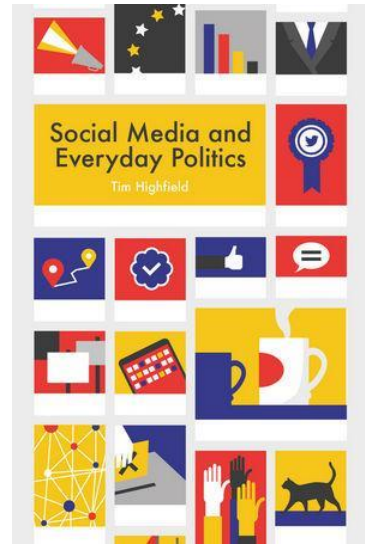Tim Highfield, **Social Media and Everyday Politics**, Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 2016, 220 pp., $69.95 (hardback), $24.95 (paperback).

Reviewed by
Erhardt Graeff
MIT Media Lab, USA

        The last time you cast your ballot, did you get your #democracysausage? In his 2016 book *Social Media and Everyday Politics*, author Tim Highfield exhibits his #democracysausage Instagram photo from 2015 (p. 147). As he explains, the ritual of compulsory voting colliding with Australian culture and participatory media led to the emergence of the #democracysausage and #democracycake hashtags with detailed maps and dedicated accounts tracking the availability of such food at polling places across Australia. Alongside Highfield's 2015 polling booth selfie in the introduction (p. 2), these personal examples illustrate the book's central premise that social media-oriented practices of politics are also the practices of everyday life, performed and documented at the blurry intersection of the private and the public.

        Social Media and Everyday Politics provides an extensive look at the state of political communication theory and Internet scholarship covering social media and politics. Highfield intends the book as "a lens for examining the ways that individuals engage with political and personal issues as part of everyday social media activity, and by extension what this means beyond the social media context" (p. 11). Not only does he touch on many of the key debates and findings over the past decade to shape this lens, but he also complicates our understanding of these practices with caveats that account for gender, race, and other social and cultural categories. As an introduction to the research and theory on the topic through 2015, this book is a welcome addition to the scholar's shelf.

        However, rating the book as a helpful contribution of new research rather than a textbook-like compendium is more complicated. As an emergent research area, the landscape of social media and politics is inherently understudied and undertheorized. Highfield's approach to the topic emphasizes comprehensive coverage of existing theories rather than a novel, narrative argument. To summarize the findings we have at the intersection of private, public, and political lives played out on social media, Highfield borrows the concept of "everyday politics" from civic studies scholar Harry Boyte (2004). Highfield's use of everyday politics provides a new frame to researchers conversant in this literature and binds together the ideas and research he cites. However, a deeper dive into the civic engagement literature would be necessary to explore Boyte's vision of everyday politics more fully.

Summary

At the heart of *Social Media and Everyday Politics* is an argument for the complexity and fecundity of mundane practices on social media that serve as the language of politics for users and bleed into our mass media and offline political experiences. Social media is defined in the book expansively, covering popular channels such as blogs, Twitter, Tumblr, Facebook, YouTube, and Instagram, as well as the smaller and more geographically or culturally niche platforms and apps. Most examples are pulled from Highfield's own research on Twitter and blogs and, to a lesser extent, YouTube, Tumblr, and Instagram, but the literature he draws on to suggest theoretical frameworks and acknowledge phenomena fills his broad definition.

Everyday politics are "highly informal" (p. 7), arising from the people rather than from the government or formal political activities like campaigns. Highfield aims to extend this concept to the ways politics is expressed online "beyond the heightened interest surrounding elections and other major events" (p. 7). The author's goal is documenting and analyzing the mundane rituals and practices that represent the majority of social media users rather than those that arise only during elections or revolutions.

The key social media practices Highfield considers include selfies, creating and sharing image macro memes and animated GIFs, hashtags, and @mentioning; as well as the core "vernacular" of posting, replying, and forwarding or retweeting. These are introduced early through theoretical frameworks that develop them first as personal, everyday practices and rituals. Mothers sharing breastfeeding photos or the open expression of one's LGBTQ identity become politicized by virtue of their publicity and the response of unintended and/or hostile audiences connected via social media. Through the remainder of the book, social media practices are situated in structures of media and power and given greater political inflection, ultimately being shown in the explicit service of collective action, national political discussion, and elections. By the end, the book has chained together a set of stories and theoretical frameworks that make clear how engagement with Australian elections or international participation in the Arab Spring hashtags are extensions of everyday, personally expressive rituals like photographing our food and following trending topics.

Overall, *Social Media and Everyday Politics* offers a far-reaching and personal tour through contemporary online practices and their intersections with politics. Highfield's native Australia and his dives into European social media feature prominently. Notably, his work on the French and Australian blogospheres and Twitter activity surrounding the 2011 Queensland floods and the 2012 Eurovision Song Contest mix with more widely known examples to provide a robust analysis of Western trends. Highfield misses few prominent trends within Western scholarship and practices, but he is also quick to acknowledge the gaps in his (and the field of political communication's) understanding of non-Western practices.

Punctuating his many examples and references to existing theory are reflections on Internet research methodology and the ethics of social media practices themselves. These serve to enrich the lens Highfield is arming his readers with, but they also interrupt the already light narrative structure of his argument. The result is a study that is extensive in its analysis but that lacks a strong narrative arc.

Because Highfield's stated goal is developing the reader's ability to comprehend this emerging space rather than arguing for a tidy, new theoretical framework, I can appreciate his unwillingness to support certain ideas over others. However, a more detailed roadmap through the book might help readers digest everything on offer.

