HOW CAN RESEARCH ASSESS THE PRACTICES AND DYNAMICS OF PROTEST CULTURES THAT ARE BASED UPON WEB 2.0 TECHNOLOGIES?

PROTEST CULTURES, POLITICAL PARTICIPATION & THE SOCIAL WEB

University of Siegen

March 29-30, 2010

For more information and registration please contact Johanna Niesyto (johanna.niesyto@uni-siegen.de).

Workshop

CONFIRMED PARTICIPANTS

Christoph Bieber
(ZMI, Gießen)

Mayo Fuster-Morell
(EUI, Florence)

Katrin Kiefer
(Universität Hannover)

Tim Markham
(Birbeck, London)

Jan-Hindrik Schmidt
(Hans-Bredow, Hamburg)

Kulturwissenschaftliches Forschungskolleg
SFB/FK 615
Medienumbrüche

DEVELOPING A COMMON RESEARCH AGENDA

Our plenary theme is the interdependent relationship between changing protest cultures and the so called social web. As the web 2.0 and peer-to-peer practices grow both in scale and in scope, this workshop brings together academics of different disciplines in order to discuss directions for future research: How can research assess the practices and dynamics of protest cultures that are based upon web 2.0 technologies? How can research analyze a new mode of protest cultures both within and beyond the social web?

This is a time where protest politics spans older forms of participation and new 'networked' forms of action and collaboration. We seek to explore the challenges, provided by shifting notions of the public and the private, and the fluidity of the boundary between the individual and the collective. This workshop aims to gather significant research findings on net based political participation and at interrogating research methods for social web technology usage in relation to contentious politics.

PROGRAMME

March 29, 2010: 2 pm – 6 pm |Mapping ideas for future research

Chair and introduction: Sigrid Baringhorst

Political knowledge production

Input: Jan-Hindrik Schmidt, Hans-Bredow-Institute, University of Hamburg

Though contested, terms such as crowd sourcing, folksonomies and 'cloud culture' (Leadbeater) have been introduced to capture changing modes of knowledge production. These phenomena have already been interrogated from the perspective of public sphere theory. However, with respect to protest politics, research needs also to address questions about knowledge production and (re)presentation: How do digital activists (re-)produce political knowledge on the web? To what extent is the social web used for building alternatives to established knowledge orders? And how is the role of scientific knowledge and expertise changing in the process of so called 'open' knowledge production?

Protest has always been creating ways of organizing knowledge about, for instance, contacts, experts, or protest material. Protest has also protected spaces to enable activists to discuss their ideas and to provide their strategies and tactics for actions. Thus, a second set of questions needs to look specifically at the meta level of activists' knowledge about social web infrastructures and cultures and how to appropriate them.

Personal politics

Input: Christoph Bieber, Center for Media and Interactivity, Justus Liebig University Giessen

Social movement studies and political science discussed processes of personalization and individualization of politics even before the social web became a widely used infrastructure (in Western democracies and beyond). Research has shown that consumers find themselves in a new role of 'agents of change' (Baringhorst). Also, in the broader field of citizenship studies scholars have observed a shift from so called 'dutiful citizenship' to a more lifestyle oriented 'actualizing citizenship' (Bennett). At the same time media studies has critically discussed personalization of public spaces in the social web. 'Practices of the self' (Reichert) and 'nihilist impulses' (Lovink) were said to be at the heart of the new media cultures. Given these criticisms and findings, the question at stake is if and how individual activists use the social web to present themselves as political personalities. Also in this regard, the transfer of formerly private knowledge to political and public spaces forms an important line of research.

Hybrid organizations

Input: Katrin Kiefer, Institute for Journalism and Communication Research, University of Hannover

'Lifestyle politics' as well as the social web usage contribute to a blurring of the public/private dichotomy. At the same time, organizations offer stable forms of political participation. In this context, researchers have tried to meet this paradox of flexible and stable participation structures by introducing the idea of emergent 'hybrid organizations' (Chadwick) and 'organized networks' (Rossiter). MoveOn has been taken as an example of a liquidation of stable organization towards a situation of continuously changing political actors that operate like a social movement organization one day and a traditional interest group the next. Besides, the net avant-garde and online protest actors were told that they have overslept the social web development: "People are generally not putting their videos on Indymedia anymore - those go onto Youtube. Photos are going into Flickr. There has been an explosion of good political content being published on the net, but it's not happening on our sites, because in many cases it's easier for people to register an account on Blogger.com and put it there instead." (http://london.indymedia.org.uk/articles/203) This session aims to look more specially at the complex relation of individual users and political organizations: How is this relation changing and how do individuals participate in new forms of organizations such as mobs or swarms?

