

Social Media and Everyday Politics

Tim Highfield (Polity, 2016)

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Introduction: Everyday Politics and Social Media

In May 2014, the British Electoral Commission issued advice to polling place staff ahead of the upcoming local and European elections: voters should not be taking selfies while in polling booths. Selfies – self-portrait photos, usually taken with a smartphone and uploaded to social media platforms such as Facebook and Instagram – were deemed to be a threat to the validity and security of the vote, particularly when polling papers were also featured in the images. By posting highly private and confidential material such as a personal vote – potentially identifiable through a user's social media content – and possibly infringing on others' privacy at the same time, voters taking selfies were seen as irresponsible at best, and at worst committing a criminal offence (Press Association, 2014; Wheeler, 2014).

The fact that this activity warranted an official statement also demonstrates the intersection of politics and everyday lives, as documented through smartphones and social media. Voting in an election is a democratic right, an ideal which is not universally realized around the world, and which has a clear, important implication: that a citizen's choice directly contributes to determining how the country will be run. Voting is also, though, just another thing happening on a day, something a little out of the ordinary that encourages being documented and shared with friends and followers online. If we update our social media profiles with details of other aspects of our everyday lives, why not present updates from the polls?

A polling booth selfie is an example of an act that is both personal and political: it is obviously personal in the sense that it is about the individual, their own actions and choices and their unique experience of voting. It is political as it is a clear engagement with a definite political activity. Even if the content of the selfie has no partisan content or commentary, such as promoting a specific campaign, it is still a politically oriented artefact, an image whose meaning is underlined by the election context. If, as in figure 1 I take an election selfie and/or a photo of my ballot paper and upload it to my personal Instagram account, I am demonstrating my engagement with the electoral process (in my case, voting in Australia, I am also possibly engaging with the obligation of participating and the potential confusion of preferential voting). The surrounding photos in my photo stream, or

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those of the users I follow, might have no political content whatsoever – but for a moment, the personal and political aligned, and were documented on social media.

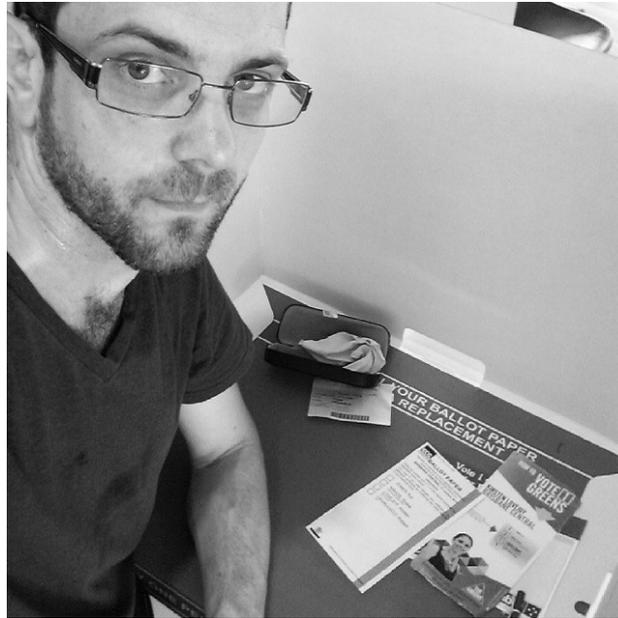


Figure 1: The author's polling booth selfie, as posted to Instagram on 31 January 2015. Moments later I was told off for taking photos inside a polling place.

However, I'm getting ahead of myself; polling booth selfies and other social media activities involving elections, while political, are examples of how our mundane uses of social media intersect with a particular political event that is not an everyday occurrence. The election context will return at times throughout this book, but not in detail until chapter 7. The purpose of introducing the selfies here, though, is to put forward two key ideas that guide this work:

First, that the personal and the political are highly interlinked, and that social media are platforms which can bring about the further personalization of politics – not in terms of parties or politicians tailoring their messages to individuals, but in how we discuss and document our experience of political issues.

