Deliberation or self-presentation?

- young people, politics and social media

This paper examines how Norwegian politically engaged teenagers use social media for political purposes.

As voter turnout has fallen especially among young people, many have expressed high hopes that Internet and social media may stimulate political participation and deliberation. Obama’s success in engaging young voters in his 2008-campaign has been associated with effective use of social media like Facebook and MySpace. This has generated optimistic visions about how social media could not only make young people vote, but also become more active participants in political deliberation.

Digital technologies, like social media, open several possibilities for people to access information, express political views and discuss issues with other people in their network. To what degree and how these opportunities may be used is another question. The Obama campaign may of course be the beginning of a new era with more participation, but it may also be a specific case, a case where one campaign managed to spread enthusiasm around its candidate for a number of reasons, and where social media was a tool, and not a reason for the success.

Several studies seem to indicate that social media has not brought about a radical change in young people’s involvement in politics. Social media are mainly social and used for finding out what friends do. But, for those who are engaged in politics, social media may make a difference.

This paper presents a study of how politically engaged young people use social media for political purposes. The study asks to what degree and how they use social media for political purposes, how they engage in political debate, and to what degree the fact that social media is mainly a social arena affects how political engagement is played out.

The study is based on Norwegian teenagers. Norway is a highly networked society in which practically all teenagers have access to and use Internet daily.¹ Consequently,

¹ In 2010 93% of Norwegian 16-24 year olds used Internet daily (SSB 2011).
politically engaged young people in Norway have opportunities to integrate Internet and social media into their political activities.

Young people, political participation and ICTs

There is a growing concern that young people are losing interest in politics. Several studies have reported that election turnout and party membership is sinking, especially among young people (Milner 2010, NOU 2003:19). Such developments have generated worries about a generation of political dropouts growing up, and the possible consequences this may have on democracy and civil society in the future (Milner 2010).

At the same time, more optimistic reports argue that political engagement is not sinking, but changing. Even if young people are less active on the conventional political arena and less interested in party politics and elections, they participate in other ways. We therefore need to re-imagine democracy, Natalie Fenton argues (2010). Stephen Coleman claims that that “what we are seeing is a mass generational migration from old-fashioned forms of participation to newer, more creative forms. There is a need to re-think what we mean by participation.” (Coleman 2005:2). He finds that young people are involved in a long range of civic and political activities, but that these are within informal structures, such as demonstrations, pickets, volunteering and symbolic campaigns (Coleman 2005:5). Bucher et al (2009) finds a similar pattern in Norway and holds that there is no evidence that civic engagement among young people is sinking. Instead, there is a general tendency that young people engage more in single-issue campaigns that concern them directly, outside the conventional political arena (Bucher et al 2009).

Parallel to the debate about civic engagement among youth, there has been a growing optimism that social media can stimulate political participation, especially among young people. This optimism was fuelled by Obama’s 2008-campaign. The campaign managed not only to get new groups of citizens to register to vote, but also to become active in the campaign (Castells 2009:372). In his analysis of the Obama campaign, Manuel Castells outlines how the Internet and social media like MySpace and Facebook played important roles in mobilizing voters. 58% of the 18-29 year olds reported that they had used Internet for political purposes (Castells 2009:390). Such facts has generated widespread of optimism, especially among political leaders, that strategic use of social media may be an effective way of attracting young voters and make them engage in political debate. Consequently, political leaders across the political spectrum have started to use social media.

Optimistic scenarios about the impact of social media reflect the debate over the last decades of how new technologies may strengthen democracy. In the 1980s Benjamin Barber optimistically argued that:

“The capabilities of new technology can be used to strengthen civic education, guarantee equal access to information, and tie individuals and institutions into networks that will make real participatory discussion and debate possible across great distances” (Barber 1984).

At that time, Barber was talking about the capabilities of local television and cable networks. In the 1990s attention shifted towards the Internet and the democratizing
potential of broadband networks. Nicholas Negroponte stated that: “Digital technology can be a natural force drawing people into greater world harmony” (Negroponte 1995:230). Nguyen and Alexander made similar claims that ICT was an “enormously liberating force working against hierarchies of all kinds. This is the democracy citizens in advanced nations always dreamed of” (Nguyen and Alexander 1996:11). The development since has not been as glorious as these optimistic scenarios (some of them extremely technology determinist) predicted. Technology does not determine social developments. But technology can provide capabilities to act (Mansell 1996:28), and the Internet may give people new capabilities for information, deliberation and participation (Storsul 2002:16).

