A NEW SIDE TO PARTICIPATION

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The process of electing people for specific jobs, whether it be for government or other kinds of organizations, can be a confounding experience, no matter the kinds and shapes of the organization. Position means legitimate power, and this is often bestowed upon a person through an election process. *In general, a political election is designed, in the purest sense, as a time when people participate by casting a vote for a specific person to take over a leadership or official political duty.* Since the late nineteenth century, even before electricity was widely available, the mechanical lever-pull voting machine was used to record votes. While this might be considered one of the first historical markers of mechanical election technology, tool use has always been part of election participation. As Don Ihde might say, the election process is "technologically textured" (1990, 1).

Whether for a high school class president, a municipal government official, or a national leader, goals conflict and coordination fractures during an election cycle. Through the years, a different kind of machine, the media kind, has also entered the political election fray to become a central technological component in politics. In American history, for instance, President Franklin D. Roosevelt (FDR) shared fireside chats on the radio for more than a decade in the 1930s and 1940s. The use of radio waves for political communication provided a one-to-many platform to speak directly to the American people, but its use also reshaped public perception. This helped facilitate FDR's unprecedented four presidential terms and started a political system focused on candidate-centered campaigns. President Dwight D. Eisenhower used print and television in the 1952 election, harnessing the catchy short slogan "I like Ike" to share his political platform with the public. He was the American President from 1953-1961. During his second campaign for President, incumbent Richard Nixon debated John F. Kennedy. Nixon is said to have sported a poor on-air make-up job, which contributed to a specific public perception of his debate performance. Media also became part of Nixon's later tenure, when secret tape recordings of conversations he had, using technology that was placed under a desk in the Oval Office and the Cabinet Room at the American President's residence, The White House, were made available to the public. Both the bad make-up job and the secret tapes later known as the Watergate Scandal, illustrate media as central to American political processes, in positive and negative ways. Nixon revealed the underbelly of media use in an election. And even before these examples, cinema was used worldwide as part of the political propaganda machine in many countries, beginning in the nineteenth century. Every country has its own history and current stories of media examples and mishaps in election cycles to add to the stack. Slogans and make-up artists aside, how has the election participation landscape changed when media became social?

While this is not the case in some countries, for many, social media messages are freely available through many different kinds of social platforms. Tracing a message through a social network is like systematically recording an old wooden bucket with many cracks and holes pouring out everywhere at different times. As one hole springs forth, another one closes. This puts pressure on another area to break through. Some are drips, and others are streams. Tracing use becomes unmanageable. That is the nature of participatory media (Jenkins, 2008; Ito et al., 2015). This idea of participation is a pivotal concept to explain the differences between media and social media. *Participation means that anyone and everyone connected to the system has the ability to create, post, push, and stream content to multiple audiences through social media any time of day or night.* First, it might be important to think of ways social media content about an election can co-constitute and co-shape the bricolage of messages that we consume. Social media is nothing if there is not technology that pushes it by electricity, through the internet, so it lands on a device. Everything is contextual, but context is often removed in social media messaging (Irwin, 2021). Social media clips are shortened and disconnected from their origination artifact, layered with additional text, graphics, sounds and filters and digitally encoded and compressed to ease movement through a variety of digital conduits.

This has been a year of pivotal elections in many countries. With elections comes the rhetorical communication about candidates and platforms. While rhetorical election processes were once vocal, contemporary rhetoric now come in the form of social media participation. *As a quick definition, social media are digitally compressed messages that people create and/or push and send to others through digital means like social media platform landing pads through a webbed and networked digital conduit for general consumption.* Pairing an election with social media produces some interesting technological shifts. While not all technologies are systems, many systems involve technologies. Elections and social media are both system-based processes facilitated by and through technologies. When combined, a systematic layering or stacking occurs. *I call these systematic layers "bundles,"* because *it describes the way both use similar machine like processes, instruments and artifacts that become bundled together in a meaningful and intertwining way.* The participatory nature of this bundle removes the gatekeepers but not the agenda. In times of social media proliferation, the agendas are multiplied because many more people participate in the systems that produce messages. Add to that algorithm and generative AI that both alter and push messaging. Perhaps the Human-Technology relations framework can provide a nuanced perspective through variational theory, to increase transparency of the of unseen mechanisms involved in the bundle.