Second, that for many people, political topics are not a major interest or a regular feature in their shared content. We might engage with a wide range of issues, but these are not necessarily constant concerns, and they coexist on social media with baby photos, music videos, comments on who just died in *Game of Thrones* and updates from nights out. That

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is not to say that social media are primarily made up of photos of cats and coffee, of friends and brunch: it is more that political discussions may be fleeting but recurring for many people, part of more extensive activity shared online. Politics is not solely the domain of 'political junkies' for whom such topics are their primary subjects of conversation (S. Coleman, 2006) – those individuals just have long-term, sustained interest in continuing political discussions. For others, engagement and reaction come tangentially, through particular events or issues, not in response to every little aspect of politics.

What this means then is that when we look at how politics and the internet intersect, at how social media might change patterns of political and media power alike, at how individual citizens use the internet for political involvement, we cannot and should not look solely at contexts such as elections, for they present one specific – and artificial – arena for political engagement. Social media, as I will demonstrate throughout this book, have fostered a wide range of political actions and functions, across numerous contexts. By taking all of these into account, we can arrive at a clearer understanding of the impact of social media on the political and media ecosystem. To do so, though, we need to consider not just 'Politics' – the work of politicians, the coverage of major government events, elections – but the *everyday* politics, how political themes are framed around our own experiences and interests. As highly personalized spaces, social media would appear to be clearly suitable for the discussion and promotion of everyday politics, and this idea is examined in depth here.

A secondary theme running through this book is a consideration of the evolving uses of the internet for political discussions by citizens, politicians and journalists. The empirical research carried out for this book took place between 2009 and 2015, drawing on blogs, Twitter and Instagram, and supplemented by observations and secondary research on further platforms and cases. This is not a book just about, for example, Twitter and politics (and there are some highly detailed studies of individual platforms or formats – see, for example, Burgess and Green, 2009; Massanari, 2015; Walker Rettberg, 2008; Weller et al., 2013). While Twitter is heavily featured in my previous research, it is not the only platform used to discuss politics. An individual's online activity encompasses multiple social media platforms, often simultaneously, and our practices on one platform can inform how we behave on others. My research considers the changing patterns and functions around different

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platforms, as internet-mediated communication moved from 'Web 2.0' to 'social networking sites' to 'social media' and beyond. While not organized chronologically, this book treats blogs, Twitter and other platforms not as examples used in isolation, but as part of an ever-evolving mediasphere.

This book comes out of my PhD and post-doctoral research into social media, politics and other topics between 2008 and 2015. Yet this is not just an account of what has occupied my time over this period. There is far more to the discussion of social media and political talk, reflecting the everyday in both contexts, than is found in my datasets alone. My work is subject to my own situation, background and perspective, and there are many elements of this topic, and numerous platforms, that I have not addressed – directly or indirectly – in my studies thus far. In the following discussion, I also draw on many examples that are – at the time of writing in early 2015 – recent, but which, like so many previous cases, might fade in relevance and memory over time. My rationale for choosing these very current examples is not that they are especially exceptional, but that they are emblematic of evolving and recurring practices. Ritualized social media behaviours coincide with politics, and while the specific outputs and contexts for them will change, these practices are established parts of political discussion and engagement online.

My interest here is in social media practices around politics, across platforms as well as on individual sites. While aspects like hashtag politics and activism are obvious starting points, they are not the be-all and end-all. This is also not intended to be a data dump; I am less interested in how many tweets contained, for instance, #illridewithyou, #JeSuisCharlie, #GamerGate, #ICantBreathe or #ruddmentum, than in why and how these markers arose and persisted, including the external factors beyond the social media context. The extent of hashtags is not unimportant, but it can also be misdirection, as can an endless series of network maps visualizing connections between sites, users or themes. Of course, I do quantitatively study hashtags and networks at points, but I have not used this approach for every single case because there are many other ways to interrogate and study social media practices. The limitations on data collection from the Twitter application programming interface (API) mean that, without Firehose access, complete archives of relevant Twitter activity around major topics are an extreme improbability at best (González-Bailón et al., 2014; Morstatter et al., 2013). For this

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reason, I argue that gaps in my data are not a limitation, since I am not claiming to be presenting the entirety of social media activity around everyday politics. Practices, themes and approaches of interest are identified here, but this is just one of the more visible – and public – sides of the story.

