

Platform Politics in Europe: Bridging Gaps Between Digital Activism and Digital Democracy at the Close of the Long 2010s

Introduction

MARCO DESERIIS
Scuola Normale Superiore, Italy

DAVIDE VITTORI
Luiss University, Italy

This introduction provides an overview of the special issue on digital activism and digital democracy. In particular, it focuses on the most recent empirical and theoretical development in the field. It argues that, albeit similar, the logic between online and offline mobilizations is different; more important, it argues that digital platforms do not organize movements' demands neutrally. In reviewing the content of the six contributions of the special issues, it highlights the strengths and the shortcomings of both digital mobilizations and digital platforms. Overall, it presents a multifaceted representation of the implications of platform politics, advancing the debate on digital politics on several productive avenues of inquiry.

Keywords: platform politics, social movement, digital activism, digital democracy, digital parties

This Special Section on platform politics in Europe is published at the close of what, paraphrasing John Hobsbawm's famous history of the "long 19th century," we might call the "long 2010s." Although the decade has just ended, its historical significance seems to exceed strict chronological boundaries. Indeed, from a historical standpoint, the start of the decade could be easily moved up to the financial meltdown of 2008, a crisis whose sociopolitical repercussions became apparent only a few years later, first through the uprisings of the Arab Spring, the indignados protests in Southern Europe, and the Occupy movement in the United States; then with the eruption of prodemocracy and antiausterity movements such as Gezi Park in Turkey, the Umbrella Movement in Hong Kong, Nuit Debout and the Yellow Vests in France; and last, with the ongoing transnational protest movements against climate change, which suggest that the long decade has not quite ended yet.

Marco Deseriis: marco.deseriis@sns.it
Davide Vittori: dvittori@luiss.it
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Although each of these movements has taken advantage of different political opportunities (Kriesi, 2004; Tarrow, 1994; Tilly, 1978), from an organizational standpoint they all share certain remarkable features. These include the mass occupation of public spaces, the open and inclusive nature of decision-making processes, and the ubiquitous use of social media platforms for the publicization and coordination of protests (Castells, 2012; Gerbaudo, 2012). Not only have social media been instrumental to the rapid diffusion of mobilizations, but they also seem to have transformed collective action from a logic predicated on strong collective identifications, robust organizational ties, and the professionalization of social movement organizations (Olson, 1965) to an emerging logic of "connective action" whereby individualized expressions are embedded within highly inclusive action frames (Bennett & Segerberg, 2013). In this respect, the movements of the long decade seem to embody what Clay Shirky (2008) in the title of his book presciently called "the power of organizing without organizations," that is to say, the capacity of loosely affiliated groups of individuals to undertake collective action without relying on centralized supervision, a shared ideology, and, in some cases, physical copresence (Bennett & Segerberg, 2013; Kimport & Earl, 2011; Shirky, 2011).

Recently, the scholarship on digital platforms and social protest has turned more critical compared with the optimistic accounts of the early part of the decade (Treré, 2018). In particular, scholars have noted that the political economy and software architecture of social media platforms may have significant downsides for social movements. These include the overrepresentation of spectacular, decontextualized, and ironic images (Neumayer & Struthers, 2019; Poell & van Dijck, 2015); a growing "desynchronization" between the slow temporality of grassroots organizing and the accelerated tempo of social media (Kaun, 2016); and the difficulty of holding democratic discussions about the movement aims on social media pages managed by unaccountable administrators (Coretti & Pica, 2019). These critical accounts suggest that far from being neutral tools, social media platforms have a logic of their own (van Dijck & Poell, 2013), which social movements may be able to use to their own advantage in the emerging phase but that might also hinder their ability to engage in long-term strategic planning.

From this perspective, it is no surprise if social movement organizers have supplemented the use of social media with specialized software tools for deliberation and decision making. Ranging from ambitious experiments such as *N - 1*, a social network site developed by the indignados movement in Spain, to Loomio, a deliberative software based on the decision-making protocols of Occupy, such tools had a limited penetration within the movements of the long decade. However, their capacity to scale deliberation, preference aggregation, and other decision-making processes have made these and other digital democracy applications (including LiquidFeedback, Pol.is, Agora Voting, and DemocracyOS to name a few) appealing to civil society organizations, political parties, and public administrations. Indeed, one could argue that by channeling social demands for more participation within these platforms, some institutional actors have been able to capture the democratic "excess" of populist movements (Laclau, 2005).

