

Thinking About the Role of Social Media in the Formation of Public Opinion

Andrew Chadwick

 @andrew_chadwick
 @lboroCRCC
andrewchadwick.com

 **Loughborough
University**
Centre for Research in
Communication & Culture

Four problems in researching the role of social media in the formation of public opinion

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Problem #1: Analyses of social media and politics have tended to focus on behaviors that are broadly progressive or pro-democratic.



Problem #1

Analyses of social media and politics have tended to focus on behaviors that are progressive or pro-democratic in the broadest sense.

But what if the social media-enabled behaviors are not progressive or pro-democratic? What if they are democratically dysfunctional?

Paradox: on the one hand, hybridity as a framework has sought to integrate the loose, informal, often cultural and subcultural political logics that we have seen grow in importance over the last decade.

However, it's only recently become clear that hybridity has enabled a) inauthentic social media expression (see for example, role of bots in 2016 in integration with the TV debates; the integration of Facebook microtargeting with television media and Trump's physical rallies in 2018) and b) social media expression that is designed to cultivate the spread of misinformation, mutual mistrust, incivility, intolerance, and hatred.

We're still developing the conceptual and methodological tools to come to terms with this development.

Problem #2: Research on social media has tended to use the *engagement gaze*.



Problem #2 Research on social media and politics has tended to use what I will call the *engagement gaze*.

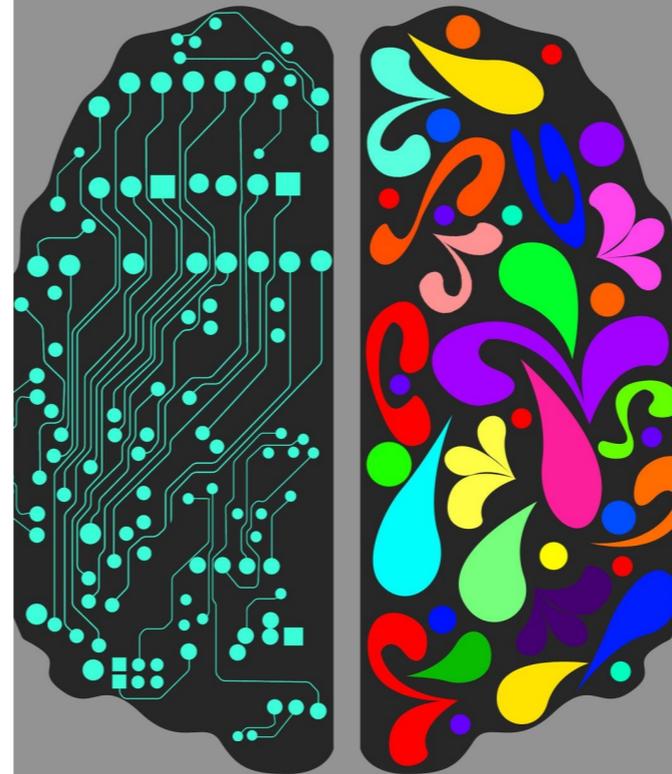
Most (though not all) research on social media has assumed that more engagement means more democratic goods for the media system and the polity. The engagement gaze has conditioned us to look for, and celebrate, engagement irrespective of

- (a) its ideological content
- (b) the likely negative systemic consequences (for democratic norms) of that engagement, and
- (c) how the media forms that not only bear content but also shape the production and reception of content can lead to democratically dysfunctional outcomes

So that's a problem.

Note this point emerged strongly out of a panel I organized on the future of digital politics research at APSA 2016, a couple of months before Trump won.

Problem #3: Research on social media and politics has been driven by the *rationality expectation*.



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This has led us to expect that citizens exercise reason in the interactions that enable them to arrive at judgements about the conduct of public affairs. This has led us to assume that citizens are reflective, act on the best information available in the media system, and that today the best information is found online.

As Ashley Hedrick, Dave Karpf and Daniel Kreiss argue in a recent review of Whitney Phillips' book about trolling culture, *This Is Why We Cant Have Nice Things*, much scholarship about digital media and politics "generally posits that people act rationally and in good faith; care about facts, truth, and authenticity; pursue ends in line with their political and social values and aspirations; and, more philosophically, are fundamentally good." And the problem is that these underlying assumptions are seldom questioned.

Phillips' and other recent studies of the rise of trolling and the so-called "ambivalent internet" are valuable for moving us beyond this complacency.