One way to sort the social media + election bundle is by types of technologies, such as *machines, instruments*, and *artifacts*. Each category is central to the bundle. *As perspective, a machine consists of mechanical or electrical devices and processes that modify to assist in performing human tasks. An instrument refers to a tool or devices that facilitate getting something moved or processed or created. And an artifact is content that is crafted, designed or created for a specific purpose.* All three categories of technologies are part of the social media + election bundle, which cranks out networked audio and video information, opinions, and images as mediated communication. During an election cycle, the social media machine opens various channels and streams to facilitate and manage election messaging through adaptable algorithms, machine learning, automation, feedback loops, and vast data-driven insights for its cause. Social media + election instruments are the tool like devices that create and then push content. The social media + election artifacts are bound by their history, context and technological systems and are the result of the bundle. These artifacts impact society as tools for information and misinformation. The artifactual digital objects (. gifs and memes included) are cultural representations, evidence (data), records, and ecosystems. Joined together, the social media + election bundle creates a synergistic process that is stronger than its parts.

Elections produce vote counts, which are another kind of artifact. In early historical elections, someone might yell, "Vote for Jim." This is election rhetoric or platform campaigning. And then someone might yell, "I vote for Jim." That verbal and participative vote was recorded when election time came, and Jim got that vote. This process occurred until everyone standing in the plaza, the street, or the building yelled their vote, and it was recorded and tallied. Those vote sounds came from natural utterances through the air and into the ear of the human. A populace might also chose to use a writing utensil and paper to record a vote and slip it into the top of a ballot box to produce a written artifact. While not an error-free process, it was a straightforward simple process with clear lines of voting structure, citizen participation, and communication.

The contemporary election process has become much more complex. The management may require a variety of produced artifacts working together like writing instruments, specifically designed ballots, ballot boxes, digital and electronic processes, punch cards (remember hanging chads), and the people and companies that design and produce voting technology, provide election security devices, and the variety of electoral processes that vary community to community. When election rhetoric or platform campaigning comes through the artifact of social media, the digital object takes on specific time periods and cultural, scientific, and

technological contexts. An artifact can also be an unwanted fleck or ghosting component within the technological creation of the message. Elections combine into a system of technologies that might involve voter registration machines, mechanical lever voting, ballot marking devices, optical scanning, and/or hand counting to either ensure or manipulate voter verification, "transparency," physical evidence, and different voting methods like single voter choice or rank choice processes. Elections use technological instruments to create processes. The way a ballot is printed, the weight of the paper, the ink, and the design of the ballot are part of the mechanism. Technological instruments monitor and "count" votes. Design process architecture, instrumental controls at the individual and machine level, proactive error detection, and technical failure like electricity outages, turning a machine on and off, moisture, discrepancy compensation, and streamlining validation (speed/error rate) are also technological instruments of contemporary election data-driven processes. When combined, the social media + election bundle produces often symbolic and cultural artifacts.

One popular social media + election bundle artifact is the *meme – a short mash up of edited digital images, videos, photos text and music redesigned from previous images and mediated content,* have become a popular way to celebrate and despair after an election. Meme artifacts about election processes and candidates are part of the social media + election bundle. These "bite sized" satirical messages ride the wave of participation to invoke a schema that might look something like this: *human social media user – (social media + election technology bundle) – socially mediated world.* I would add arrows to this schema, but I am not even sure at this point which direction they would go. Social media during an election cycle becomes a bundle of technological machines, instruments, and artifacts that co-shape messaging during and after the polls close. Sifting out each component of social media and election processes helps to examine the variety of technologies entangled in the process. While most kinds of leadership votes do not occur over social platforms at this point in the contemporary election process, public option, persuasive messages and polling results certainly do. The technological texture of this complex process creates an ambiguity that can be clarified through ideas from Human-Technology Relations, to provide a way forward for future strategy and policy.

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