This is particularly true in continental Europe where new antiestablishment parties have emerged, which have capitalized on the protest movements of the long decade. In particular, "movement parties" (Kitschelt, 2006) such as the Pirate Parties of Germany and Iceland, Podemos in Spain, the Five Star Movement in Italy, La France Insoumise, and Momentum (a progressive organization of the UK Labour Party) have adopted digital platforms with the ostensible goal of empowering ordinary members vis-à-vis party elites and career politicians (Gerbaudo, 2018). Similarly, the administrations of several European cities

such as Madrid, Barcelona, Paris, Reykjavik, and Tallin have made liberal use of civic technology applications such as Your Priorities, Decidim, and Cónsul to increase participation via online referenda, citizen initiatives, and participatory budgeting projects.

Although it may be too early to assess the overall impact of these experiments on democratic participation and sovereign power, there is little doubt that online participation platforms have played a key role in structuring and formalizing a variety of demands emerging from the civil society. At the same time, it is also clear that digital democracy platforms do not organize these demands neutrally. On the contrary, in the same way as social media platforms reshape the logic of collective action, so do digital democracy platforms reshape ordinary citizens' understandings of their own political agency vis-à-vis state power. Furthermore, in reducing the costs of political participation, social media and digital democracy platforms increase the pressure on democratic institutions to be responsive to citizen demands. These commonalities suggest that research on digital activism and digital democracy should not belong in separate niches. Indeed, the main purpose of this Special Section is to bring into conversation these two strands of scholarship within a sociopolitical context, the European one, which offers fertile ground for this type of convergence.

Social Media Platforms and Digital Democracy Platforms

To be sure, there remain substantial differences between social media platforms (SMPs) and digital democracy platforms (DDPs). Whereas SMPs embed datafication, commodification, and selection mechanisms whose primary function is to increase profitability (van Dijck, Poell, & de Waal, 2018, pp. 31–48), such features are notably absent in DDPs. Because the latter are often developed as open source software and their user base is quite limited compared with that of commercial platforms, DDPs are not very efficient at analyzing and extracting value from user data (Karpf, 2018). For this reason, DDPs have at least the potential of implementing normative criteria whereby the democratic quality of online participation and deliberation can be assessed (Hands, 2011; Kies, 2010). At the same time, lacking the mass user base of SMPs, their claim to universality is necessarily limited.

By contrast, with their highly usable and standardized interfaces, SMPs provide a common aesthetic framework for an inclusive, and potentially universal, networked public sphere (Benkler, 2006), which could have a significant impact on the institutions of representative democracy. However, because the software architecture of SMPs is not primarily designed for political participation, rational-critical deliberation, or political agonism, critics have expressed misgivings about their democratic potential. The first objection is that if the networked public sphere allows for the intake of a wide range of viewpoints, there is no guarantee that such viewpoints will be equally represented. Research on power-law distributions has in fact demonstrated that the more a network increases in size, the more the gap between popular and less popular opinions tends to increase (Barabási, 2003; Hindman, 2009). Whereas power laws are a generic property of scale-free networks such as the Internet, SMPs amplify the popularity gap through the introduction of social buttons (Helmond & Gerlitz, 2013) and other features that "gamify" social interaction (Vaidhyanathan, 2018), rewarding individuals over the common good. The second major criticism of SMPs is that the algorithmic selection of interest-based content reinforces confirmation bias, trapping users into echo chambers and "filter bubbles" (Parisi, 2011) while increasing group polarization (Sunstein, 2017). Third, the commodification of user data makes it difficult to characterize the discursive space of social media as a

public sphere—at least in strictly Habermasian terms—given that Habermas (1986) clearly separated democratic deliberation from the “norm-free” sphere of market relations.

