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Two provocations for the study of digital politics in time

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ABSTRACT

This article confronts some of the difficulties that temporality poses for the study of digital politics. Where previous articles have discussed the unique methodological challenges for digital politics research – centrally, that we face *ceteris paribus* problems when attempting to study how people use a medium that is itself still being developed – this article addresses the underlying subject of temporality itself. It offers two distinct provocations. First, it discusses what we are ignoring when we discuss Internet politics in terms of an overarching "digital age" or "digital era." Conceptualizing a uniform digital age in contraposition to previous media regimes is an easy heuristic crutch, but it comes at the cost of rendering key features of the sociotechnical system invisible. Second, the article distinguishes temporal rhythm from the more common concepts of linear and cyclical time. Particularly in the areas of contentious politics and media politics – areas that are central to the topics covered in this special issue – some of the core changes in institutional processes can be understood as a breakdown of routinized temporal processes. The article then offers suggestions for how digital politics scholars can better incorporate temporal concepts into our research.

KEYWORDS

Historical institutionalism; online political advocacy; online political activism; digital politics

Introduction

The Internet has been *new* for a long time. As a research community, comparisons between the "digital age" and the broadcast era that preceded it (and exists along side it) are commonplace. Whether it is through comparisons of online and offline mass political behavior, through studies of how political institutions incorporate digital affordances into their work, or through investigation of how the new (digital) has disrupted the old (existing institutions), most research – both empirical and theoretical – treats the digital era as a singular jumping-off point. Political use of Facebook and Twitter in 2019 is not generally placed in comparison to how the two platforms were used in 2014, or how blogs and YouTube were used in 2009. It is placed in comparison to television and newspapers. The Internet stays new because we so rarely place it in comparison to the Internet of the not-too-distant past.

This article argues that something important is lost by treating the Internet as forever new. It grapples with the concept of temporality, and confronts some of the difficult challenges that temporality poses for the study of digital politics. In so doing, the article builds upon an earlier piece, written in 2012 (Karpf, 2012b), that laid out a set of methodological observations about social science research in Internet Time – centrally, that we face unique *ceteris paribus* problems when attempting to study how people use a medium that is itself still being developed. Where the previous article focused on methodological workarounds to Internet Time, the current article directly addresses the subject of temporality in the digital era. It does so through a series of provocations. First, it discusses what we lose from view when we treat the "digital age" as a uniform phenomenon, using the case of digital advocacy and activist organizations as a guiding example. Second, it discusses three different types of temporality, highlighting how each might contribute to our understanding of digital politics. The article then provides suggestions for how digital politics scholars can better incorporate temporal concepts into our research.

Theoretical priors – a brief history of internet time

The theoretical backdrop of this article can be summarized thusly: the Internet of 2018 is a different medium than the Internet of 2008 or

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1998. We have moved from desktop portals, onramps to the "infobahn," to laptops on wifi, producing blogs and wikis, and then further still to a digital landscape dominated by social sharing on mobile devices, mediated through a few quasi-monopolistic platforms whose algorithms shape what we see and how we interact. As the field of digital politics has grown and matured, the underlying set of social phenomena that we have sought to analyze has changed as well. Today's digital age is not only different from the broadcast age that came before it; It is also, in important ways, different from yesterday's digital age.

The history of the Internet can be traced through four metaphors that have sequentially shaped public understanding of the Internet's role in civic life. First is the pre-World Wide Web "Virtual Community. The Internet of the 1980s was not heavily populated, but it did feature robust Bulletin Board Services (BBS's), most famous among them being the Whole Earth 'Lectronic Link (The WELL) (Hafner, 2001; Rheingold, 1993). The virtual community was displaced by the "information superhighway" and the mid-1990s homesteading of the World Wide Web. This metaphor fueled the first Internet bubble, what would later be retrospectively called "Web 1.0." The Internet of the 1990s was defined by static web pages (Geocities), early search engines (Mosaic and Netscape), and walled-garden Internet portals like AOL. Early government websites were conceived as informational resources – "brochureware" or online billboards that could serve as tools for early Netizens to learn more about public policy and public affairs. In the aftermath of the dotcom crash, Internet intellectuals forged a new metaphor, "Web 2.0," which centered concepts such as "commons-based peer production" (Benkler, 2006) and "convergence culture" or "participatory culture" (Jenkins, 2008). Websites like Wikipedia, Craigslist, and the blogosphere all demonstrated the complex, collaborative endeavors that citizens could potentially co-produce online. Where web 1.0 died with a bang, web 2.0 died with a whimper. It has been replaced in the past decade with what Jose Van Dijck and her coauthors term "the platform society" (Van Dijck, Poell, & de Waal, 2018). Whereas web 2.0 imagined power being distributed to mass communities of newly-empowered participatory creators, the platform society locates power within the handful of major platform companies (Facebook, Amazon, Twitter, and Google, in particular) and raises questions about their algorithms, quasi-regulatory power, and social responsibility.