Theoretical Forebears and Contributions

This is Highfield's first book, and it encompasses the work he did during his 2011 PhD studies and subsequent postdoctoral experiences at Queensland University of Technology. As a scholar and practitioner of social media, he has participated in both the emergence of these phenomena on contemporary platforms and the rise of their social scientific study. Laudably, the book both leans on the important theory-building work of Nick Couldry, Zizi Papacharissi, and others and helps carry it forward.

In *Media Rituals*, Couldry (2003) developed the concepts of media ritual to describe how media orders and organizes our lives and social spaces. And in *Media, Society, World*, he outlined a "practice theory" of media as a way of abstracting the uses of technology and media to better analyze how social phenomena intersect with them (Couldry, 2012). Highfield credits Couldry's influence on his own approach to bridging everyday social media practices with political practices. As a whole, *Social Media and Everyday Politic* reasserts and extends Couldry's work by marrying his media practices approach with Highfield's doctoral supervisor and frequent collaborator Axel Bruns's (2008) more artifact-centric "produsage" approach.

Laying the groundwork for Highfield's strongest theoretical positions on how personal practice can turn political is Papacharissi's work on social media and politics. *A Private Sphere* dove into democratic theory to reframe Habermas's "public sphere" in light of how digital media work to break down the barrier between the private and the public, and thus the personal and the political (Papacharissi, 2010). *Affective Publics* returned to this question by closely examining the cases of Occupy Wall Street and the Arab Spring to find the ways that storytelling in these spaces bind people together through shared sentiment and provide new forms of political agency through phenomena like networked gatekeeping and networked framing (Barzilai-Nahon, 2008; Meraz & Papacharissi, 2013; Papacharissi, 2014). On this point, Papacharissi's and Highfield's books also build on Lance Bennett and Alexandra Segerberg's (2012) "logic of connective action," which provided a fresh theory of how collective action operates on social media via networks of individual-oriented practices anchored in identity building and identity performance rather than starting from a community orientation.

Social Media and Everyday Politics synthesizes these important political communications and media studies theories to offer a holistic picture of how the personal is the political in the age of social media, and Highfield supports this assertion with a newer and broader collection of examples. As he himself admits, the book's analysis is constrained by primarily using Western examples and scholarship and lacking deeper empirical work on platforms like Facebook that are massively important yet still largely closed to researchers. Future international and comparative research as well as changes in policy at companies like Facebook will be necessary to paint a more universal picture.

Everyday Politics

To tie together the disparate political and social media practices in the book, Highfield adopts "everyday politics" from Boyte's 2004 book of the same name. There is much to be gained from bridging political communication and media studies with Boyte's democratic theory and civic studies literatures. However, the richness of Boyte's conception of everyday politics is lost in the way Highfield applies it. To Boyte, everyday politics is as much a description of how politics is infused into our more casual and constant practices as it is a proposal for reinvigorating civic engagement and the average person's orientation toward producing the good society. By recognizing how people cocreate society through every action they take, he argues that we might better appreciate the importance of our decisions and reflect on ways they promote positive or progressive outcomes.

Again, Highfield intends *Social Media and Everyday Politics* as a lens that can shape our understanding of everyday politics on social media and what that means "beyond the social media context" (p. 11). This is where deeper engagement with Boyte and similar scholars would be helpful. Boyte's *Everyday Politics* argues for a vision of civic and political engagement that addresses the crisis in civics of a bitterly divided "red state, blue state America" and the professionalization of politics (Skocpol, 2004). Not only do we need to acknowledge the political qualities and opportunities of our everyday practices, but we must investigate the ways these can amplify grassroots democracy.

This suggests additional dimensions in how we analyze the relationship among practices, media platform design, and democracy. For instance, what do democratic affordances look like? What is the balance between mundane features versus purpose-built civic features? How do political practices intersect with the publicly espoused values of corporate platforms and the way those values are ingrained in their designs? Highfield touches and reflects on some of these issues throughout the book, but they are removed from his core argument and analysis. *Social Media and Everyday Politics* will be an important companion volume for future scholars who seek to address these questions, and Highfield should be lauded for setting the backdrop and introducing the work of scholars like Boyte to new academic communities.

References

Barzilai-Nahon, K. (2008). Toward a theory of network gatekeeping: A framework for exploring information control. *Journal of the American Society for Information Science and Technology*, *59*(9), 1493–1512.

Bennett, W. L., & Segerberg, A. (2012). The logic of connective action: Digital media and the personalization of contentious politics. *Information, Communication & Society*, *15*(5), 739–768.

Boyte, H. C. (2004). *Everyday politics: Reconnecting citizens and public life*. Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press.

Bruns, A. (2008). *Blogs, Wikipedia, Second Life, and beyond: From production to produsage*. New York, NY: Peter Lang.

Couldry, N. (2003). *Media rituals: A critical approach*. London, UK: Routledge.

Couldry, N. (2012). *Media, society, world: Social theory and digital media practice*. Cambridge, UK: Polity.

Meraz, S., & Papacharissi, Z. (2013). Networked gatekeeping and networked framing on #Egypt. *The International Journal of Press/Politics, 18*(2), 138–166.

Papacharissi, Z. (2010). *A private sphere: Democracy in a digital age*. Malden, MA: Polity.

Papacharissi, Z. (2014). *Affective publics: Sentiment, technology, and politics*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press.

Skocpol, T. (2004). *Diminished democracy: From membership to management in American civic life*. Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Press.