If these criticisms are certainly founded, there is little doubt that SMPs have contributed to a revitalization of the public sphere precisely through the movements of the long decade. Significantly, these movements have reclaimed the right of ordinary citizens to occupy the public space and to contest the authorities, refusing to be confined to one side of the ideological spectrum. Furthermore, some of the aforementioned criticisms can be mitigated once social media are seen as one component of a broader protest media ecology (Treré & Mattoni, 2016), which includes social messaging applications, streaming media, and DDPs. Whereas DDPs are much less participated than SMPs, they function as discursive arenas whereby the free airing of opinions is organized in structured debates and deliberation is converted into collective decisions. For this reason, one of the recurring themes of this Special Section is the impact of participation platforms on the complex relationship between deliberation and decision making. Furthermore, the authors consider how decisions that emerge from social movements, civil society organizations, and political parties impact the action of elected representatives, government officials, and party leaders. This is a crucial point, given that one of the major criticisms of digital activism is its putative inability to convert the expression of dissent into substantive political change (Dean, 2009; Fenton, 2016). Thus, in introducing the articles of this Special Section, we place them in a wider analytic framework that considers the impact of participation platforms on political representation, the quality of deliberation, social learning, and grassroots activism.

The Impact of Platform Politics on Political Representation

Notwithstanding their wide range of uses and applications, participation platforms have one affordance in common: They lower barriers to participation. In doing so, they open two interrelated problems. First, in increasing the opportunity for citizens to represent themselves, participation platforms raise the question of how self-representation is organized, who controls it, and to what ends. Second, the proliferation of opinions in SMPs risks an undesirable side effect—namely, self-representing citizens may not be heard by policymakers and other power holders, or may be heard but ignored with the excuse that social media profiles are easily manipulatable and value-laden.

In their article, Louise Knops and Eline Severs tackle the first issue by considering how the Belgian Citizen Platform for Refugee Support (CPRS), a Brussels-based grassroots organization that emerged in response to the refugee crisis in 2015, used Facebook to represent ordinary citizens who acted in solidarity with the refugees. Knops and Severs astutely combine Michael Saward’s theory of representation as a performative act of claim-making with Pierre Rosanvallon’s (2008) analysis of the three legitimation mechanisms (proximity, impartiality, and reflexivity) available to citizens who challenge the authority of elected representatives. Whereas the latter can easily derive their capacity to speak in the name of the people from the electoral process, self-appointed representatives engage in the construction of an “alternative We” that encompasses in this case both Belgian citizens and refugees. Drawing from Saward, Knops and Severs analyze 868 posts from the CPRS Facebook page along three dimensions: a claimant dimension (which concerns the construction of representative authority), a subject dimension (which revolves around the construction of the represented), and an interest dimension (which concerns the needs

of the represented). Significantly, the CPRS claims to speak on behalf of both Belgian citizens and refugees. At the same time, Knops and Severs note how the page is administered by one citizen, who claims to post "content that reflects the variety of messages and viewpoints amongst members of the platform" while discarding posts that are "deemed too 'radical' or 'stereotyped.'" Besides suggesting that human editing may be as consequential as the platform's filtering algorithms, Knops and Severs contribute to the scholarship on the politics of managing social media accounts within social movement organizations (see Coretti, 2014; Kavada, 2015).

The relationship between algorithmic filtering and human filtering is also explored by Maria Bakardijeva in "A Tale of Three Platforms: Collaboration, Contestation, and Degrees of Audibility in a Bulgarian e-Municipality." Here, the related questions of how self-representation is organized via online platforms and of its substantive impact are analyzed through the concept of audibility, which Bakardijeva defines as the "perceivable effect of online expression and deliberation by ordinary citizens on administrative decision-making and institutional politics." Bakardijeva operationalizes this concept through a comparative analysis of three participation platforms in Stara Zagora, a mid-size Bulgarian city: (1) a platform for civic participation designed and run by the city administration; (2) My e-Municipality, a collaborative platform for power sharing between city administrators and citizens designed and run by the latter; and (3) Preserve Bedechka, a Facebook group started by environmental activists to save a city park from residential rezoning. Whereas the city administration platform follows an e-government model providing citizens with basic "tools and procedures for administrative compliance," the collaborative platform embeds a log that tracks and displays the response time of the administrators to the citizens' queries.

This feature alone—combined with the city government's political will to be responsive—triggers a virtuous cycle wherein citizens' voices and concerns are actually heard. Even more interesting, the administrators of My e-Municipality partnered with the Preserve Bedechka group to launch a referendum campaign whereby citizens successfully challenged the city choice of rezoning the park. In this sense, it is significant that a Facebook group supported, once again, an autonomous practice of contestation, and that this practice produced a tangible outcome, which resulted from the antagonism between city residents and the authorities rather than cooperation. In this sense, Bakardijeva's article suggests that citizens can selectively rely on both SMPs and DDPs to achieve different objectives and fulfill different needs.