These four ways of seeing the Internet have been layered atop one another. You can still find virtual communities today, and major collaborative sites like Reddit have much in common with the Bulletin Board Systems of old. Every company, campaign, and civic organization has a website. There is a wealth of searchable information online for those who are motivated to find it. Peer production and collaboration still abound, particularly within cultural industries and among younger Internet-users. The eras of virtual communities, brochureware, and web 2.0 did not vanish. Rather, they *faded*, replaced by different tools, different actors, and different challenges.

Studying digital politics, then, demands attention to *when* in Internet time our research is being conducted. The Internet is not only distinct from past media regimes. Today's Internet is also distinct from the Internets of five, ten, and 20 years ago. The digital advocacy organizations that are the shared subject of this special issue are separated both geographically and temporally – the pioneering advocacy organizations of the Web 1.0 era were leveraging different affordances of a different internet toward political advocacy goals that were themselves situated within a specific, geographically-bound opportunity structure. Mainstream political communication research lacks a robust framework for discussing these temporal changes within digital media.

The digital age as a heuristic crutch (or, where is the internet, and why it matters for politics)

Consider, for a moment, the following question: "*Where* is the Internet?"

In 1998, the Internet was located on a desktop computer. You accessed it through a dial-up modem or an Ethernet cable. If you were logged in through dial-up, you could not make or receive a phone call. There was a firm boundary between

online "cyberspace" and the offline "real world." You had to log off the Internet to move about. The Internet was anchored, tethered, stationary, in-place. The desktop anchor gave force to the dominant metaphors of the Internet at that time, "web portals" and the "information superhighway." Cyberspace was a separate world from the one our bodies move around in. This inevitably led researchers to explore the dichotomy between online and offline behavior.

There remains today an ample literature on online versus offline activism. If this debate seems a little forced when taught to present-day undergraduates, there is a good reason why. A normal-science approach to digital politics research has led us to continue to build upon the theoretical foundations that were set out in the late 1990s and early 2000s. But those foundations have shifted. Online versus offline no longer has a contemporaneous reference point.

By 2005, the boundary between online and offline had already turned porous. WiFi connectivity and GPS tracking meant that the Internet could be found in cafes, airports, hotels, and many public spaces. The Internet of 2005 was located wherever you could find a hotspot. This was not the completely mobile interface that we are accustomed to today. But it was a fundamental change in the online experience. It was also, not coincidentally, a time when one's "cyber-friends" became indistinguishable from one's friends. Facebook, then MySpace, then Facebook became hubs of online activity, based on the premise that your life online was just another facet of your life. Many of the foundational concepts for studying social media and politics were established in this Web 2.0 moment. But as the Internet moved from your laptop to your smartphone, and as the platforms grew in size and power, the ways the Internet was used for politics changed as well. The open blogosphere gave way to retweets and Facebook shares. Search engine optimization was replaced by social sharing optimization. "Open source politics" was replaced by "controlled interactivity" and "computational management" (Kreiss, 2012; Stromer-Galley, 2014).

The location of the Internet matters a great deal for the formation of digital advocacy repertoires. MoveOn originated as a digital petition in 1998, urging Congress to "censure Bill Clinton and move on" [from the Lewinsky scandal]. Digital politics at that time was almost entirely an online-only phenomenon, due to the affordances of the 1998 Internet. It was an Internet of GeoCities and brochureware websites, an Internet of chat rooms and AOL, an Internet where social sharing happened clunkily through e-mail forwarding chains. The pioneering insight from Wes Boyd and Joan Blades was that petition-signers could be treated like members (Karpf, 2012a). When their petition failed to produce results, the founders reached out to their list of 300,000 signers and invited them to help lobby Congress. A single online tactic became the foundation for a rapid-response organizational model. Many of MoveOn's network of peer organizations in other countries were founded in the Web 2.0 era, and many of them blended elements of the participatory web into their tactical repertoires. If we are to draw effective comparisons between these organizations at the time of their founding, we must account both for the variance in electoral systems, civil society frameworks, and cultural norms *and* for the variance in digital affordances at the time of their founding.