Many have argued that the potential of ICTs to enhance democratic participation is especially strong among young people. Sonia Livingstone argues that this has to do with the architecture of online environments matching the new ways of political participation:

“Intriguingly, there appears to be a promising match between the style of deliberation afforded by the internet and that preferred by the very population segment – young people – who seem the most disengaged from traditional forms of political activity. The very architecture of the internet, with its flexible, hypertextual, networked structure, its dialogic mode of address, and its alterative, even anarchic feel, appeals to young people, fitting their informal, peer-oriented, anti-authority approach. In the online environment, it may be that young people feel more expert and empowered, especially by contrast with the traditional, linear, hierarchical, logical, rule-governed conventions often used in official communications with youth” (Livingstone 2009:121).

Livingstone argues that campaigns, new social movements and single issue networks are increasing online:

“Online, we are witnessing the flourishing of life-political and single issue networks, campaigns and new social movements, many of which may be expected to – and often are specifically designed to – appeal to young people.” (Livingstone 2009:121).

This is, however, not what young people primarily do when using online media. The main purpose of participating in social networking sites is to socialize and check out what friends do (Storsul et al 2008). danah boyd therefore finds visions about the democratizing potential of social media optimistic. She argues:

“[P]eople pay attention to what interests them. Not surprisingly, offline or online, gossiping is far more common and interesting to people than voting. – Gossip about Hollywood celebrities is alluring; the war in Iraq is depressing” (boyd 2008: 114-115).

Studies also confirm that, at least so far, online media do not seem to have revolutionized political participation for the large majority of young people (Bakardjieva 2010). The share of young people who engage in discussions on civic issues is approximately the same online as offline (Hauge and Storm-Mathiesen
Internet and social media open up new and easy ways to express views, but do not seem to radically change young people’s attitudes towards political participation.

This does, however, not mean that social media are unimportant for political activities. As we have seen in North Africa in 2011, in times of social and political upheaval the networks of social media are extremely powerful when they are mobilized for political purposes. Further, means of expressing political opinions are easily available, and as Maria Bakardjieva notices, there may be something bubbling up underground at the level of subactivism that may become more important (Bakardjieva 2010). But, it seems that in everyday politics, social media has so far not made new groups come running to political activities. This may not be very surprising as changing young people’s interests and behaviour would take more than new technologies.

The focus of this paper is, however, not on how new groups can be mobilized, but to see how those who are politically engaged, inside or outside the conventional political arena, use social media for political participation. How do they use the capabilities of social media? How do they use social media to engage in political deliberation? And, to what degree does the fact that the arena is a social one affect how political engagement is played out?

**Study and methods**

In order to get young people to tell about their own experiences and thoughts, focus group interviews have been chosen as the most relevant method. Focus groups enable the informants to stimulate each other and exchange views on many aspects of the phenomenon studied (Tjora 2010:107).

The study focuses on political activities in both the conventional political arena, and on single issue-arenas. Consequently, participants were included both from youth parties and from civic and single-issue-oriented organisations. The participants were recruited because they were active in these organizations. They were, however, not leaders as the focus of the study was not on political leaders who may have a more calculated communication strategy, but of the activities of ordinary young people who are politically engaged. The participants were all teenagers from 16-19 years.

Two sets of focus group interviews have been conducted. The first set of interviews was conducted in 2008 and included two focus groups with eight to nine participants in each. Each group consisted of participants from a mix of political, civic and single-issue organizations. The main purpose of these focus groups was to explore what means of communication the teenagers used, i.e. to see the relations between telephony, leaflets, paper-mail, e-mail, social media, and other online media. The interviews showed that Facebook dominated completely as the most important communicative means among politically engaged teenagers.

---

2 The 2008 interviews were moderated by Cecilie Kløvstad at AC Nielsen and the 2010 interviews were moderated by research assistant Ane Lindholt. Interview guides were developed in close cooperation between interviewers and the author of this article. All analyses are done by the author. Procedures for handling privacy have been approved by Norwegian Social Science Data Services (NSD).
The second set of focus group interviews therefore focussed on social media and aimed for a more in-depth understanding of how politically engaged teenagers used social media, and particularly Facebook. These interviews were conducted in 2010 and included four groups with four to five participants in each. In order to allow for a free discussion about how they used social media within their organizations, each group consisted of participants from only one organization. Two groups had members from political youth parties, and two groups from single-issue/civic organizations known for being active outside the conventional political arena.