3

March 30, 2010: 9 am – 12.30 pm | Methodological challenges

Chair and introduction: Johanna Niesyto and Mundo Yang

Tracking user practices and cultures

Input: Tim Markham

Studying media usage and/or media consumption research on political participation has aimed primarily at large-scale generalizations based on surveys of users and case studies of websites. Why not take another route and focus on studying everyday-life practices of users? In particular, diary methodologies and cultural probs have been used in order to focus on individual media users' practices. Important questions flow from these approaches, including: How are we to contextualize diaries in the light of complex social web usage? What are the experiences of both users and researchers identified in such research so far?

By integrating methods such as focus groups or interviews, research tries to embrace the social web beyond the digitized space and flesh out the interrelations between offline and online protest: Aiming at understanding people's participation practices online, research must examine the offline context within which individuals operate. How can social web research on political participation and protest connect individual practices and refrain from analyzing online practices and content only?

Analysis of social web platforms such Wikipedia, Flickr or Social Forums Memory platforms

Input: Mayo Fuster-Morrell, European University Institute

The internet in general and the social web more specifically merges interactivity and usage described by the term of 'produsage' (Bruns). This offers new ways for protest research to analyze the complexity of online usage and actions. However, this merging also complicates research: "What makes studying digital cultures distinctive is not the mindset, but how the architecture affects our practice. There are four key architectural properties of mediated sociality to keep in mind: persistence, searchability, replicability, and invisible audiences." (Boyd)

In accepting that protest actors on the social web act in a rich environment, research has also to take into consideration how a specific design, interface and technological actors (such as bots) structure online interactions. Beyond the consideration of online structures Wodak and Wright also claimed that research should further integrate analysis of the institutional frameworks and look at what body or person is hosting and/or moderating a social web platform. These claims demand a multi-methodological perspective. From such a perspective, how can methods such as online and offline ethnography of participants in ongoing debates be best combined with quantitative tools such as the visualization of the digital threads or user networks?

More information

This workshop is organized by 'Changing Protest and Media Cultures', a research project of the Humanities Collaborative Research Centre 'Media Upheavals'. For information about the research project see www.protest-cultures.uni-siegen.de/engl/index.html. For more information about the workshop please do not hesitate to contact Johanna Niesyto (johanna.niesyto@uni-siegen.de).

About the discussants

Christoph Bieber is a political scientist at the Center of Media and Interactivity at the University of Giessen. He has worked in the field of internet and politics since 1999 and is editor of several key German publications, e.g. about the concept 'interactivity'. Christoph is collaborator of the online platform politik-digital. Also he is writing for offline-magazines as well as online-journals about the concerns of the digital society. More information at www.zmi.uni-giessen.de/home/profil-cbieber.php.

Katrin Kiefer conducted a study (MA thesis) at the University of Hannover. In this study Katrin analyzed the social web by NGOs and traced both chances and barriers. She now works as media consultant and is specialized in the field of publics relations, strategic communication and internal communication of NGOs. More information at http://netzwerkpr.de.

Tim Markham is Lecturer in Media (Journalism), and Programme Director for the BA Journalism and Media and Postgraduate Certificate/Diploma in Journalism at Birkbeck, University of London. Before joining Birkbeck in 2006, Tim was a researcher in the Department of Media and Communications at the London School of Economics and Political Science. Tim worked on the Media Consumption and the Future of Public Connection research project, part of the ESRC/AHRC's Cultures of Consumption Programm. He was previously a tutor in politics and sociology at the University of Oxford, where he completed a doctorate in political theory. He also teaches qualitative and quantitative research methods, and has worked in radio. More information at www.bbk.ac.uk/culture/our-staff/tim_markham.

Mayo Fuster-Morrell is an activist researcher at European University Institute and School of Information (UC Berkeley). Her thesis deals with governance of online communities for the building of digital commons. She co-organized the first international forum on free culture and knowledge in Barcelona in 2009. Also, she keeps helping the Networked Politics collaborative research and is collaborating with the web team of the European Social Forum and World Social Forum to spread the networking tools www.openesf.net and www.openwsf.net. More information at www.onlinecreation.info.

Jan-Hinrik Schmidt worked on a postdoc project on 'Practices in online–based networking' and since November 2007 he has been working as a senior researcher for digital media and political communication at the Hans Bredow Institute. His research focus is on developments of the web 2.0 where he is particularly interested in current changes in online based public spheres and social networks, as well as their effects on politics, economy and civil society. More information at www.hans-bredow-institut.de/en/node/1530.

4