The Impact of Platform Politics on the Quality of Deliberation

The Stara Zagora case is also interesting because the three participation platforms examined by Bakardijeva seem to correspond, *prima facie*, to three distinct models of governance: e-government, open government, and e-democracy (or digital democracy). In their contribution to this volume, Michele Sorice and Emiliana De Blasio note that whereas the first two models are primarily concerned with top-down consultations, digital democracy presupposes a spontaneous mobilization of the civil society. (From this angle, the My e-Municipality platform is a digital democracy initiative rather than an open government one.) Drawing from Christopher Reddick's distinction between three models of e-government—the managerial, the consultative, and the participatory (Reddick, 2011)—Sorice and De Blasio make the important observation that participation is often subsumed under the e-government paradigm when, in fact, it is a distinctive feature of any democratic practice. To disentangle this terminological and

conceptual ambiguity, Sorice and De Blasio argue that “digital democracy is such when communication technologies combine the facilitation of episodic participation (voting) with a continuous deliberative practice, within a framework of social interconnection and sharing of political processes.” Bottom-up deliberation then becomes the crucial element for passing from a “minimalist” notion of participation based on voting and preference aggregation to a “maximalist” notion “characterized by the equalization of power relations” (Carpentier, 2011, p. 354). Differently put, deliberation is critical to improve the quality of democracy (Dahl, 1972; Diamond & Morlino, 2005).

Significantly, Sorice and De Blasio note in their conclusion that although until few years ago the online deliberative practices of social movements were seen as distant, if not openly critical of the e-government models outlined by Reddick, in recent years the scholarship on digital activism and e-democracy has partly converged precisely through the DDPs and the “technopopulist” experiments of the movement (parties) of the long decade.

Whereas these digital parties—especially in their Southern European variant—have been reluctant to experiment with online deliberation (see Deseriis & Vittori, this Special Section), the new municipalist movements that have been governing many Spanish cities in recent years have integrated deliberative features in their DDPs. Such is the case of Decidim, the participation platform of the City of Barcelona. Rosa Borge Bravo, Joan Balcells, and Albert Padró-Solanet examine the public discussion of the Strategic Action Plan, which took place in early 2016. Combining the qualitative and theoretical literature on the normative criteria of online deliberation with a quantitative analysis of conversation structures, the authors examine the participated debate on the issuance of new licenses for tourist apartments, a highly controversial subject in Barcelona. Here it is worth noting that Decidim is designed to host both deliberation and voting even though the latter is in principle nonbinding. Administrators cannot intervene directly in the discussion, except in the case of rules’ violation. Overall, Borge Bravo, Balcells, and Padró-Solanet draw a mixed picture of the quality of deliberation. Whereas the debate offers the possibility to participants to voice their opinion for or against the release of new licenses, other key normative criteria such as discourse equality, reciprocity, justification, reflexivity, and empathy are only partly met. It is unsurprising that, in the case of discourse equality, the conversation is dominated by a few hyperactive users, who post the vast majority of the comments.

As we noted, power-law distributions are a common phenomenon in online communities. Yet, it is significant that Decidim administrators do not actively moderate the forum so as to encourage more diversified participation. Second, the authors note that as the conversation gets deeper, the quality of deliberation tends to decrease as contributors spend fewer and fewer words in providing a justification for their arguments. Borge Bravo, Balcells, and Padró-Solanet conclude the article by suggesting a few measures to improve the institutional design of the platform so as to support a more diversified and sincere exchange of opinions between participants.

The Impact of Platform Politics on Participation and Social Learning

Significantly, Borge Bravo, Balcells, and Padró-Solanet link the decline in the quality of deliberation to the initial interest of participants—property owners and neighborhood residents—to participate so as to

influence policy outcomes. Because the consultation did not incorporate incentives for participants to find common ground, participation declined as users realized that it was not worth investing time and effort to change other users' opinions.

Curiously, Marco Deseriis and Davide Vittori's article about Participa and Rousseau, the DDPs of Podemos and the Five Star Movement, respectively, advances a symmetrical argument. In fact, Deseriis and Vittori argue that participation in both platforms tends to decline over time because the two platforms privilege decision making—the voting moment—over spontaneous deliberation. Whereas Decidim offers participants the possibility to determine the issues of common concern and to reciprocate other users' comments, in the case of Rousseau and Participa, such features are either disabled at the software level (Rousseau) or rendered ineffective through statutory norms that disconnect member deliberation from high-level decision making (Participa). To these technological and normative constraints, Deseriis and Vittori add a third one: the high frequency of the consultations, which makes it difficult for members to make informed decisions on each and every issue.

