Social Media for Development: Outlining Debates, Theory and Praxis

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1. Introduction

A commonly used definition of social media derived from the business and management literature refers to a group of Internet-based applications that build on the ideological and technological foundations of Web 2.0, and that allow the creation and exchange of User Generated Content (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010). Today there is an extensive literature on the broad social media topic that crosses several disciplines. The literature on business and management has focused on how practitioners may embrace social media technology for knowledge management, forming close bonds with customers and for marketing purposes (e.g. Culnan, McHugh, & Zubillaga, 2010). Focused special issues of journals in information systems have improved our understanding of the relationship between social media networks and business transformation (Aral, Dellarocas, & Godes, 2013; Kane, Alavi, Labianca, & Borgatti, 2014). There are also several journals with ongoing discourses on the cultural and political dimensions of social media (see e.g. Information Society, Media Culture and Society and Information Communication and Society). However, to date there has been limited attention specifically to the theoretical and empirical linkage between social media and development. We intend to contribute to the emerging field of social media for development not only by identifying the knowledge gap in this area, but also by offering new avenues which may lead to new conceptual frameworks on social media for development through empirical cases. We also have practical ambitions, that is, addressing business, policy-makers and NGOs, as well as raising the interest of academic colleagues in the field of ICT for development.

2. Social media and the development discourse

Debate on the meaning of development in the ICT for development literature has centered around three main discourses, namely: modernization, dependency and human development (Sein & Harindranath, 2004). The underlying assumption in modernization is that development is linked to the insertion in a market economy, and the underlying value is that this insertion provides people more than mere survival (e.g. just enough to eat and live in a slum). Development, understood from this perspective, inscribes people in an accumulation process. The dependency discourse posits that economic growth in developed countries results in the underdevelopment of poorer countries, mostly former colonies that may be subject to negative terms of trade and technology and industrial dependency. The human development discourse is focused on building capabilities and realizing individual potential with people at the center of the development process economically, environmentally, socially and even politically. This means that people
may progressively improve the quality of their environment, invest in a better livelihood, acquire more sophisticated equipment and have easier access to means of working, as well as benefit from wider participation in politics and decision-making processes.

We are interested here in the latter discourse focusing on the conditions under which social media can be transformative in human development; the ways in which social media may be used in order to raise the capabilities of people to better and more effectively improve their livelihoods (i.e. development purpose) as well as to exercise their civil and political rights (i.e. advocacy purpose). However, development discourse has been rather conservative focusing on impacts that can be quantified, measured and generalizable. Much of the extant research in ICT for development is driven by development agendas with a historical bias toward project-based and economic outcomes. As emerging economies globalize and urbanize, their populations become critical consumers and creative contributors of digital content including social media. Aligned with discourses on development 2.0 (Heeks, 2010), we posit that social media for development requires a new understanding of development beneficiaries. To be specific, social media for development approaches social media by twinning them as objects of development and as social artifacts deeply entrenched in multiple aspects of everyday usage.

Social media for development complicates the linear understanding of socioeconomic progress, development benefits and beneficiaries and moves away from normative understandings of “users” in emerging economies as unique and utilitarian beings and more as typical participants in this digital age (Bruns, 2008; Rangaswamy & Arora, 2014). This fluidity enables social media for development scholars to contribute to contemporary and critical preoccupations within social media studies more broadly. Beneficiaries of social media for development are a range of users in resource-constrained environments generating rich organic usages that are not overtly developmental from a conventional sense of the term.

3. Reorienting development toward social media

How should social media for development be theorized? Our initial proposal is for critical, human development and institutional conceptual lenses. An example of the critical alternative may be found in the writings of Ivan Illich specifically in *Tools for Conviviality* (1973), where he outlines the characteristics that define convivial tools. These are guidelines to the continuous process by which a society’s members defend their liberty. The four criteria are as follows:

- Users, rather than the designers of the technology, must have the power to shape it according to their tastes, desires and needs.
- Convivial tools must promote communities and encourage and maximize communication among the members of the society.
- Convivial tools must make the most of the energy of individuals, and maximize and encourage creativity and imagination of users.
- Users of convivial tools must not only be mere consumers, but also producers and contributors to the technology.