The literature on the Internet and politics rarely places our theoretical and empirical findings within internet-historical context. It is still routine to rely on the heuristic crutch of speaking about "the digital age" or defining Internet-based ICTs as a single, overarching media regime that has replaced the broadcast media regime that preceded it. While I readily acknowledge that such crutches can be useful (not every study of Internet politics needs to be a study of Internet time), leaning so heavily on this crutch renders important drivers of institutional change invisible.

To illustrate this point, consider the following question: *Is e-mail "social media?"* If "social media" refers to all digital media tools, then the answer is yes. Margetts, John, Hale, & Yasseri make this argument in *Political Turbulence* (Margetts, John, Hale, & Yasseri, 2015), arguing that the boundary between e-mail, apps, websites, and social media "is increasingly blurred" (6). Katz, Barris, and Jain do likewise in their 2013 book, *The Social Media President* (Katz, Barris, & Jain, 2013). Lumping e-mail in with social media is a heuristic shortcut, allowing researchers to dive into their research

design and empirical findings without dwelling on the different affordances of e-mail, Facebook, YouTube, Twitter, Instagram, Reddit, etc. There are plenty of research studies that would not benefit from a deep discussion of how e-mail differs from these other digital communications tools, or of how the various tools fit into a broader communications ecology that was built over time in response to a complex set of technical, legal, social, and financial demands. But the net effect of this conceptual shortcut deserves some scrutiny. For a field that has devoted so many barrels of (digital) ink to the subject of technological affordances, we have an awkward habit of painting all digital tools with the same broad brushstrokes.

E-Mail, of course, predates the World Wide Web. It has lasted decades, and entire industries and regulatory frameworks have risen and fallen around it (Brunton, 2013). Social media, by contrast, generally refers to a set of communications technologies that grew to prominence atop the mobile web. Facebook, Twitter, WhatsApp, and Instagram are all emblematic of social media. E-Mail enjoys nearly universal adoption, at least throughout the Global North. There is no learning curve with e-mail. There is no digital skills divide with e-mail (though there *is* a digital access divide in some countries where SMS-texting dominates instead of e-mail and the web). E-Mail fits the category of what Nielsen calls "mundane mobilization tools" (2011) and Bimber, Flanagin, and Stohl refer to as "technology as context" (2012).

More importantly, e-mail is the sole "push" technology that has gained widespread adoption on the internet. Social media sites, smartphone apps, and blogs are "pull" media. They rely on (and optimize for) repeat user engagement. Plenty of "gamified" websites have turned to virtual ghost towns because they failed to attract a critical mass of engaged repeat users. If you join a civic technology organization by downloading its smartphone app and then never open that app again, you effectively become unreachable. If you "like" an organization on Facebook, then you can see that organization's content when (a) you look at the Facebook newsfeed and (b) the organization's content has received Facebook's algorithmic blessing (probably by paying to boost its message). By contrast, if you sign up for an organization's e-mail list, then that organization's messages will sit in your inbox until you deal with them.[1]

E-Mail and social media have distinct affordances, and support different tactical repertoires within contentious politics. As I noted in *Analytic Activism* (Karpf, 2016), a critical flaw in the Kony 2012 viral YouTube video was that it left no digital trace data that Invisible Children could use to plan follow-up campaign actions. Over 100 million people watched the Kony 2012 video. It was designed for sharing through social media. But only Google/YouTube was left with data on who those viewers were. A mere two years later, Invisible Children shut down due to a lack of funding. Compare that experience to MoveOn.org's original e-petition, which rendered a list of 300,000 signers, all of whom were available for repeat contact. (MoveOn's first viral petition was in 1998, calling on the U.S. Congress to censure Bill Clinton and move on from the Monica Lewinsky scandal). Former MoveOn staffer Ben Brandzel described to me in 2013 that e-mail's affordances were central to the organization's membership model, which has since been replicated around the world, as Nina Hall's research on the Online Progressive Engagement Network (OPEN) makes clear (Hall, 2019a, 2019b). Such organizations develop a "sticky, light-touch structure that captures kinetic energy from high-energy moments. It stores that energy and grows it as movement power, then re-energizes and redeploys it elsewhere" (Karpf, 2013). Brandzel came to this insight while observing MoveOn's participation in the anti-Iraq War movement. He witnessed a wave of massive in-person mobilizations. Some of those ended with everyone going home. Others – the ones MoveOn helped plan – left behind the sedimentary residue of participant e-mail addresses. "Without this structure, all that energy dissipates," he told me. "Every time a moment happens without this network structure in place, it is a heartbreaking loss."