Thus, in lowering the costs of participation, these DDPs have the unintended effect of placing a high burden of decision making on ordinary party members. As a result, participation in internal party consultations shows a wavering trend and tends to dwindle over the years as members take action only when issues of general interest are at stake. Drawing from the scholarship on referenda and other direct democracy initiatives, the authors conclude that these platforms "set in motion participatory processes that are not very inclusive—and thus hardly democratic—because [they are] based on self-selection." In this respect, Deseriis and Vittori's contribution provides a cautionary tale for the intraparty democracy literature, which relies almost exclusively on procedural assessments of party statutes while neglecting the political context and the actual unfolding of participation trends over the years.

One of the key implications of Deseriis and Vittori's findings—but also of Bakardijeva's contribution—is that users of participation platforms constantly adjust their behavior in response to the actions of government officials and party elites as well as the behavior of other users. This complex process of learning-by-experience and of social learning depends on the construction of a shared knowledge, which users produce in SMPs such as Facebook and Twitter via the practice of sharing and retweeting. Dan Mercea and Helton Levy's contribution to this volume deepens the concept of movement social learning on Twitter by considering the case of the People's Assembly Against Austerity, a political initiative launched in the United Kingdom in 2017.

Building on previous work on the same subject (Mercea & Yilmaz, 2018), Mercea and Levy explore the concept of social information use within the British movements against austerity. Drawing from evolutionary biology, the authors describe social information use as "a 'signaling interaction' that cues a response from an observer either deliberately or inadvertently." Probing a data set of nearly 50,000 retweets (or retweet dyads) of the People's Assembly network from 2015 to 2016, and triangulating it with in-depth interviews with Twitter author-retweeters, Mercea and Levy found that social information use has a double function. On the one hand, it allows for the transmission of "factual information" about the negative consequences of government's austerity policies and the protest initiatives of different movement actors. On the other hand, retweeters "solicited the attention of their followers to content that elicited a behavioral

response such as growing more aware of the movement and its agenda." This active solicitation enabled a range of loosely affiliated individuals to participate in the "designation of collective outcomes and possible pathways to their attainment." In this sense, Mercea and Levy provide a positive picture of the participatory environment within the Twitter sphere, concluding that "there was a plurality rather than an elite group of retweeters circulating posts by authors."

Conclusion

At the same time, Mercea and Levy observe that after an initial flurry of activity, which coincided with the peak of the mobilization, retweets sharply decreased in volume. This observation falls in line with our prior observation that SMPs may be well suited to increase the initial diffusion of collective action but are ill suited to sustain and strengthen organizational ties in time. In other words, if the algorithmic logic of SMPs tends to increase the visibility of protests in their initial phase, it also increases their obfuscation as they fizzle out. If this may be explained with the market-oriented logic of SMPs, some contributions to this volume have also highlighted descending participation rates in relatively established DDPs. On the one hand, these findings suggest that the lowering costs of participation do not solve the issue of the noninclusive nature of participation based on self-selection (Smith, 2009). On the other hand, these studies indicate that although a functional differentiation between mass participation via SMPs and direct democracy via DDPs may be theoretically desirable, it is only feasible and effective within certain sociopolitical contexts. Indeed, although Southern European parties such as Podemos have partly functioned as political vehicles for the movements of the long decade by combining the use of SMPs and DDPs, the Bulgarian case study suggests that SMPs can be used as alternatives to e-government platforms based on a top-down model of participation. From this angle, a platform model is yet to be developed that may strike a balance between spontaneous participation and structured deliberation and between social movement practices and the procedural codification of such practices. Furthermore, the Bulgarian and the Belgian case studies show that (well-managed) Facebook groups can voice citizen dissent and exert moral and political influence over government policies, and that self-representation via SMPs is a perfectly legitimate goal in its own right. At the same time, as noted, corporate ownership of SMPs subjects social media participation to the ultimate oversight of unaccountable administrators. All in all, the contributions to this Special Section provide a multifaceted representation of the implications of platform politics, advancing the debate on digital politics on several productive avenues of inquiry.

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