As a general methodological overview, my analyses have drawn on digital methods approaches and provocations (Rogers, 2013b). The cases I study feature data captured using automated processes, crawling from seed lists of blogs and using tools to query Twitter and Instagram APIs, including yourTwapperKeeper, Archivist and NodeXL, and supplemented with tools like Issuecrawler. From datasets organized around defined populations, users, keywords or hashtags, I have filtered relevant content to focus variously on overall patterns, time-specific periods, topical discussions (see Highfield, 2012) and networked communication, using software including Gephi, Tableau and Leximancer to aid these analyses, and drawing on and adapting scripts developed for processing Twitter datasets (see Bruns and Burgess, 2011b). For the Mapping Movements research into Occupy Oakland and anti-fascist activism in Greece, the social media analysis supported ethnographic fieldwork and interviews carried out by Sky Croeser and outlined in our relevant publications. Citations are provided as appropriate to cases that are covered in depth in previous publications.

Key Concepts

Social media

Because this book is in part a historical treatment of how political discussions online have changed over time, the term ‘social media’ is used differently here from its standard definition in much Internet Studies research, primarily for internal continuity. I take an expansive, inclusive approach to ‘social media’. Terminology changes often, particularly within fields of constant development like Internet Studies, and ‘social media’ is both a successor to and replacement of ‘social networking sites’ (see boyd and Ellison, 2008), which in part overlapped with the idea of ‘Web 2.0’ sites (Allen, 2012). As technologies and uses continue to evolve, ‘social media’ itself will be replaced by other terms, which might reflect the growing importance of mobile devices, apps and ubiquitous media. Here, then, ‘social media’ represents a moment in time but is also a catch-all term, covering blogs and blogging platforms,

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social networks such as Facebook, content-sharing sites and apps including YouTube and Instagram, and forums and communities like reddit and 4chan. This also includes platforms set up for (or originating from) different national, cultural and linguistic contexts, such as Weibo, Line, Orkut and CyWorld.¹

A critical element of this definition is that while these are all forms of internet enabled communication, they are not solely websites. In particular, social media include mobile apps, which have website presences and profiles that are not the primary means for users to access and share content. Even platforms that were not initially launched for the mobile web, such as Facebook or Twitter, have shown the importance of mobile technology in the user experience, especially in integrating and connecting to other services, as users share updates and content wherever they are and whenever. Similarly, users do not access these media through a computer or even a single device (although some may be primarily accessed through one device, users are not limited to just a computer, tablet or smartphone). Many of these services also privilege and promote 'small' data, where users share short messages (Twitter), images and time-limited videos (Instagram, Vine) or highly ephemeral media (Snapchat) – but are encouraged to continually use these services and add to their content. While there are niche and topical apps and websites which serve specific purposes, rather than the more generic nature of Facebook, Twitter, blogs, YouTube, Instagram and so on, the focus here is on these popular social media with myriad functions and uses, which were not explicitly developed for political purposes but where politics is a regular and emergent topic.

It goes without saying that social media are not separate, disconnected phenomena. There are practices specific to individual platforms and reflective of social media cultures, but these are also rooted in wider social, political and technological contexts and norms (among others). These predate and extend beyond social media, and the influence of external factors that are not online-only is important to remember. The offline and the online are closely interlinked and impact upon one another; for this reason, delineating between the two is rather redundant, especially in considering the various aspects of the political featured here. As Whitney Phillips (2015) argues,

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so-called real life necessarily bleeds into online life, and vice versa. Our raced, classed, and gendered bodies are encoded into our online behaviors, even when we're pretending to be something above or beyond or below what we 'really' are IRL (in real life).
(p. 41)

For this reason, while I refer to social media activity and practices directly in this book, I am not claiming that they are divorced from the wider contextual factors which affect individuals' and groups' experiences of politics and the internet.

