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WHY AND HOW POLITICIANS USE SOCIAL MEDIA? UNDERSTANDING SENSEMAKING AND REPRESENTATIONS OF DIGITAL PLATFORMS. THE CASE OF “FACEBOOK” AND “TWITTER” IN THE EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT

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Introduction

The mainstream perspective on politicians who use social media has been based on the premise that social media technology is, by nature, an innovative tool and that politicians are not using it to its full potential (Roginsky, 2014). In my paper, I will outline some of the existing claims made for the innovative potential of social media regarding politics and lay out a number of uses and questions that should lead to be wary about celebrating accounts. Such an approach requires us to first focus on digital imaginaries as apprehended by social media promoters before looking at its development and circulation within a specific political context – taking into account the different types of actors that may be encountered (internet specialists, journalists, politicians, employees...). As underlined by Flichy, “the imaginaire is at the center of (...) use of the internet” and is diverse and riddled with contradictions (2004:11). I will challenge the mainstream normative approach and will rely on a socio-technical approach to demonstrate that social media technology is not innovative by nature and innovation is not necessarily where it is expected, nor it is necessarily easily visible: it is however part of a “technical imaginaire” (Flichy, 2004:10). Such an approach highlights the existence of a “symbolic universe” (Granjon, 2014:113) accompanying adoption and uses of social media. This will lead me to call into question the capacity of quantitative analysis of large datasets to understand how social media are used as a tool for political communication and the manner in which politicians use it. In the realm of new media, populated as it is by rhetoric about technical possibilities and potentials, it is indeed important to look at actual users, uses and experience. However, there is a lack of comprehensive accounts of how political actors perceive social media. We must therefore examine carefully the experiences they make in specific environments and

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understand how practices are shaped. In other words, “scholars should not take the technological affordances of social media for granted – but should carefully consider the way in which users understand, appropriate and experience social media” (Barassi & Treré, 2012: 12).

How to study uses and representations of social media?

In this regard, the presentation will highlight the contribution of ethnographic methods to better understand perceptions and use’s patterns of social media technology, focusing on the recursive intertwining of users and technology in practice. I will argue that communication emerges from the performativity of social media as interacting with actors’ practices. The performativity is sociomaterial, shaped by the way in which the technology is designed, configured but also engaged in practice (Orlikowski, 2007). A socio-technical approach allows the researcher to articulate both technical elements and social actions. Such an approach demonstrates the importance to look at “social media imaginaries” in order to understand how political actors¹ make sense of social media and how it drives their usages of such digital tools. Indeed social media practices are not phenomena that take place exclusively online but are rather consecutive with and embedded in other social spaces (Miller & Slater, 2005:5).

As reminded by Brewer (2000:10), “ethnography is the study of people in naturally occurring settings or ‘fields’ by means of methods which capture their social meanings and ordinary activities”. Ethnology, through (both offline and online) participant observation and interviews, allows us to analyse social media uses in relation with “other social practices that bear them, frame them or graft onto them” (Granjon, 2014:118). In the field of European politics, this is of particular importance as politicians are embedded in a series of contrasting roles and various settings.

Case study in the European Parliament

Throughout this presentation, I will use one specific field to exemplify my arguments – my research related to the use of social media by Members of the European Parliament from 2009 to 2014. The approach is longitudinal and sheds light on the evolution of representations and uses of social media over five years. I will provide empirical insights into how political actors make sense of social media technology and the “imaginary world” (Mésangeau & Povéda, 2013) they create, emphasizing the importance of contexts and interactions. Political actors act with social media technology as a function of the meaning this technology has for them, and this meaning is constructed in the course of social interactions as well as individual and collective practices.

