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Digitality and socio-political networks

JEFFREY S. JURIS

Globalization entails growing interconnectedness across time and space due to the greater ease of international travel and enhanced information and communication technologies. Digitality, or the way social, cultural, and political life is increasingly organized through digital networks, is a critical feature of contemporary globalization. New digital technologies, including the Internet, cell phones, and social networking sites, have radically altered the way we communicate, and by extension how we socialize, build communities, and engage in politics. Despite early fears that digital technologies would exacerbate alienation and erode social ties or, alternatively, the hyped claims that they would completely alter our social and political worlds beyond recognition, it is now clear that new digital technologies are being incorporated into daily social and political life, enhancing and transforming our everyday forms of social and political engagement at local, regional, and global scales. Contemporary globalization is thus facilitated by and constitutive of a widespread expansion of digitally powered socio-political networks.

DIGITAL TECHNOLOGIES, NETWORKS, AND GLOBALIZATION

Manuel Castells is perhaps the preeminent theorist of the relation between new digital technologies, networks, and globalization. In his study of the “Information Age,” Castells

(2000/1996) identifies a new technological paradigm involving electronics-based information and communication technologies that has given rise to a new economy that is informational, global, and networked. Informational suggests that knowledge generation and information processing increasingly shape economic production and distribution; global means core economic activities have the capacity to function on a planetary scale in real time, while networked refers to new forms of economic organization based on inter-firm networking and strategic alliances. At the same time, networking forms and logics have diffused beyond the economic realm, transforming social organization, global governance, and even social movements. Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri (2001) have argued that a new form of globally networked sovereignty has arisen based on national and supranational institutions such as the World Trade Organization, World Bank, and International Monetary Fund. For Hardt and Negri, “Empire” is not rooted in physical territory, but is rather a deterritorialized, networked mode of rule, against which they posit the rise of an alternative networked counter-power, or “multitude.” Digital networks are thus transforming the nature of domination and resistance in the global era.

DIGITALLY POWERED SOCIAL NETWORKS

At the most basic level, new digital technologies are changing the way we relate to one another on local, regional, and global scales. Although new technologies such as cell phones or the Internet decrease the need for face-to-face contact, communities are not being undermined so much as changing in form. Bounded, locally rooted physical communities are giving way to extended, diffuse, and virtual communities. As Barry Wellman (2001) has argued “computer-supported social networks” are changing the nature of community, sociality, and interpersonal relations. The proliferation of individualized, loosely bounded, and fragmentary social networks predates the Internet, but digital

communication enhances these trends, allowing communities to communicate and interact at a distance. New technologies are also being incorporated into more routine aspects of daily social life, as virtual and physical activities are increasingly integrated. In this sense, digital networks facilitate global connectedness, even as they strengthen local ties.

Whereas much of the early literature in this field focused on Internet email and listserves, more recent research has examined the impact of cell phones and online social networking sites. Significantly, cell phones have had a much more profound impact among low-income people in developing countries. Once again, digital technologies are seen to be incorporated into existing patterns of sociality. As Horst and Miller (2006) suggest in their study of cell phone use among poor communities in Jamaica, the cell phone does not so much generate entirely new practices as expand upon already existing modes of communication. At the same time, similar to other new digital technologies, cell phones expand and reinforce the speed and scale of social interaction, providing enhanced capabilities for communication and interaction across space. The research on social networking sites such as Facebook or MySpace is still in its infancy, but emerging trends suggest a similar pattern of enhanced speed, density, and scale of interaction combined with the support of existing social relations (Boyd & Ellison 2007). In sum, digitally powered social networks are a constitutive feature of contemporary globalization, allowing communities to communicate at-a-distance, but at the same time, they tend to be incorporated into prevailing patterns of social interaction.

DIGITALLY POWERED POLITICAL NETWORKS

Digital technologies have also facilitated innovative modes of political engagement. The Internet and related computer technologies have greatly expanded the scope, scale, and capacity of transnational activist networks and social movements around issues such as human rights, the

environment, and global justice. Anti-corporate globalization movements have made particularly effective use of new digital technologies, operating at multiple geographic scales and integrating online and off-line political activity (Juris 2008). Transnational activists have thus built on the early use of the Internet by the Zapatistas and anti-free trade campaigns to organize global actions and mobilizations, share information and resources, and coordinate at-a-distance.

Beyond electronic listserves, activists have also used interactive web pages to facilitate transnational planning and coordination. Particular activist networks have their own home pages, while temporary websites are created during mobilizations to provide information, resources, and contact lists; post documents and calls to action; and house real-time discussion forums and chat rooms. Activists have also begun to collectively produce and edit documents across space using online "wiki" open editing technology, reflecting a growth in digitally powered, transnationally networked collaboration. Similarly, grassroots media activists have founded Independent Media Centers in hundreds of cities around the world, providing online forums that allow activists to post their own news stories, bypassing the corporate media. Cell phones and social networking sites represent the latest frontiers of transnational activism. On the one hand, activists have used cell phones to convene flash mobs, coordinate protests, and spread the word about mobilizations, altering political landscapes in countries as diverse as Iran, the Philippines, and Spain (Castells et al. 2007). On the other hand, as we have recently seen in the pro-democracy protests in Tunisia, Egypt, and other countries in the Middle East during the so-called "Arab Spring," activists increasingly use online social networking sites such as Facebook and Twitter to publicize local, regional, and global actions and campaigns.

