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To cite this article: Andrea Carson & Ariadne Vromen (2017): Introduction: international approaches to online political participation and connective action, Australian Journal of Political Science, DOI: 10.1080/10361146.2017.1416588

To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.1080/10361146.2017.1416588

Published online: 21 Dec 2017.

Article views: 26

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Introduction: international approaches to online political participation and connective action

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This symposium highlights how scholars are engaging with cutting edge research questions on the transformative effects of online political participation and new forms of online collective action. First, we hope to shape contemporary debate in Australian political science, as it has generally been reluctant to understand fully how central political communication processes are now to our understanding of political participation, mobilisation and organisation. Second, we also intend to contribute to international debates on the theory of connective action via papers that critically engage with the approach’s central tenets, through novel theorising and empirical analysis.

Many, if not most, citizens now use everyday, digitally-based mechanisms to engage in politics and express points of view. Once these acts were referred to as ‘unconventional’ forms of participation, but that description is now redundant. Russell Dalton (2008) argued that these changes signify a move away from traditional modes of engagement towards ‘citizen-initiated and policy-oriented’ engagement with politics. Others understand it as a general preference for more flexible forms of individualised political engagement (see Micheletti 2010; Stolle and Hooghe 2011). There are ongoing debates about what the expansion of political participation actually is and means. For example, a recent issue of the journal Policy Studies was devoted to understanding new forms of participation from a more critical lens. Overall, it argued that we need to expand where we see political participation happening, and to undertake more in-depth analysis to understand both participation and mobilisation mechanisms (Marsh and Akram 2015). To meet that aspiration the five empirical articles in that special issue ranged from qualitative analysis of how political actors describe and understand their participation, to analysing new sites of engagement such as theatre and popular culture, to content analyses of digital media content produced by political organisations and social movements, with complex network analysis.

However, the contention that research on participation, mobilisation and the definition of the political ought to be expanded is not without its critics. For example, Jan Van Deth (2014) summarised the arguments for an expansion of analysing what and where political participation is. While he is sympathetic to the emergence of more expressive modes of participation that are digitally enabled, he is also wary of expanding the idea that doing politics can be totally separate from government. He notes that...
‘aspects can be taken into account – legality, legitimacy, effectiveness, non-violence, Internet use and so on – but are not compulsory for the conceptualization of political participation’ (Van Deth 2014, 367). Thus, the internet is an optional add-on in understanding political participation, not a sphere that generates unique forms of participation and mobilisation.

In this symposium we argue and demonstrate that the internet has brought profound changes to citizen engagement with politics, and changed the practices of mobilisation and organisation. Many contemporary political campaigns are built from everyday, online forms of participation. Analysts of participation and mobilisation increasingly focus on the role and effects of the media generally, and digital media in particular, for fostering the creation of new political organisations (see Karpf 2012). They have also pointed out that the organisation of participation, campaigns and movement mobilisation has been made easier by the use of the internet. For example, Bimber, Flanagin, and Stohl (2005, 375) noted early on that the distribution of information and campaign communication materials was simply quicker and easier for online-focused organisations; and that the internet was important to the communicative evolution of more traditional political organisations. One theory, though, has animated recent research more than any other: that collective action is increasingly replaced by processes of online-led and enabled forms of connective action.

Bennett and Segerberg’s (2013) ground-breaking book The Logic of Connective Action argued that the digital context had fundamentally changed how we should understand collective action. Connective action social movements are contrasted with conventional collective action protests and movements. Connective action is predicated on the use of digitally enabled personalisation of action frames. This means that individual actors use and share digital media content that they adapt to suit their own political frames and meaning. In contrast, conventional collective action relies on building a shared sense of collective identity frames. Connective action movements are also characterised by: scaling up quickly; producing large, and sometimes record-breaking, mobilisations; having flexibility in terms of political targets and bridging different issues (e.g. economy and environment); and creating new protest repertoires, sharing open source software development, and embracing an ethos of inclusiveness. Bennett and Segerberg (2013) argued that collective and connective action can occur in various formations in the same ecology of political action. What differentiates them is that online and personalised communication is a prominent part of the organisational structure of connective action; and, Digitally Networked Action (DNA) changes the core dynamics of the ‘organising game’ of politics. This is not the case for conventional collective action, as it depends on well-resourced brokering organisations, such as trade unions, to facilitate cooperation and bridge differences between participants. In traditional collective action, the communication process itself does not transform the underlying organisation of the political action, whereas it does for connective action. Connective action takes two distinct organisational forms: (a) coordinated by existing campaigning organisations that use interactive digital media and easy to personalise action themes; or, (b) digital technology platforms provide the mechanism for coordinating action. In either case, personalised communication and digital media play a defining role, and reshape the organisation of what Bennett and Segerberg label as connective action.
This symposium critically engages with the transformative effects and potential of online forms of political participation and new connective action social movements, highlighting the importance of evolving forms of citizen-driven politics. Connective action has mostly been observed in advanced democratic contexts; here, the concepts are applied not only in developed democracies like Australia and the United States, but applied and adapted for nascent democratic regimes and authoritarian states such as Taiwan and Bahrain. Beyond state-based case studies and new theoretical work, this symposium shows how widespread online practices are now, including their use in both feminist and disability-focused forms of connective action.