The interviews were transcribed and analysed thematically in order to investigate both how teenagers used social media, and also the possible tensions between their political and social spheres. The main results from these focus group interviews will be presented in the following.

**Coordination on Facebook**

When young people discuss how they use social media for political purposes it becomes obvious that organising political activities is no longer about handing out leaflets, sending out letters, and sticking posters on walls. Practically all organisation and coordination take place electronically, and Facebook dominates completely.

At the time of the interviews (and the time of writing this paper) Facebook was the most widespread social medium in Norway. In the interviews, only a few other social media were mentioned. This was mainly YouTube where some would watch political videos, and a couple of discussion forums for specific issues. Twitter, which has a high attention among journalists and political leaders was only mentioned a couple of times, and only as a phenomenon, not as something the teenagers used themselves.

Facebook has a number of functions which were systematically used to organise and coordinate political activities both internally and for external purposes. There was little variation between the informants in how they used the different functions, illustrating that norms have been established on how to use Facebook for political purposes.

The *event*-function enables people to create an event and invite people they know to participate. The function is used for organizing parties, meetings, public demonstrations etc. When a big demonstration was organized against Israel’s

---

3 In 2010 90% of Norwegian 15-29 year olds used Facebook at least weekly, whereas 80% in this agegroup used Facebook daily (TNS Gallup 2010).
bombing of Gaza in 2009 more than 20,000 people were mobilized in two days without any advertising, using only Facebook and word of mouth. Many informants report that they organize even their local meetings as Facebook events. They explain that people use Facebook many times every day and the event function reminds them about the appointments they have when these are set up as events. “I use Facebook events as my calendar”, one of the informants said.

The messages function in which users send messages to identified friends are frequently used in smaller groups and for individual communication. For many purposes of direct communication, the function has replaced e-mail. One indication of this is that the informants regularly talked about the messages-function as “mail”. They explained that regular e-mail was filled up with spam, therefore, they used the internal messaging system in Facebook instead. Only a few informants claimed that they still used e-mail for exchanging documents (which Facebook at that time did not have a good function for).

Facebook groups can be created by anyone and are used for a number of purposes, both internal and external. Groups are used for external promotion of a specific cause or organisation, for enabling discussion, for organising working groups within their organization, and for storing and circulating plans, minutes from meetings etc. The internal groups are sometimes closed so that only members can read and write, and sometimes hidden so that only members can see that the group exist. In addition groups are used for showing political preference as people may join groups that support specific views or causes. The causes-application was also used for expressing opinions.

In addition, statuses are used to promote events or views or other things people would like to communicate, and this is in some instances accentuated by using their profile picture to underline views. For example, some informants tell about how they participated in campaigns against child abuse by using a picture of their favourite cartoon as their profile picture. Finally, likes are used for showing support for example of people’s expressions in their statuses or that someone is participating in an event.

In these ways, Facebook is used for a number of political purposes, reducing the need for other means of communication and coordination. Facebook does not replace physical meetings, but the meetings are planned and organised through Facebook. E-mail is seldom used and paper mail is almost completely replaced by electronic communication, mainly Facebook. Only one informant said that he once got papers in the mail, and that was before attending a national congress for which he received a large pile of documents. Facebook has also replaced telephony and sms for organisational purposes. The phones are important in young people’s lives, but only for the closest circle of friends. When organising something less personal, like political activities, Facebook dominates.

**Awareness of self-representation**

At the same time as the teenagers used Facebook as a tool for coordinating activities, they were very concerned about how they appeared in social media. Facebook was mainly a social arena for these teenagers, as it is for the majority of Facebook users. The informants explained that they were Facebook friends with most people they had
met; from school, family, neighbourhood, sports, and politics. Thus their Facebook networks are very mixed, bringing together friends and contacts from very different contexts. Marwick and boyd (2010) calls this phenomenon when multiple audiences is flattened into one for “context collapse”. As we shall see, this influences how young people engage in politics on this arena.