Lumping e-mail, digital petitions, blogs, Twitter, Pinterest, Reddit, WhatsApp, Instagram, and Facebook into a single category makes it harder to treat these different affordances as an object of analysis. It is not just historically misinformed; it

detracts from our understanding of digital media in activist tactical repertoires. And this is particularly critical given that the Internet is still in a state of ongoing development. Hashtags are different than viral videos, or closed Facebook groups, or distributed text-messaging campaigns. The major digital advocacy organizations of 1998 and 2005 have had to learn and adapt to the social media landscape of 2018.

E-Mail is not social media. Websites are not social media. I would even argue that blogs and other emblematic technologies of the "web 2.0" era are not social media, as we understand it today. We are repeating an error when we lump all digital media together and talk about it as having a set of common affordances that are distinct from analog media. It is not just that we are failing to grasp granular, platform-specific distinctions. It is also (and more importantly) that we are failing to grapple with how the digital media environment itself continues to morph into something new.

Three approaches to temporality: linear, cyclical, and rhythmic

The discussion thus far has treated Internet Time, as though it is linear in nature. But that is only one perspective on temporal processes. As research from the field of American Political Development makes clear, temporal processes have both a linear and cyclical phenomenon (Orren & Skowronek, 2004). I would further add that the study of Internet politics particularly benefits from a third perspective: treating temporality as *rhythm*. Let us consider how each of these perspectives can refine our understanding of the "Digital Age."

The previous section has already demonstrated what a linear approach to temporality can bring to the study of digital politics. The four overarching metaphors – the Internet as virtual community, information superhighway, web 2.0/participatory web, and the platform society – serve as temporal markers, indicating how digital media was viewed, marketed, and sold to venture capitalists, regulators, journalists, and consumers. The linear approach anchors our research in time, and can be a valuable tool when attempting to address the problem of "temporal validity" (Munger, 2019). In a 2016 analysis of fifteen years of publications in major communication journals, James Stanyer and Sabina Mihelj demonstrated that historically-informed research is rarely published in the field of political communication.

Those articles that do engage with temporal data primarily treat temporality as a simple, linear phenomenon (Stanyer & Mihelj, 2016).

The cyclical approach to temporality is a hallmark of historical institutionalist scholarship and the field of American Political Development. Steven Skowronek, for instance, takes a historical institutionalist approach to the American Presidency in his landmark 1993 book, *The Politics Presidents Make* (Skowronek, 1993). Skowronek describes two different approaches to thinking about time: secular time and political time. Secular time is linear; political time is cyclical.[2] Across secular time, Skowronek observes the "thickening" of the administrative state and the changing role, responsibilities, powers, and expectations of the presidency – put simply, in comparing late 20th century Presidents to earlier Presidents, one must account for the increased size and complexity of the Executive Branch. Across political time, he observes the rise and fall of dominant ideological coalitions in American politics. This cyclical approach provides analytic leverage for Skowronek to compare Presidential administrations that face similar opportunities and constraints despite occurring far across secular time. Historical institutionalist scholars have also developed concepts such as "institutional layering" (Thelen, 2004) that are helpful for explaining how the Internet of the 2000s evolved out of the institutional choices of the 1990s, 1980s, and earlier.

Within the field of digital politics research, most of the historically-informed research has focused on the linear progression of Internet Time. Daniel Kreiss (2012, 2016) and Jennifer Stromer-Galley (2014) have traced the historical development of digital tools within US Presidential campaigns. Bruce Bimber (2003) analyzed American political development over the course of four "information regimes." Ben Epstein (2018) added a cyclical feature, in line with American Political Development scholarship, by examining the interplay of the diffusion of innovative political communication techniques and the emergence of regulatory responses across the centuries-long history of American

politics. Epstein aside, there is still substantial room for a more granular approach to cyclical processes that have occurred solely within the "Digital Age."