Everyday politics

This book also considers politics as not solely what is presented through elections, politicians' speeches or protests. The adoption of different politically relevant practices by increasing numbers of social media users highlights the importance of digital platforms as arenas for politics in addition to, and alongside, other personal concerns. Such practices further underline the importance of *everyday* politics to online discussions, where ongoing political concerns that affect education, welfare, immigration, relationships or families, for instance, are discussed, debated, critiqued, supported and challenged.

Everyday politics, as described by Boyte (2005), is populist and civic: of the people, not of governments or campaigns. Politics then is not just formal, as shaped and discussed by established political actors and the mainstream media, but highly informal. Everyday political talk features occasional contributions by individuals who are loosely connected (if at all), but who have their own personal interests, perspectives and issues of importance. In this book, I extend this idea by treating everyday politics as a lens through which to obtain a further understanding of how politics is discussed online, beyond the heightened interest surrounding elections and other major events.

In particular, I argue that the everyday informs how people cover politics, including both the mundane and the more extraordinary and artificial settings like elections. This view is substantiated by examining what people are doing in relation to social media – their practices (Couldry, 2012) – within political topics and contexts. Politics is also an emergent topic within other discussions; conversations about different subjects, however banal, may include political themes. Social media users discuss

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both the explicitly and tangentially political, and the overlap between various topical discussions and common practices is apparent throughout this book. A recurring element of this discussion is the idea of the ritual – patterned and repeated actions that demonstrate socially mediated phenomena and behaviours (see Couldry, 2003, 2012) – as a part of how individuals use social media platforms for everyday communication and contribute to political discussions. The everyday is also an increasingly critical provocation for social media research: Brabham (2015) argues for more research into ‘normal, everyday topics’ in the field, as ‘very few social media users use social media tools to coordinate revolutions’. While I am still focused on discussions that might not involve the majority of social media users – and which are certainly not representative of wider populations – the consideration of the everyday here, for political talk and for the practices accompanying it, is a step towards more research into the mundane activity taking place on Facebook, Twitter and their ilk.

Publics

A guiding concept for this book is publics. The underpinnings for this I have drawn from Warner (2002), especially the idea of publics as ‘the social space created by the reflexive circulation of discourse’ (p. 62). While publics are self-organized spaces formed between strangers and featuring personal and impersonal discourses, there are differences between often-transient, topically specific issue publics (Dahlgren, 2009) and longer-term publics (as part of, or in place of, a public sphere in the Habermasian sense; Habermas, 1989). Publics on social media, whether predefined or ad hoc (Bruns and Burgess, 2011a, 2015), reflect the convergence of different groups of actors in these spaces – within these assemblages, there are politicians and media as well as ‘the public’, although these topical groups involve different combinations of members of these groups in different roles. Further conceptual publics within this analysis include networked publics (boyd, 2011), personal publics (Schmidt, 2013), calculated publics (Gillespie, 2014) and affective publics (Papacharissi, 2015): these are variously shaped by and respond to affordances of social media platforms, and by practices and styles of communication on the likes of Twitter and Facebook.

The concept of hybridity – seen as traditional and newer media intersect, overlap and in combination shape political coverage and action – has guided further research in this field (Lindgren, 2013, 2014). Chadwick

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(2013) argues that media logics in the hybrid media system are created by media, political actors and publics, where power is held not just by the first two groups (p. 20). An addition to this argument made in this book is that there are participants here which are variously members of the media, political actors and publics at different times, and that these 'publics' may extend to encompassing the other groups too. Social media also bring their own further concerns of power and influence, such as the politics of social media platforms: how information is presented, how people are able to use these platforms, what these actions represent (and what they do not), how individuals' data are used and the algorithms behind these platforms as well as methodological questions around 'big data' analysis (boyd and Crawford, 2012; Bucher, 2012a; Gillespie, 2010; Langlois and Elmer, 2013). As will be seen in the following chapters, these considerations add new dimensions to the discussion of social media and politics, which overlap and influence one another through questions of surveillance, privacy, consent and more.