Being a teenager involves developing an identity, and that process takes place on social media as well as in physical settings. Marika Lüders describes how online representations is part of a reflexive process in which people are careful about how they present themselves in open arenas (Lüders 2007). This was very apparent in the focus groups of the present study. The informants explained that they evaluated their Facebook friends and how they appeared, and they had a high awareness on how they presented themselves. As one girl said:

“On Facebook, you judge each other’s lives. That’s what you do. I look at pictures, how they are, and I look at interests if we share some interests. If you visit my profile you can find out everything about me. All the things I like.”

The teenagers therefore thought carefully about how they appeared on Facebook. In general, they were very concerned about pictures and to what degree that might affect their future or their possibility to get a job. Many of them had separate lists of friends where they allowed their teenage friends to see photos from parties, whereas parents and grown-ups could only see some selected photos. They were also concerned that they could meet pictures or statements again in the future. In one focus group, there was a discussion about what would have happened if Obama had Facebook in college, when Obama has admitted he smoked marijuana. “Then we would have pictures of him smoking!” one boy said. And then they discussed whether that would have cost him his presidency or not.

The concern about how they appeared on Facebook also affected which groups they would join. These were selected, not only because of interest and opinions, but also because of how it made them look. One girl explained that:

“There are some groups you want to be in because you want to be associated with them. Like, if I am a member of a Fair Trade group on Facebook, this is no coincidence. I can ignore buying Fair Trade products, but people will consider me as a very smart Fair Trade-person.”

Consequently, political groups are used for creating a desired representation of the self on Facebook. In the next section we shall see how the social influences the use of Facebook for political debate.

**Leaders deliberate – members ‘like’**

The teenagers’ high awareness about self-representation influences how they use Facebook for political purposes. They join political groups, but they are careful in selecting which groups to join. They support causes, but only a chosen few. They join events and publish pictures, but they make sure that the total presentation is balanced the way they want it to be. And they are hesitant towards engaging in political discussion.
The last point was the most surprising, especially considering the expectation on how the Internet and social media may enable more political deliberation. In contrast to this, one girl expressed what was a general position among the teenagers: “On Facebook I say less than I usually do.”

In all the focus groups, the teenagers explained how concern about self-representation limited their use of Facebook for political debate. The teenagers find it much easier to post a-political statements than to engage in political debate. They observe that leaders in their organisation are active and discuss and debate political issues, but they rarely engage in discussions themselves. The teenagers announce that they ‘like’ statements from their leaders by using the “like”-function, but they are hesitant to post political status updates or comments themselves.

There are several reasons for this hesitance, all having to do with how they want to represent themselves. Many explain that they make sure that their profile is uncontroversial. The profile is open to all their friends, it is their entry point into the social arena, and the teenagers explain that it is important not to be too provocative. As one girl commented:

“The profile is more shallow. You talk to friends. But for political and school things and such, you use groups.”

The fear of being ridiculed prevents many from engaging in open political debate. Posting political statements on their profile may generate long discussions and annoying comments from political opponents who just want to mock the person posting the statement. “If you go on Facebook there is so much drama,” one of the teenagers explained. The solution often mentioned was to limit discussion and political comments to friendly groups:

“You must stay within the groups you have on Facebook. There you can engage in debate because there you only meet likeminded people.”

But for a few, making provocative statements was half the fun. In one group, where most were concerned that they wanted to avoid endless discussions with people they disagree with, one teenage boy argued that this could actually be an effective way of attracting attention about an issue:

“If you want attention from a lot of people about something, then you write something a bit provoking on these persons’ walls and then you generate long debates involving lots of people who then gets to know about it.”

Another aspect that made young people hesitant towards engaging in political debate on Facebook was irony. Irony makes Facebook discussions difficult in two ways. First, the teenagers explain, if they post comments and argue seriously for or against a statement made by someone else, it is embarrassing to find out that the original statement was meant ironically. Second, they were concerned that they could be misunderstood and generate bad feelings if they used irony themselves:

“I use sarcasm and irony quite a lot, especially on Facebook. There you can write something a bit bad and expect that it is received as humour. But then
they don’t get it, and then you have to delete comments, and everything is misunderstood.”

In general, expressing political views with words may be both risky and difficult. As one girl said:

“It is difficult, I think, to comment because then you use more words. It is a lot easier to just ‘like’”. 

The difficulty of using your own words to express political views is, of course enlarged by the social risks of getting negative feedback and ridiculing, of misunderstanding and of being misunderstood.