Consider "Moore's Law" – Gordon Moore's 1965 prediction that transistor capacity would grow exponentially, doubling once every 18–24 months (Moore, 1965) is an exemplar of productive linear temporal thinking. Moore's Law could be treated as a linear temporal process, charting the exponential growth of computational power. But, as John Markoff remarks in *What the Dormouse Said*, Moore's Law also became enshrined as "Silicon Valley's defining principle. … It dictated that nothing stays the same for more than a moment; no technology is safe from its successor; costs fall and computing power increases not at a constant rate but exponentially: If you're not running on what became known as 'Internet time,' you're falling behind" (Markoff, 2005, xi). Moore's Law is part of a mythology that has guided the decisions of technologists, investors, and regulators for decades. It is central to the myth of "disruptive innovation" (Christensen, 1997), and helps to define which companies and products are hailed as innovative enough to become centered in the public discourse on sociotechnical systems.

We can borrow a third approach to temporality from the field of journalism studies. Where political time is cyclical and secular time is linear, media time as described in newsroom ethnographies (Gans, 1979; Usher, 2014) is ultimately rhythmic in nature. Consider such well-established concepts as news events, the "news hole," "second-day" stories, and the "Friday night news dump." The industrial production of news revolves around a set of rationalizing institutions that help determine which stories will be covered, with what images and frames, for how many minutes/column inches. The news hole is a construct of these rationalizing institutions (how many pages or minutes must be filled, on what timetable, with what editorial input?) The newsworthiness of a given story depends on the availability of a fresh news hook (how did elites respond to the initial story, what happened next, what changes must readers/viewers be informed of?) Political elites seek to minimize the impact of damaging information by releasing it when news organizations are focused on other things, or when it is too late in the day to make the evening news/morning paper. Only the rarest events are so objectively newsworthy that they demand a "Stop the presses!" response. News events are constructed in relation to the rhythm of the newsroom.

There is abundant evidence that these news rhythms have changed in recent years. The news hole has expanded as media organizations have moved onto social media. Media cycles churn faster, but also are extended by the digital call-and-response of Twitter replies and online videos. Recent scholarship has explored the changing temporal rhythms of how news is produced and spread (Boczkowski, 2010; Petre, 2015). Stories now move from social media to mainstream media and back again. Media organizations chase viral stories, and this affects the content and framing of their coverage.

The rhythm of political contention is established by media. That rhythm has changed over time, and it has done so at an accelerating rate. This is the insight at the heart of Chadwick's (2013) work on hybrid media and the "Political Information Cycle." The old, established media cycle, Chadwick argues, has been replaced by a political information cycle, in which contentious media events play out amidst the interplay of digital and traditional media tools. The hybrid media framework that Chadwick develops is useful for emphasizing the interplay between digital media logics and traditional media-political interactions. Rather than replacing or competing with the mainstream media, digital media alters how news is produced and who plays what role in its production.

The frameworks that political communication scholars employ for understanding how media shapes politics do not directly consider temporality. Robert Entman's research on presidential scandals, for instance, demonstrates that political scandals are socially constructed by news organizations (Entman, 2012). There is not an objective set of facts that constitute a political scandal. Rather, a complex combination of newsroom norms and strategic political behaviors amplifies some potential scandals and quashes others. A broadcast information environment featuring a handful of gatekeeping news organizations operates quite differently than a networked information environment featuring a plethora of competing and contrasting niche news organizations. The changing media environment could be viewed as part of secular time, but it is not a simple linear process such as the thickening of the administrative state.

Submerged in both Entman's and Chadwick's books, one can get a sense of how our temporal experience of politics varies across time. (It also varies across space – the rhythm of political contention and attention cycles in Australia is far different than in the United States, as I noticed when visiting an Australian digital activist organization and hearing about the "very long" 40-day electoral campaign they were preparing for.) But, perhaps because the fields of historical institutionalism and political communication/internet politics have rarely interacted, temporality is not explicitly theorized in either book. Our understanding of the dynamics of present-day political contention would benefit from all three types of temporal thinking – cyclical, linear, and rhythmic.

Scholars such as Skowronek, writing in the historical institutionalist/American political development tradition, can be forgiven for overlooking the temporal role played by media systems. Across the broad swath of history, media change has occurred slowly, and has overlapped with plenty of other important institutional developments. In *Information and American Democracy* (2003), Bruce Bimber uses a historical institutionalist framework to develop a theory of US politics that moves through four "information regimes." This remains a landmark text within the field. But, written as it was during the first decade of the modern World Wide Web, there is a static quality to Bimber's periodization scheme. His four regimes act as demarcation lines across secular time. I would argue that there is also important temporal change happening within those regimes.