An example of the application of these guidelines is provided in Ameripour, Nicholson, and Newman’s (2010) analysis of Iranian online activism demonstrating how conviviality offers a viable critical stream of theorization. A second potential stream draws on Sen’s (1999) human-centered perspective on development and focuses attention on building capacities and creating societies where individual potential can be realized. An example is presented by David Nemer in this issue outlined below. A third potential stream is shown in Bass, Nicholson, and Subramanian’s (2013) combination of the complementary lenses of institutions and
capabilities shown in Figure 1. An institutional lens acknowledges the importance of the context stressed by Walsham, Robey, and Sahay (2007), among others.

Figure 1 shows the three dimensions of the model between ICT, capabilities and institutions. Considering social media and capabilities (dimension B) focuses attention on how mobile and fixed-line web-based social media offer the conversion factors to the freedom to achieve capabilities supporting such applications as citizen reporting, crowd sourcing and education. Social media may contribute to poverty alleviation by facilitating certain functionings such as sharing of resources (time, expertise and support); information (job opportunities, benefits advice and influence); opportunities for capacity-building (to develop skills or start an enterprise) and collective action and influence (improving a local area, social campaigning and ensuring a voice in local affairs). Considering social media and institutions (dimension C) directs attention to how social media may play a role in reducing corruption by enabling anonymous whistleblowing and increasing institutional transparency, thus improving the effectiveness of state poverty reduction initiatives (Afridi, 2011; Bertot, Jaeger, & Grimes, 2010).

However, there is also a dark side of social media use affecting both of these dimensions, from cyber-bullying, to mindless “buzzing” in the competition among business organizations, to organizing riots and spreading hatred (e.g. Awori, Benesch, & Crandall, 2013). In addition, the use of social media assumes the availability of access to IT infrastructure that in some developing and emerging economies is still problematic as it is concentrated only in the most developed parts of the countries.

Considering the relationship between capabilities and institutions (dimension A), techno-optimists posit that social media can topple repressive regimes. US President Bill Clinton commenting in 2000 on the Internet in China stated that “liberty will spread by cell phone and cable modem” and that “trying to crack down on the Internet is like trying to nail Jell-O to the wall.” Countering this technological determinism (echoed by many others e.g. Rheingold, 2002) is a literature that explores how governments have developed institutions for control of the use of Internet and social media in terms of censorship and surveillance (e.g. Morozov, 2011). At
the time of writing, Chinese authoritarian rule has survived social media and today provides an example for other repressive regimes. The response from State legal institutions toward the openness and transparency capabilities provided to individuals by social media can be swift and decisive. There are many examples from around the world shown, for instance, in Ameripour et al. (2010) of State countersurveillance and using police and military in halting dissent. At the time of writing, the Saudi Arabian blogger Raif Badawi had been sentenced to 10 years in prison and 1000 lashes for setting up a liberal discussion forum.²

4. Papers in this special issue

The aim here is to present the debates, to discuss the extent to which social media can contribute to development and under what conditions may the potential of this technology be realized and harnessed for developmental purposes.

How has this special issue achieved this aim?

The first paper in this issue is entitled Online Favela: The Use of Social Media by the Marginalized in Brazil authored by David Nemer. This paper adds to our understanding of social media for development by applying principles of Sen’s capability approach to the case of a Brazilian favela. Using an ethnographic method, the marginalization of the favela occupants is sensitively explored by Nemer through the personal stories of the users of social media. Deep insight is provided into the constraining institutions – unfreedoms – experienced in the favela and the potential for social media to facilitate functionings discussed through the lens of empowerment. The paper contributes to the ICT for development discourse by corroborating with Kleine (2010) on notions of empowerment and choice. Furthermore, the findings challenge the instrumental approach to ICT in development interventions. Instead, Nemer argues persuasively for a noninstrumental approach focusing on social media use as empowerment. What may be dismissed as entertainment or pastime is shown to have development outcomes such as digital literacy, income generation and relationship maintenance.

