, there is a tendency in the literature to focus on the latest

innovations (Edgerton, 2006). This often manifests itself by studying the latest technical development in isolation. As best as can be told give the paucity of empirical evidence, people don't discuss politics in one place or using one technology; they use a variety of applications from email to Facebook and blogs to discussion forums – and these are often intertwined heavily and cross-fertilize. If this is correct, the impact of the internet on political communication cannot be determined by studying blogs, Twitter or Facebook in isolation – yet each 'innovation' was accompanied by a raft of such studies with little attention paid to the broader patterns of political communication and our media ecology (Gurevitch et al., 2009). The danger with using revolutionary accounts is that they are often drawn from speculation about the latest technology when this needs to be considered in a much broader context.

(3) Look in different, Third Spaces

While the study of political deliberation online is still in its infancy, a number of empirical studies have been conducted. Virtually all research has, until very recently, focused on established political events (e.g. elections), institutions (e.g. parliament/party websites), activities (e.g. government-run online consultations) and actors (e.g. elected representatives' blogs). A few early studies looked at online political discussion more generally, such as on Usenet forums, but these studies chose largely to focus on explicitly party-political areas (Davis, 1999, 2005; Wilhelm, 2000). While this research undoubtedly had significant value, it is time to cast our research net more broadly when looking for political debate online. As Graham (2010: 11 – see also Freelon, 2010: 1173) argues: 'researchers need to stop privileging politically oriented spaces and start being more inclusive. Such privileging not only provides us with an incomplete picture, but also a distorted one.' Similarly, Saward (2003: 166) notes:

An extraordinary feature of the literature on deliberative democracy has been its unwillingness to take an encompassing view of democratic sites, institutions and procedures.

In this vein, I believe it is time to expand analyses to what I call 'Third Spaces'.

Informed by a critique of Oldenburg's Third Place, a Third Space is an online discussion forum with a primarily non-political focus, but where political talk emerges within conversations. The key link between participants is not (normally) their location but specific issues or topics (see Wright, under review, for a detailed account). Topic-based online discussion forums abound. The largest forum in the world focuses on Gaia and has 1.8 billion posts. Of the top 25 biggest forums in the world, none focus explicitly on politics though they host a total of 4.9 billion posts.⁸ These (largely) informal gathering spaces appear to have far greater meaning to participants than a government-run online discussion forum or a political party-controlled chat-room. Relatively few people participate in government forums for a variety of reasons (Chadwick, 2009: 17), yet a space such as the <http://www.moneysavingexpert.com> forum has over 20 million posts, with a significant amount of political discussion.

Analysis of deliberation in Third Spaces arguably requires a more inclusive definition of what constitutes political talk and measures of deliberativeness.⁹ As noted by Coleman

and Blumler (2009), many studies are grounded in a ‘deep, sombre, rationally-bounded cerebral rumination’ picture of online deliberation that is ‘more suited to the Senior Common Room than the workplace, community hall or public square’. While this undoubtedly has a place, clearly many online spaces are very different from this. Coleman and Blumler ‘are happy to settle for a *more deliberative democracy*’ (2009: 38, original emphasis) that ‘would take seriously a range of forms of public talk, from the informal and conversational to the consultative and evidential’. At the moment there is a danger that we use idealized, and arguably impossible criteria by which to measure deliberation that preclude a positive outcome at the outset.¹⁰ While Habermas-inspired models do still have a significant role to play – Kies’s (2010) detailed empirical analysis of deliberation being a strong example – researchers need to consider more flexible approaches to online discussion (Freelon, 2010). The widespread use of ‘elite’ models may be linked to the preponderance of research into government-run policy forums and those of political parties – Kies’ work again being a good example.