This brings us back to the opening premise of this article. The Internet is distinct from previous information technologies in that it keeps changing. A television, telephone, or radio functions in 1967 effectively the same as it does in 1977 or 1987. Industries, economic relations, and regulatory frameworks develop around these communications technologies. Once one has learned how a television or telephone operates, there is not much need to keep relearning that topic. The rhythm of each communications medium is established and changes slowly. But the Internet of 2017 looks little like the Internet of 2007 or 1997 (or 1987). Computers and connectivity have radically changed. What once was prohibitively costly later became too-cheap-to-meter. And that results in an ongoing process of revision and reinvention. It is not just that new media is "disrupting" old media. Rather, both the old institutions and the new ones that are supposedly replacing them are becoming increasingly *fragile*. Established patterns, norms, and relations are being constantly reworked.

Neither secular time, information regimes, nor political time provide the right template for thinking about this feature of Internet Time. The accelerating pace is unique and conceptually frustrating. Temporality as it is established through media provides a better set of concepts. We mark the routine passage of time with media – the daily paper, the nightly news. Hashtags and blog posts have altered the rhythm of these temporal markers. News stories that would once have lasted a month now disappear in a weekend. Digital media is not a single innovation, nor are we living through a static "digital age." It is more like a piece of experimental music, who's time signature keeps staggering forward and back.

For researchers interested in digital advocacy organizations, rhythmic time emphasizes how advocacy and activist groups seek to alter and respond to the changing media landscape. This includes the development of hashtag activism that interferes with existing media routines to place issues on the media agenda or alter the trajectory of their coverage (Jackson, Bailey, & Foucault Welles, 2019). It also includes activist groups as media-makers – designing memes, Facebook Live videos, and online political advertisements with the intention of provoking a response from their targets that in turn becomes the subject of public discourse. And it includes disruptive tactics that make it harder for political opponents to control the media narrative through established routines. We can see this sort of behavior from both progressive and conservative activists (particularly in the United States during the Trump years).

Consider how pioneering digital activist groups such as 38 Degrees (itself a member of the OPEN network) can be viewed through these three temporal lenses. In linear time, 38 Degrees was founded over a decade after MoveOn.org. That was in the late web 2.0 moment, as the boundary between online and offline was becoming porous. It was created with the help of Ben Brandzel,

a MoveOn veteran who had deeply studied similar organizations around the globe. In cyclical time, 38 Degrees was launched while the Labor Party held control of government and was facing increasing pressure from progressive activists. This is a similar cyclical moment to MoveOn's founding in 1998, suggesting a potential hypothesis about the conditions under which OPEN organizations experience initial success. In rhythmic time, 38 Degrees's tactical repertoire has included a mix of digital petitions and savvy media tactics and has developed over the years alongside a changing media environment (Dennis, 2019). When the organization is making its biggest impact on UK politics, it is forcing media and political actors out of their established patterns of engagement.

This likewise impacts political advocacy and social movements. Zeynep Tufekci (2017) has argued that today's movements organize too easily, and thus develop less strategic capacity than the movements of old. It is worth investigating whether this "tactical freeze" has indeed become more of a problem for today's social movement organizations than it was in the 1980s and 1990s. It is likewise worth investigating how political elites, electoral campaigns, media elites, and social movement actors adapt to and exploit the changing rhythms of present-day media cycles. Do innovative activist tactics lose effectiveness as media and political institutions learn to ignore their rhythmic disruption? And in so doing, it is also valuable to employ the concepts of linear and cyclical time to compare present-day contentious politics with similar contentious political struggles *within the history of digital politics*. There is now a long enough history of digitally-enabled social movements that we can draw fruitful comparisons among cases that used digital tools, instead of making broad comparisons between the digital present and the long-ago, analog past.

Historical institutionalism provides conceptual scaffolding for abandoning the heuristic crutch of lumping the past few decades under the uniform heading of "the Digital Age." The digital politics research community can benefit greatly from importing these temporal concepts from historical institutionalist scholarship. Our focus on changing media practices can, in turn, provide a rich addition to the historical institutionalist tradition. By treating time as both a cycle, a line, and a rhythm, we can advance theories of digital politics well beyond where they currently stand.

Recommendations

What is to be done, then? Pointing out that history is complex and nuanced is an easy and often fruitless task. We will still make references to the digital age, if for no other reason than it makes for shorter titles and effectively signals our topic to the audience.[3] What, then, should researchers do, and what should we avoid? I have three recommendations to offer.