NETWORKED ORGANIZATION

Facilitated by the speed, adaptability, and flexibility afforded by new digital technologies,

decentralized networks are out-competing traditional vertical hierarchies. Nowhere has this been more apparent than within the realm of collective action, where transnational social movements reflect the decentered, networking logic of global informational capitalism, even as they attack the roots of global capitalism itself (Castells 2004/1997). Beyond providing a technological medium, the Internet's reticulate structure reinforces networked organizational forms. Network designs have diffused widely, as new digital technologies power the expansion of globally connected, yet locally rooted social movements, which are increasingly organized around flexible, decentralized formations, rather than traditional top-down political structures.

Digitally powered socio-political networks thus constitute the organizational architecture of contemporary global social movements. This has been particularly evident in the case of the global justice or anti-corporate globalization movement. Networking logics have given rise to what many global justice activists refer to as a "new way of doing politics," involving horizontal coordination among diverse, autonomous groups, grassroots participation, consensus decision-making, and the free and open circulation of information. In contrast to the command-oriented logic of traditional political parties and unions, the objective becomes enhanced "connectivity" by articulating diverse movements within flexible, decentralized network structures that facilitate transnational coordination (Juris 2008). Given this context, the self-produced, self-developed, and self-managed network becomes a widespread cultural ideal among many activists, providing not just a model of political organizing, but also a model for re-organizing society as a whole.

THEORY, METHOD, AND FUTURE RESEARCH

Scholars have begun to employ diverse theoretical perspectives to better understand the precise relationship between new digital technologies, globalization, and socio-political networks,

moving beyond the more empirical accounts that characterized the initial wave of research. Juris (2008) uses practice theory to examine the way that networking logics are produced, reproduced, and transformed among anti-corporate globalization activists within particular social, cultural, and political contexts. For their part, Graeme Chesters and Ian Welsh (2006) and Arturo Escobar (2008) invoke complexity theory to explore the complex, self-organized dynamics of locally rooted yet globally coordinated socio-political networks. Most recently, Routledge and Cumbers (2009) have made use of actor-network theory to trace the networks of relations that comprise transnational global justice networks. Each of these approaches represents an attempt to better understand the logic underpinning the operation of digitally powered socio-political networks and the relation between globalization, digital technologies, and networked forms of organization. However, these studies were largely based on fieldwork during the early part of the 2000s before the proliferation of online social networking sites and cell phone use in the context of political mobilization. Future research will be needed to further explore the relationship between online social networking, cell phones, and the dynamics of contemporary socio-political networks on local, regional, and global scales.

With respect to method, many of the early studies of globalization, digitality, and socio-political networks employed quantitative, survey, and/or interview-based approaches. This was important in terms of identifying and evaluating empirical trends, but a deeper understanding of the underlying cultural logic and significance as well as the political tensions that characterize contemporary digitally powered socio-political networks has required longer-term ethnographic approaches based on participant observation and critically engaged fieldwork. Ethnographic approaches have also been important in terms of appreciating the complex relationship among local, regional, and global scales of socio-political interaction. The studies mentioned above thus combine locally rooted, place-based fieldwork with mobile,

multi-sited ethnographic research. An important future challenge will be to learn how to use similar ethnographic methods to study the relation between online social networking sites and contemporary socio-political networks.

SEE ALSO: Civil society; Counter-hegemonic globalization; Globalization from below; Information and communication technologies; Networks.

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Dinosaurs of consumption

GEORGE RITZER

While virtually all of the cathedrals of consumption experienced difficulties with the

onset of the Great Recession, it was the higher-end, especially the costliest to build and to maintain, cathedrals of consumption that experienced the greatest difficulties (Ritzer 2010). This was certainly clear in the United States in general, and Las Vegas in particular, as the epicenters of the development of the paradigmatic cathedrals of consumption. By late 2008 visitor volume, gaming revenue, and daily room rates in Las Vegas were down substantially. When one of the great cathedrals on the Strip – Wynn Las Vegas – opened in 2005 a bargain rate for a room was \$250 a night. The month after Encore (an adjacent casino-hotel also built by Steve Wynn) opened, rooms in January 2009 could be had for \$159 a night (Powers 2008). True to the need to be spectacular, Encore, which cost \$2.3 billion to build, is three stories higher than the neighboring Wynn Las Vegas and features the original art of Fernando Botero, a 231-carat pear-cut Wynn diamond, and a nightclub that seats 3000 people. Such a casino-hotel requires lots of visitors spending and gambling enormous sums of money and that is much more difficult to achieve in the midst of a deep recession. This resulted in great economic pain including a huge budget deficit for the state of Nevada, a drop in new construction of 92 percent from October 2007 to October 2008, a huge decline in housing prices, and a rise in statewide unemployment from a minuscule 0.4 percent to 8 percent in November 2008 (and this quickly exceeded 10 percent within a relatively short period of time).

However, bigger problems confront new Las Vegas cathedrals of consumption that were planned, and on which construction had begun, or was even well along, before the plunge in the economy. Construction on the planned \$4.8 billion Echelon resort was halted in August 2008 with three of its towers having already reached 12 stories (one was to have been 55 stories). Other projects (e.g., the Fountainbleau) are on hold. However, some huge projects were too far along and could not be held up or stopped. The nearly \$4 billion Cosmopolitan Resort and Casino, a complex