The next two papers not only speak in contrasting voices, but also allude to distinct outcomes from yoking social media and ICT for development. Both instances describe the inflection of social media and the political sphere; the second paper in this issue is a negative instance where political institutions override citizenship rights through a powerful manipulation of networking technologies. The third paper underscores the power of the common citizenry employing the networking potential of social media transforming the political efficacy of civil society.

Techno-optimism or Information Imperialism: Paradoxes in Online Networking, Social Media and Development is authored by Sharon J. McLennan. McLennan’s paper takes a cautionary approach toward the outcomes of social media’s encounter with global development practices, especially viewed through the prism of social media as a democratic disrupter vesting capabilities in the common man as political citizen. The paper underscores the severe shortcomings of a paternalistic development approach in the processes of including social networking practices of an online peer-to-peer collaborative development project to support an international development project. Brushing aside the techno-optimism surrounding the Web 2.0 platforms, the paper implicates the institutional lens in the form of social traditions and elitism sidetracking the democratic and inclusive benefits of social media and networking technologies. Building on the charisma of its founder Marco, Project Honduras evolved into a homophilic and pro-establishment forum subverting hopes of an alternative forum of equal yet diverse human nodes of social networks pressed to service the cherished goals of participative nondiscriminatory development. The paper leaves us with the following thoughts: Social media for development is a contested process that might amplify rather than dissipate powerful voices,
transform a fairly open online space as proxy for mediated participation in support of the status quo. Finally, it may reflect isomorphism in the shape of top-down Western hegemony in its paternalist approach to development, underplaying the democratic and collaborative credentials of digital networking media.

The third paper is entitled How Do Social Media, Mobility, Analytics and Cloud Computing Impact Nonprofit Organizations? A Pluralistic Study of Information and Communication Technologies in Indian Context by Aparna Raman. Raman’s paper frames the collaboration of nonprofits [NPO] and ICTs, focusing on the use of social media, mobility, analytics and cloud computing (SMAC) bridging the “digital chasm.” SMAC is no longer a buzzword, but a platform supporting NPOs to achieve their social missions and together, social media, data analytics and cloud computing bring organizational and informational value. Using the diffusion of innovation theory, the paper probes the adoption path and impact outcomes from the collaboration of SMAC and NPO. A multipronged approach to embrace SMAC across organizational functions of the NPO opened up opportunities with stakeholders, astute integration of social media engagements and decision-making processes. Here is a case for techno-optimism identifying the channels, paths and attitudinal factors pairing social media, ICTs and development agendas.

The final paper, “Social Media and the ‘20 Cents Movement’ in Brazil: What Lessons Can Be Learnt from This?” is a view from practice and speaks as a positive instance to the capabilities approach. Author Joia argues on the role of social media in widening the political space of the citizens in Brazil despite the digital divide that the country suffers from, by showcasing the “20 cents movement.” Social unrests and protests, in this case sparked by public reaction toward the provision of public transport service, were amplified by the use of social media and brought to a new level in terms of both the magnitude of the movement itself and its sociopolitical impacts. However, as it turned out, the key for the “success” – or “failure” – of such technology-facilitated social movement is not the technology or the use of the technology itself. Rather, it is the functionings, the ways in which the actors can use the technology strategically. However, in this case, shared meanings between campaigning groups differed and this lack of unification meant that the plebiscite toward change was canceled and institutions of government thus remained unchanged. For the government in Brazil, and also in many other countries, the seemingly unstoppable proliferation of the social media use may pose new challenges – which can be seen as a positive drive toward promoting institutions of openness, transparency and accountability –which are keys in delivering successful and meaningful development. Institutional entrepreneurs of change may learn from the deficiencies reported here in shared meanings between activist groups described as the lack of “monolithic sense making process” supporting a social media-enabled social movement over the course of time. In this case, social media is seen to expand and amplify a hitherto dormant potential of the political citizen not through institutional mechanisms, but the more experientially defined civic space.

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No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.
Notes

1. This special issue was initially motivated by a conference track “Social Media for Development” which took place at the International Federation for Information Processing (IFIP) Working Group 9.4 in 2013. Proceedings are available at http://www.ifipwg94.org/files/IFIPWG94_2013Proceedings_FINAL.pdf.


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