Everyday social media practices

In this book, I explore the everyday coverage of politics on social media, through mundane practices on different platforms. How social media users employ Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, Vine, Tumblr and other platforms and apps for interactions, information-sharing and -sourcing and communication shapes how these same users discuss and participate in political issues. Everyday practices are commonplace in politically relevant social media activity, including @mentioning other users, retweeting and sharing others' comments, replying and liking, posting and creating memes and using markers like hashtags for topical, structural and emotive purposes alike. Politicians and journalists are tagged and @mentioned, in response to their social media comments but also at times when talking *about* them as well; user accounts become shorthand and a direct reference to these public figures, in the same way that users tag friends and celebrities.

Everyday social media practices can be specific to political themes. The day-in, day-out discussion of politics on Twitter is reflected in the creation of standardized hashtags for such topics. Markers from #auspol to #dkpol and #cdnpoli are employed to denote tweets about Australian, Danish and Canadian politics respectively – any outcome of general, civil discussion from their use is debatable, with #auspol tweets highly polarized and vitriolic (Jericho, 2012) – while state, province and city-

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specific hashtags are also apparent (such as #qldpol for Queensland, Australia). The thematic scope of these hashtags is seemingly limitless. Beyond the context of Danish politics, a #dkpol tweet might dwell on health, economics, foreign policy, immigration and refugees, religion or particular political actors, among other potential topics. Such standardization also applies to particular political events which, while not everyday, are recurring: #ausvotes for Australian elections, #SOTU for the annual State of the Union presidential address in the US. However, of course, it is essential to remember that hashtag use is neither universal nor a requirement; it is a user's choice to include, or to refrain from featuring, topical markers in their social media comments.

The political can be present within the personal, without needing to be framed as explicitly political (see also Papacharissi, 2010a). The principles behind mundane forms of social media communication, from selfies to memes, intertextual references through animated GIFs and checking-in to particular locations, are also applicable to political themes both directly and tangentially. Understanding the personal uses and everyday practices of social media (Baym, 2010; boyd, 2014; Walker Rettberg, 2014) provides us with insight into the diverse ways that politics is realized, discussed, challenged and participated in online. As Rogers (2013a) has explored for Twitter research, debanalizing platforms and studying mundane communication practices are 'a means to study cultural conditions' (p. xiv). To understand everyday politics *on* social media, we also need to understand the practices, logics and vernacular *of* everyday social media. Whether through selfies and their various sub-genres (Senft and Baym, 2015), tweets about trending topics (Papacharissi, 2015) or image macros mixing photographs with topical captions (Shifman, 2014b), everyday and banal communication online is extended to, remixed and appropriated for political themes.

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These ideas are explored through different practices around political discussions on social media, across seven chapters which each focus on specific aspects of everyday social media and politics. My argument guiding this analysis is that social media afford the opportunity for different groups, including citizens, traditional political actors and journalists, to contribute to, discuss, challenge and participate in diverse aspects of politics in a public, shared context. In doing so, social media

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centralize and demonstrate the overlap between different political practices and topics. If ultimately they do not lead to increased formal participation, then they still reshape and facilitate new, informal ways of political talk and action.