Innovative work by Stephen Coleman and Jay Blumler (2009), Liesbet Van Zoonen (2007) and Todd Graham (2009, 2010) has argued, and empirically shown, that ‘everyday’ political conversation in online spaces whose primary function is not political, can have real democratic value (see Hay, 2002). Part of the broader cultural turn in the study of politics, Graham’s (2009, 2010) work is particularly interesting in this context: he found that political debate in a Wife Swap online discussion forum was deliberative when tested using Habermas-inspired measures. To determine what constitutes political debate, Graham used a broad approach inspired by Mansbridge (1999):

(1) a participant makes a connection from a particular experience, interest, issue, or topic in general to society, which (2) stimulates reflection and a response by at least one other participant

To summarize, one of the central arguments put forward here is that two of the most significant theoretical developments in the last 20 years – the ‘deliberative turn’ (Dryzek, 2002) and the ‘cultural turn’ (Nash, 2001) need bringing together more explicitly through the study of Third Spaces.

(4) Look over longer timeframes

The sheer volume of debate on the internet creates serious research problems. To mitigate this, there is tendency to pick specific, narrowly defined case studies with relatively limited samples. Take political blogging in the UK. There have been several studies but virtually all focus on the Westminster village, and often during election campaigns. We must look beyond the atypical election campaign period; this may actually be the worst time to study discussion within traditional political spaces because candidates are risk averse, want to avoid embarrassment and are focused on offline activities (Stromer-Galley, 2003). But there are further limitations: researchers have typically undertaken sampling over short periods of time or with small sample sizes. For example, Davis (2009) sampled messages over a one-month period; Jackson (2008) and Staney (2006) analysed a three-month span of messages; while Auty (2005) looked at three weeks and

Ferguson and Griffiths (2006) only a week. Given the often short/small sampling periods, some researchers have been unduly hasty in making rather generalized claims about the nature of online deliberation (Davis, 1999, 2005; Wilhelm, 2000). To extend samples, computerized coding and corpus linguistics, for all their limitations, need to be revisited alongside conversation mapping (and other) tools (Sack, 2005). The growing number of data capture and analysis tools is significantly extending opportunities here.¹¹ Extending sample sizes and looking over longer time frames speaks to the diachronic/punctuated evolution approach, outlined above.

(5) Increase experimental (social science) research

So far, the account has largely built on the dominant approach to researching online deliberation amongst social scientists: assessing the impacts of new technologies without intervening directly in the practice. Such approaches are arguably necessitated by the desire to analyse the extent to which new technologies are having revolutionary effects. This clearly has value: comparative research of practice – ‘actually existing democratic innovations’ as Smith (2009: 6) terms it – has suggested that there are a number of ways in which online discussion could be facilitated, such as through consideration of forum design and moderation (Janssen and Kies, 2004; Wright, 2006a; Wright and Street, 2007). Using the language of devices, Saward (2003: 167) argues that we must: ‘stand back [...] precisely in order to manipulate and combine their elements in democratically promising, tailored ways’. Working on a system-wide, procedural level that assumes an array of democratic tools or devices, Saward (2003: 167) continues: we must ‘design, manipulate, deconstruct and reconstruct systems of devices to forge procedures to enhance democratic ideals in particular places’. Smith’s (2009) ‘democratic goods’ framework for analysing innovations is a helpful intervention here.

This is clearly important, but at this stage, it is necessary to advance a further argument. Following Saward and Smith’s logic, more attention needs to be paid to micro-level approaches – to the individual tools and how they might be designed to appeal to the different underlying principles (be they deliberative, aggregative or otherwise – compare for example, Downing Street e-petitions with the Scottish Assembly e-petitions – the latter has a deliberative space built in). Put simply, e-democracy tools can themselves be viewed as discretely designed interfaces that can be embedded with specific institutional norms, values and procedures (Wright and Street, 2007). Experimental research designs would allow these claims to be tested in depth. While there have already been a number of experiments with designing online deliberation tools (Fishkin, 2009; Iyengar et al., 2005; Price, 2009; Smith, 2009: 142–161), inter/multi-disciplinary efforts arguably need to be redoubled with greater involvement of social science in broader fields such as computer and decision science. In particular, comparatively testing different forum interfaces to see how they impact deliberation (and other values) would enhance Saward’s democratic toolkit. This is important because analysis of government-led discussion forums are replete with examples of poorly designed and institutionalized platforms (Wright, 2006b: 240–242) that can hinder citizens’ participatory journey (Wright, forthcoming) and there is a danger that if citizens have bad experiences with e-democracy tools they will be put off from participating further.