Consequently, it seems that the social risk of engaging in political debate on a social arena is at least as big on Facebook as it is on other arenas. Being political is not generally considered a cool thing. And as these teenagers report, Facebook may actually be a bit more unpredictable than offline arenas, as they never know who is listening, and they cannot see peoples’ faces and interpret what is irony and what is serious. This is reinforced by the context collapse as Facebook networks integrate people from very different settings. Marwick and Boyd argue that this context collapse “may create a lowest-common denominator effect, as individuals only post things they believe their broadest group of acquaintances will find non-offensive” (Marwick and Boyd 2010). This corresponds well with the Norwegian teenagers in the present study who explain that they hold back and say less on Facebook then they normally do.

What these teenagers report stands in contrast to the optimistic scenarios for increased democratic deliberation through online participation. Social media are important tools for organising and coordinating activities, but the social characteristics of these arenas delimits political debate. This does not mean that there is no political debate on Facebook, but that even politically engaged teenagers hold back and often refrain from making political comments because of their awareness about how they represent themselves on the social arena.

**Newspapers more prestigious**

Young people are not only hesitant towards engaging in political discussions on Facebook, they also think the impact is larger on printed newspapers. Even though they use much time on social media, they “like” political statements from others and they share news and postings with friends and use Facebook for organisation and coordination, they still find newspapers to be on top of the hierarchy. Some of the informants were active in sending comments to newspapers, and some said that this was something only political leaders did. But all seemed to agree that it was more prestigious to publish in the paper. As one girl said:

“There are so many things on the Internet. Everyone can put something out on the net. But everyone cannot get published in the newspaper. It is a lot bigger to see your own text in the newspaper. It is more trustworthy when someone has read it and said that this is good enough for publishing.”

And another girl followed up:
“Everything is on the net. Serious and unserious things. In the paper, they only print serious stuff. So – then it is more real.”

As these quotes show, the reason for the hierarchy is the selection process, that an editor has selected and thereby ensured the quality of the comments in the newspapers. Thus, even the online generation seems to trust paper.

**Discussion and conclusions**

Social media have become the main instrument for young people when they organised and coordinate political activities. Whether the purpose is internal meetings or external mobilisation, social media is the platform for planning, reporting and communicating political activities. In only a very few years, Facebook has replaced other means of communication, such as e-mail and paper mail, for purposes of political organisation and coordination. In this regard, social media is an important instrument for political engaged young people. Open mobilization through social media may also enable more people to participate in political activities.

At the same time, politically engaged young people are hesitant towards using social media for political deliberation. They are concerned about how they represent themselves and they are hesitant to stand out as very political. An important explanation for this is that on social media the teenagers’ political and social contexts collapse. As Marwick and boyd observe, this generates a tendency for individuals to only post things they believe most people in their network will find non-offensive (Marwick and boyd 2010). This tendency is confirmed in the present study as the young people interviewed were generally very careful about how they wanted to appear on social media, experiencing engagement in political debate as particularly risky. This implies that concern about self-representation limits the impact social media has on political deliberation.

This does, however, not mean that social media are unimportant for political deliberation. The young people interviewed in this study have only been interviewed. Consequently, we can only draw conclusion about what they think about their actions and their own reflections about being reluctant towards engaging in political discussions on Facebook. Their actual online activities have not been studied. It is possible that the level of political deliberation is quite high, even if the teenagers hold back. More research should be done in order to investigate how and how much politically engaged young people actually engage in political debate in social media.

Further, the mobilizing potential of social media is important. Even if young people are concerned about how they appear on social media and are hesitant towards getting involved in political debates, they may be mobilized if something matter much to them. Both the Obama 2008-campaign and the social and political upheavals in North Africa in 2011 show the importance of social media for informing and mobilizing large networks when people feel something really matter to them. Even if newspaper debates may be more prestigious even among young people, social media may be more effective when something really matters to many people. And then the collapsed contexts, where the social and political networks merge, are exactly what can make social media effective.
References


Bucher, Taina, Ardis Storm-Mathiesen and Jo Helle-Valle (2009) “Ungdom, politikk og internett, en akademisk refleksjon over norsk ungdoms samfunnsvirkning online” Oppdragsrapport nr 2 2009, SIFO.


Accessed 8 July 2011.