My first recommendation is also my most universal: all digital politics researchers ought to historicize our literature reviews, placing research contributions in linear time and identifying the relevant objects of analysis that have changed in the intervening years. It *matters* that Bob Puntam's commentary about the Internet and social isolation was written in 2000, in reference to the dial-up Internet of the 1990s. It matters that Yochai Benkler's foundational work on commons-based peer production was written in 2006, in response to the upwelling of web 2.0 online social collaboration. It matters that Lance Bennett and Alexandra Segerberg's was written in 2013, providing a framework for understanding the social movement activity in the early years of the current platform Internet. In many other subfields of political communication, this is a less important habit – it hardly matters that Phillip Converse was writing in 1964 (Converse, 1964) or John Zaller in 1992 (Zaller, 1992). But temporality is a bigger issue for digital politics scholars than it is for our peers in other subfields. We sacrifice nothing by adding temporal context to our review of the existing literature.

My second recommendation is more narrowly addressed to researchers interested in the affordances of social media. It is high time that we stop lumping all digital media under one convenient heading. If we are going to build a stable foundation for affordance-based research, we need to increase our specificity. E-Mail is not social media. Twitter, Facebook, Reddit, and YouTube all have different affordances. They are strategically deployed to support separate goals. Studies

of Twitter cannot be generalized to all "social media." Studies of Facebook need not be generalizable to Facebook and similar platforms (the benefit of being a quasi-monopoly is that there are no similar platforms). We need not make such generalizations to expand the impact of our research, and in fact we dilute our research findings when making such generalizations.

My third recommendation is something of a research "wish list." Advancing our collective understanding of temporality in digital politics will require research that falls outside the current trends in research methods. We can best understand cyclical and rhythmic time through a combination of methods that borrow from historical institutionalist tradition of American Political Development and methods that borrow from the ethnographic tradition of Journalism Studies. This is not to say that other research methods are not equally valuable for studying a variety of important research questions. But in the rush toward "big data," computational methods, and open science, it is worthwhile to keep space open for methodological pluralism. We will not develop our understanding of temporality unless we embrace methods that can support this complex theory-generating work.

The Internet now has a substantial history of being *new*. It is my hope that these three recommendations can help us better understand the dynamics of today's Internet, distinct from the dynamics of Internets' past.

Conclusion

In the end, the intended contribution of this article is a simple one: digital media keeps changing, and digital politics keeps evolving in response. Both our theories and our research methods will be enriched if we examined this change *within* the "digital age" rather than remaining fixated on comparisons between digital and analog regimes.

The theme of this special issue is "understand digital advocacy organizations." If we are going to understand them, we will need to study them both across space and across time. If we are to evaluate the efficacy of digital tactics, we are going to need to consider how they align with or disrupt the established rhythm of political and media systems. We will also have to consider how tactics that flourished during the Infobahn or Web 2.0 years are differently positioned in the current moment when a handful of massive platforms dominate the attention environment.

There is an instability at the core of digital politics research. The medium that we are studying – the media technologies that political activists make use of – is still in flux. We must relax the *ceteris paribus* assumption that underlies most variable-oriented research.

The leading digital advocacy organizations themselves tend to have a sharp eye for the emerging affordances of digital media. "What can we do with WhatsApp?" they ask. "How can we take advantage of changes to the Facebook newsfeed algorithm to further amplify our message and increase our political power?" If the research community is going to advance public understanding of the Internet and political action, we need to adopt as fine-grained a view of digital media change as is held by the practitioners we study.

Notes

1. There are three exceptions to this rule. (1) Automated Spam-filtering technology can put the organizations messages in the rarely-visited spam folder. (2) Spam-lists maintained by Spamhaus can render organizational e-mails undeliverable. (3) Gmails "promotions" tab can also effectively decrease visibility. It is noteworthy that all three of these exceptions arise as technical solutions to the exploitation of e-mails unique affordances.
2. In *The Political Value of Time: Citizenship, Duration, and Democratic Justice*, Elizabeth F. Cohen argues that "scientifically-measured, durational time" – what Skowronek calls secular time – is itself deeply political (Cohen, 2018).
3. In the time that I have worked on this essay, I have participated in several panels that made reference to "the digital age." I even helped name a few of them. Heuristic crutches can be useful time-saving devices.

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