Conclusion

This article has set out a series of suggestions for how scholars might take forward online deliberation research, informed by a critique of the revolution/normalization frame that has had a broad influence upon the internet politics literature. It would be ridiculous to claim that this was a completely new agenda; as one would hope, *some* of the suggestions are already being taken up by researchers of online deliberation, and this article is indebted to these innovative studies. However, there is clearly a significant way to go.

In particular, the article has argued that if researchers wish to frame their research with the revolution/normalization dichotomy, they must be explicit about what they mean by the terms. The concept of a normalized revolution highlights the complexity of such issues and greater thought is needed here. Given this complexity, analysis that is informed by historical institutionalism, and punctuated evolution in particular, offers scope to expand understanding at the macro level. At the micro-level, it has been argued that researchers must stop privileging analysis of deliberation within traditional institutional environments using 'elite' models of deliberation. Furthermore, the innovation-centric approach that imbues much research – reflected in many studies focusing on one new technology or website in isolation – can be unhelpful. To ensure sufficient breadth of analysis, new data analysis and coding tools need to be considered. Finally, studies of online deliberation experiments have afforded a number of insights that could be explored further through experimental research designs.

This critique, and the series of recommendations that have followed from it have, undoubtedly, raised more questions than answers. However, I hope that it will inspire debate about the future of online deliberation studies, and more generally about how we should theorize, empirically analyse and subsequently interpret the impacts of technology on politics.

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Notes

1. For example, it might be the case that speculation about blogs overthrowing elites was incorrect; that people have 'distorted the scale of the phenomenon that they are examining; they have made the long tail into the entire dog' (Hindman, 2009: 135). But this assumes that traffic is the crucial measure when for many bloggers the value derived from blogging, and their reason for continuing, are far more diverse. Put simply, the criticisms that Hindman makes of other people's work can equally be applied to his own.
2. Davis (2009: 39), for example, notes that the lack of focus to date on what he calls 'common blogs' is 'disturbing'; they 'reflect the democratic elements of the blogosphere touted by pundits and journalists' (Davis, 2009: 35). However, he opts to continue this trend because this is where the 'locus of power currently' lies (Davis, 2009: 39).

3. 21 August 2008, http://www.harrisinteractive.com/harris_poll/index.asp?PID=879
4. For example, 'flame wars' would be considered a strength amongst agonistic thinkers (Mouffe, 2000) but negative from the elite deliberation perspective (Habermas, 1996: 287–387).
5. See, for example, Overton's (1996) synthesis of a range of literature and argument that the agricultural revolution took place after 1750 and Freeman and Louçã's (2001) argument for a reasoned economic history informed by the charting of successive technological revolutions.
6. This does not mean that analysis is impossible, but that caution is required (Freeman and Louçã, 2001: 303). See Edgerton (2006) for a broader discussion.
7. These arguments do, of course, cut across a number of literatures. Consider, for example, Freeman and Louçã's (2001) argument for a reasoned economic history that draws on the long wave approach to economic research, but suggesting that such approaches need to account for both recurrent as well as unique features of different technological revolutions and the core role of institutions, which often act as impediments to change (Perez, 1983).
8. Data collated from www.bigboards.com, 25 November 2010.
9. However, initial research into three Third Spaces conducted by Scullion et al. (2010) found that 7 percent of posts talked about 'big P', traditionally defined politics. If similar levels were recorded across broader forums, it would suggest a significant volume of political discussion.
10. Disagreements about what are the 'right' criteria of deliberation, and how these should be operationalized, may help to explain why scholars interpret empirical results so differently, but these issues are all related to the broader concerns outlined here.
11. Some notable tools include the Blog Analysis Toolkit (BAT), DiscoverText, Argument Visualisation, and the LexiURL searcher.

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Scott Wright is Lecturer in Political Communication at the University of East Anglia and a member of the Media@UEA research group. Wright has published widely in the field of e-democracy. He was recently awarded a British Academy Mid-career fellowship, that will allow him to explore some of the issues raised in this article through an empirical analysis of citizen blogging.