This research adopts an ethnographic perspective in order to investigate how social media technology is described and discussed among users. It includes a mix of participant observation within the European Parliament (2009-2012) and about 50 interviews with assistants to Members of the European Parliament (2010-2014). I also interviewed 8 MEPs. As a parliamentary assistant between 2009 and 2012 in the European Parliament, I was involved in a series of informal discussions with assistants on the use of social media as well as few workshops and trainings organized within the Parliament. Michon (2008) argues that parliamentary assistants are key political actors, even though they remain virtually unstudied. Their knowledge of working practices within MEP’s offices as well as their position “in the background” (Michon, 2008:169)

¹ Politics is a profession, as highlighted by Hubé (2009). The term « political actor » includes both elected representatives as well as their employees. Indeed, they are both “professionals” in politics, as they both live *for* and *by* political activity (Paoletti, 2014:118).

provide them with an insightful understanding of MEPs' approaches to social media technology and the possibility to speak in a more free way than their employer. Furthermore my own position as a former parliamentary assistant, therefore a former colleague, contributed in facilitating dialogue. I did not take nationality and party politics into account, although I was cautious to have a variety of profiles – both in term of country of origin and political groups.

The analysis of the representations of social media by political actors does not limit itself to ethnography of situational practices but includes the analysis of published messages on social media platforms (Facebook and Twitter). Triangulation allows the researcher to study practices and uses of social media from more than one standpoint in order to explain more fully the richness and the complexity of the different ways that social media are imagined in the political realm. Textual readings of profiles are conducted and status updates analysed, focusing on those politicians and staff who have been interviewed. Hine (2009) notes indeed that the ethnography of the internet should involve mobility between contexts of production and use as well as between online and offline.

Deconstructing normative assumptions through practice

Accompanying discourses play a decisive role in highlighting how technology should be used, why it should be used and the consequence of its usage (Breton, 2002). As Michel de Certeau (1998:185) notes, “narratives precede social practices and pave the way for them”. However, the same author also develops the concept of bricolage to refer to the ways individuals “borrow from existing cultural forms and meanings to create new uses, meanings and identities” (Humphry, 2011). In other words, people negotiate with technology, in relation to “the institutional contexts in which they live and work, and the social and cultural conventions associated with participating in such contexts” (Orlikowski, 2000:410). The concept of practice allows us to articulate both technical elements and social actions in order to understand better the relationships between technology and social use. Rather than starting from the assumptions that the technological affordances of social media could create more interactivity and increased participation, we should start instead with (individual and collective) social practices and examine how political actors interact and shape social media.

In doing so, it is possible to show that the advent of social media in the existing arsenal of communication has participated in transforming political practices in a number of ways; although most of them cannot be grasped online, such as (1) work patterns; (2) listening practices; (3) writing routines; (4) offline interactions triggered by online presence. The content analysis of messages published on Twitter or Facebook suggests that tweets or Facebook status updates do not give much information about the people behind the messages, even though many of these are synopses of activities at work.

It goes back to what Orlikowski (2000:407) calls “emergent structures”, i.e. “how structures are constituted and reconstituted in recurrent social practices” to acknowledge that “while users can and do use technologies as they were designed, they also can and do circumvent inscribed ways of using the technologies”.

More importantly perhaps, this approach suggests that there are a number of reasons why political actors use social media the way they do, such as (1) the work settings in MEPs' offices, (2) the institutional settings of the European Parliament and the nature of

political and legislative work as well as “case work” in constituencies, (4) the representations political actors have of their profession, their role, their audiences (5) the way they understand, appropriate and experience social media; (6) the co-existence of older and more recent technologies.

Conclusion

This presentation is intended as a contribution to the on-going discussion on social media and politics in highlighting the complexities of political actors’ everyday interaction with technology. Indeed it is important to remember that “we cannot describe technical devices without referring to the acts of habitus, skills, tactical sense and social knowledge of the individuals themselves” (Granjon, 2014:114). To investigate users’ practices in relation to social media, we need to go beyond the traces of uses that we can capture online – as “analysing the social uses of technical devices on the unique basis of this material may capsize the whole project into a state of empiricism. (...)” (Granjon, 2014:117). Instead, one should “analyse in order to measure and not measure in order to analyse” (Bachelard, 1970:213) – in other words we should not take as an explanation that which needs to be explained. Ethnographic and qualitative approaches can therefore help us to provide meaning to observed use, calling for triangulation of data in order to give a detailed and balanced picture of the situation. The objective is to better understand why and how political actors use social media in everyday political life.

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