The behaviours, topics, groups and discussions facilitated on social media platforms reflect various elements of formal and informal politics, and the application of everyday social media practices to politics. From ad hoc responses to breaking news, to ritualized irreverence fuelled by ongoing political intrigue, the coverage of political themes on social media takes many forms and involves diverse participants who bring with them their own personal and professional perspectives and motivations. In this book, I do not argue that any one way of political talk on social media is the right and only approach, or indeed that any of these practices alone will change our political and social institutions, norms and behaviours. What happens on social media is one part of our everyday lives and experiences; what this offers, though, is a lens for examining the ways that individuals engage with political and personal issues as part of everyday social media activity, and by extension what this means beyond the social media context.

The structure of this book is designed to support this argument, with each chapter focusing on specific practices and contexts that build on one another to detail how politics is featured on social media. Starting with the personal and the not obviously political, the subsequent chapters move from individualistic irreverence, humour, play and ritualized styles of political engagement to the intersections and overlaps between social media users and established political actors (representing formal political institutions, including the mainstream media and politicians themselves). Collectively, the practices and examples highlighted across the seven chapters demonstrate some of the extensive ways in which the political and the personal, the formal and the informal, the everyday and the extraordinary, are intertwined on social media.

Chapter outline

The everyday context means that the personal is closely interlinked with the political. **Chapter 1** examines this in more detail, exploring the personalization of politics and the emergence of political themes from seemingly unrelated topics and spaces. Issues that can be deemed

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political affect our everyday lives without needing to be framed around presidents or prime ministers, monarchs or ministries, while the politics of social media platforms informs how everyday practices can become politicized.

Personal and everyday social media practices, including the coverage of political themes, often take ritualized forms. **Chapter 2** examines political and media rituals as standardized practices in response to various types of news event, which may from time to time take on political dimensions.

Chapter 3 considers what the adoption of social media means for the mediasphere at large, discussing how media politics has changed through the introduction of blogs, Twitter and other platforms. In particular, the chapter explores the intersections between mainstream and social media, which have taken both contentious and collaborative positions.

The flows of information around political topics are examined further in **chapter 4's** consideration of flashpoints of activity and interest: breaking news, scandals and crises. The importance of social media as a practical, and mobile, means for quickly communicating to a large population is explored here – as well as the potential pitfalls and issues accompanying such communication.

Chapter 5 studies social media within collective action, including the integration of social media into movements with strong physical components, such as Occupy, and the development of social media-driven (or -only) campaigns. Although the use of social media for collective action may go beyond the 'everyday politics' marker, these cases also tie in with more quotidian discussions and practices examined in the preceding chapters.

The focus turns in part to traditional actors and structures in **chapter 6**, exploring politicians, their parties, and how partisan politics plays out on social media. The analysis considers how politicians make use of online platforms, including their styles of use and their choice of social media. The chapter also examines the partisan side of political discussions, and the deliberate incitement of others in order to get a reaction as part of the everyday coverage of politics online.

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Chapter 7 brings the main ideas and themes featured in the previous chapters together within an election context. Elections are treated as a microcosm of everyday practices around politics and social media, highlighting the different practices outlined in the rest of the book. These include election-day rituals carried out on social media, party and politician strategies and the interlinking of traditional and social media as results are made available.

Finally, the **Conclusion** collects the book's various threads in summarizing the evolving uses of social media around everyday politics. The conclusion outlines future directions for research in this field, and for how the mediasphere will continue to evolve with new technological, social and political developments.

Note

¹ A quick note on platform nomenclature: in this book, I have not italicized platform names (like Twitter or Facebook), but occasionally do put non-English terms for types of platform in italics, such as *weibo* as a general descriptor of Chinese microblogs – this is as opposed to particular microblogging platforms in China like Sina Weibo. In general, platform names are capitalized, except for cases like reddit where the name is usually presented in lower-case. I capitalize Tumblr for the platform itself, while tumblr and tumblrs refer to blogs set up using this service. While I generally present hashtags in lower case in my own posts, I have attempted to use the established capitalization for individual hashtags where appropriate. Finally, my personal preference is not to capitalize 'internet', and apart from within quotes and citations this is the approach used in this book. I apologize for any errors and confusion here ...