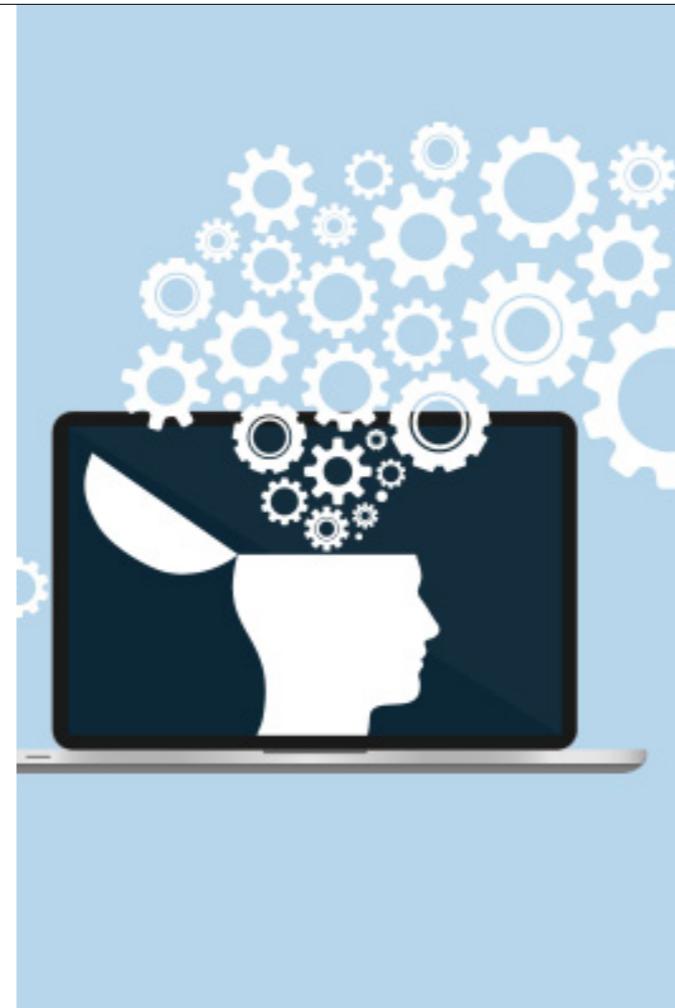
I think the problems generated by the engagement gaze and the rationality expectation have been somewhat elided in research that has foregrounded affect or emotion as a key driving force in online politics.

There is an unresolved paradox here: we know that affect interacts with the affordances of social media to play a role in opinion formation. This creates the social solidarity and identity that scholars such as Zizi Papacharissi and others have argued are essential precursors to pro-democratic engagement... All good and healthy.

But the social force of affect online is such that the identities it shapes are highly resistant to challenge and subversion; they're difficult to dislodge, even if they are democratically dysfunctional. And of course there is mounting evidence that they ought to be challenged and subverted.

So that's a problem.

Problem #4: The specific affordances of media have played only minor roles in traditional, mainstream public opinion research.



Problem #4

Specific media affordances have played only minor roles in traditional, mainstream public opinion research. With some important exceptions mainstream public opinion research has been mostly about the message, not the medium.

And yet, mainstream public opinion research *has* paid attention to democratically dysfunctional aspects of how public opinion is formed, for example through studying biased elite cues and the limits to genuinely informed public opinion when media exposure is conditioned by partisanship, polarization, selective exposure, motivated reasoning, and so on.

What's urgently missing now, however, is specific attention to how the affordances of social media interact with the limits that we know shape citizens' reasoning about public affairs.

And, of course, we also need to add to the mix that social media affordances are not always what they appear to be on the surface. They are vulnerable to being exploited, often in hidden ways, by elite actors of various kinds who seek to influence public opinion.

So that's a problem.

It now seems essential to try to address problems #1–#4 in some way...

- In a “post-truth” era it would be unwise to abandon the engagement gaze and the rationality assumption.
- Despite the growth of social media (and perhaps because of it), elite access to media and elite persuasion are still highly important for the formation of public opinion.
- Yet propaganda, misinformation, hate speech, and incivility are now radically networked like never before.
- An *information as resources* perspective: the raw materials required for individuals and organizations to behave in democratically-dysfunctional ways are diverse and multiple: media content and affordances, journalistic cues, cues from political elites, automated and algorithmic cues.
- We need better understandings of how social media interact with, and potentially reconfigure, the different limits to opinion formation at the individual level.
- We should identify the conditions under which those limits most strongly apply, the extent to which those limits are shaped by a blend of cognitive biases, social identities, and social media affordances, and how, overall, we can minimize the impact of those limits in the interests of promoting democratic norms and behaviors.

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It now seems essential to try to address problems #1–#4 in some way...

It would be unwise to abandon the engagement gaze and the rationality assumption as both normative ideals and analytical frameworks. They involve valuable principles to inspire research on the formation of public opinion in a “post-truth” era.

Despite the growth of social media (and maybe because of it) elite access to media (of all kinds) and elite persuasion are still highly important for the formation of public opinion. Thus, one important task is to identify the conditions under which elite persuasion is effectively challenged and diffused by oppositional engagement.

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