This symposium unites the study of participation, mobilisation and organisation via case study qualitative analysis of interviews with political actors and the use of digital methods tools such as network analysis and semi-automated content analysis. Arguably, this focus on broader data collection and analysis methods is distinctive in a field that tends to understand political behaviour based on longitudinal survey data analysis alone. Indeed, Bennett and Segerberg’s (2013) research mainly utilised content and network analyses of digital traces of connective action movements, whereas in this symposium the voices and analyses of political actors are important to understanding emerging forms of participation and mobilisation.

The five articles here were all presented at the 2017 workshop, in Melbourne, of the Australian Political Studies Association’s Participation and Political Organisation research group, organised by Andrea Carson. The group was established in late 2013 to create a pluralist space for researchers of political participation, political parties, interest groups, social movements, and political communication. We have aimed to share ideas on cutting edge research and build a critical mass for new research agendas, especially but by no means exclusively among Australian-based, early-career researchers.

First, Kylie Moore-Gilbert’s analysis of the Shi’a dominated opposition protest groups to Bahrain’s Sunni Al Khalifa family, which has ruled Bahrain since the eighteenth century, provides an under researched case study of political action frames during the 2011 Arab Spring pro-democracy protests. Moore-Gilbert explains that like other Arab Spring-inspired uprisings, Bahrain’s pro-democracy protests took place both online, through social media and chat forums; as well as offline, taking the form of street protests in the capital Manama. The question of whether the political mobilisation and online activism in Bahrain best fits a connective or collective organisational logic is examined through social media content analysis of three Bahraini Shi’i opposition groups, together with 60 interviews with protesters.

Second, like the Bahrain case-study, Shiau Ching Wong and Scott Wright’s article examines the relationship between online and offline protest. But they put the spotlight on the role of old and new media in facilitating political action frames. Through their examination of the Anti-Media Monopoly Movement (2012–13) in Taiwan – a protest against media concentration, censorship and biased reportage of the Want Want China Times (WWCT) – they argue the hybrid media strategy at the centrepoint of this protest is crucial. In their critique of the limitations of the connective action framework, Shiau Ching Wong and Scott Wright pay attention to old and new media logics through semi-structured interviews with activists from the loose network that forms the protest movement, and argue that that the hybridity of media practices effectively integrates connective and collective action.
Third, Filippo Trevisan, analyses rapid response connective action protests by disability activists that occurred after the election of President Donald Trump in the USA and during his inauguration in January 2017. Through an analysis of this unique ‘virtual’ disability protest march, facilitated by a crowdsourced blog, he shows that inclusion of voices matters for those traditionally excluded from both politics and offline protest movements. The analysis also reveals some of the key limitations of this type of connective action. In particular, clearly personalisable frames failed to emerge and a coherent overarching narrative – other than opposition to Donald Trump – struggled to materialise.

Fourth, Verity Trott, presents research to develop a new theory of feminist connective action. She argues that organisational shifts have been driven by digitally equipped individuals who use digital tools and their personalised extensive digital networks to organise and drive protests. Her research draws on 22 interviews with Australian feminist activists and foregrounds the often obscured interpersonal dynamics that are an key part of organisation. In doing this, the paper presents a conceptualisation of contemporary activism that recognises digitally equipped activists as performing the role of organisation, and provides a feminist understanding of connective action.

The symposium concludes with a theoretical exploration by Max Halupka on how online ‘clicktivism’ challenges definitional understandings of political participation, and forces us to reconceptualise the relationship between political communication and democratic systems. Expanding on Beetham’s theories of political legitimacy he demonstrates how clicktivism epitomises our understanding of contemporary political action. Halupka argues that clicktivism can be understood as a legitimate form of political action used in connective action mobilisations, but is independent of the campaigns and avenues of communication which it is facilitated by.

Collectively the selected articles build on the works of Bennett and Segerberg and others, to challenge narrow conceptions of democratic engagement in the digital era. In doing so, we hope the symposium provides a springboard for further scholarship to examine critically the somewhat complex relationships between online and offline networks that now facilitate political participation and organisation.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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