

A Month Before the Midterm: The State of Television and Media Practices in the Political Landscape

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To engage the above set of questions I propose that we focus on social media within the larger intersections of local and global networks of power. Here lies what I identify as a major dilemma – or catch -- for us to address: On the one hand, strategic and tactical use of social media can provide a voice to those brutally silenced by their governments (e.g.- videos of the oppression of the Burmese people by their government). On the other hand, a focus on “voice” through social media can be part of a strategic decision by oppressive/dominant elites to construct the illusion of voice for the “ordinary” person (e.g.- BP oil).

Identifying strategies and tactics of engagement through social media requires that we think through what the desired social change is within the larger context of strategic political mobilization.

Social media activism can impact certain kinds of action, thinking and emotion, more than others. Notwithstanding, like any form of activism whether it is successful or not is dependent on strategy, tactics and context. We don't ask whether a protest advances or degrades political discourse but instead if the protest helped or did not help a cause. Was it strategic? Did the organizers gage the reactions of its intended audience? Did they have a chance of expanding policy alternatives?

In asking how and if social media is part of improving political discourse requires a preliminary clarification: Which groups and organizations dominate economic state and cultural networks of power and how social media fit within these networks? What is the viability of their effects? How do these networks or flows intersect and where is there room to challenge or exploit fragile links in networks of power through use of social media? Who has access to social media and who is excluded?

The above means that thinking about engagement through social media requires the identification of sites of political practices and the consideration of how best to deploy them within particular contexts in order to expand political and policy alternative. Sites could be in the form of blogs, twitters and wikis, yet those which have political and policy influence and which connect to race and ethnicity, gender, class, sexuality and disability. How to engage them, and for what strategic purposes becomes a matter of crucial consideration.

Creating political and policy alternatives through social media engagement requires transcending antagonistic political debates. It also requires a careful listening to, and articulation of the messy dynamics of political action. Whether the debate or dialogue is online or offline it is within networks of power that it most centrally operates. Hence, ignoring **power** is engage in a collective amnesia of sorts – one which forgets about inequity -- past and present -- in favour of notions of liberal democracy in which every “Man” has his say.

Central to whether social media improves democracy is therefore how we consider strategies of debate and engagement rather than find a fabrication of consensus that is based on exclusion (e.g – the Washington Consensus). Fundamentalism whether online or off-line happens when people find a niche that supports their views of the world because the group is based on a fabrication of consensus – if you agree join us and if not you are the enemy. Clearly then, it is a strategy of political engagement, in which a philosophically-grounded and reflexive praxis determines the roles of social media in expanding or closing down spaces for visibility and influence in public decisions.

My concern about the current state of political discourse is the dominance of critical apathy: a sense of knowing about power and corruption and feeling it naïve to think one can change it through political engagement. Social media can be a place where activism seems possible, and that is positive. This said, if activism is narrowed to one's comfort zone or spectacle based (e.g.– elections) manifestations, it will not result in structural change that requires large scale mobilisation (e.g. –changes to the social programs or foreign policy), leading to a sense of alienation and fragmentation of any meaningful notion of the public sphere.

Social media -- as in the case of the Tea Party -- can be a spectacular location for exclusion and fundamentalism. Technology is agonistic and therefore progressive individuals and groups must always be developing proactive and reactive strategies and tactics. Strategy requires context rather than a blueprint for how to use social media, which in turn requires thinking through the complimentary of social media with other forms of politics such as elections, community debates, dialogue and education.