

# This Time It's Personal: Social Networks, Viral Politics and Identity Management

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## **Abstract**

This chapter deals with political mobilisation and participation in social media. The main focus is on the importance of Internet-mediated social networks in providing a 'media filter', functioning as a kind of collective gatekeeper to spread news and information perceived as important, in contrast to the image of the single individual media consumer faced with an insurmountable mass of information. I argue that by investing one's personal *ethos* in spreading information and encourage peers in the personal social network to political participation, vital news and calls for action spread quickly. A form of *viral politics* ensues that, in concordance with traditional types of mediation and formation of political opinion, might provide a basis for a new type of political elite in competitive democracy. Drawing on earlier research concerning the effect of social capital created by weak ties on political participation, I argue that social networks organised online provide a new type of post-organisational weak ties, functioning as *maintained social capital* building institutions, encouraging to and organising actions of civic engagement. I also argue that, contrary to the common belief that various forms of Internet-mediated political mobilisation constitute a more inclusive, emancipatory and egalitarian politics, it could also be the case that the growing importance of viral politics reinforces the traditional inequality in political participation and influence in society. More specifically, a case is made for the need for more thorough conceptualisation of new modes of participation: spontaneous, individualised, 'unorganised' forms of action. Two concepts, '*temporal elites*' and '*viral politics*' are developed for describing how social network membership and density determine how people are recruited to political campaigns. The theoretical assumptions are further illustrated by the preliminary empirical findings of an ongoing study of Swedish Facebook users and their attitudes and behaviour concerning political participation in social media.

**Key Words:** Social Networks, Political Participation, Virtual Mobilisation, Facebook, Social Capital, Elite Theory.

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## **1. Introduction**

This chapter starts with a short background of the academic discussion in the field and giving a rationale for why new concepts are

needed. After a brief introduction to the phenomenon of social media and social network sites, the concepts of viral politics and temporal elites are developed and explained. The chapter ends with an empirical illustration of viral politics at the individual level, reporting the results of a study on Swedish Facebook users.

An ongoing discussion in democracy research is concerned with the question of whether the level of political participation in the industrialised or post-industrial countries is sinking or not. The reason for why a high level of participation in society is perceived as important is that it is thought to be an essential part of well-functioning democracy, at least by proponents of the lines of thought in democratic theory associated with concepts like participatory, deliberative, or 'strong' democracy and theorists like J. S. Mill, Benjamin Barber and David Held. By participating, citizens learn and grow as individuals, thereby bettering and emancipating themselves as human beings and contributing to better governance.<sup>1</sup> Mass participation is not seen as a *sine qua non* by all democratic theorists. Proponents of what David Held calls competitive elitist democracy, like Max Weber, Robert Michels and Joseph Schumpeter, underline the need for a competent political elite and restrict the role of the masses to voting, in effect selecting between competing elitist groups.<sup>2</sup> As I will argue below, participation in internet-mediated social networks, *viral politics* might be interpreted as the emergence of a new type of political elite rather than mass participation.

An academic debate concerning political participation in post-industrial countries has been going on for the last few decades. The main idea is that social capital, as theorised by among others Bourdieu, is correlated to the level of participation.<sup>3</sup> The debate goes in two lines of argumentation. The line championed by, among others, Robert Putnam, maintains that political participation is decreasing as the level of social capital in society wanes with increasing individualisation and political apathy.<sup>4</sup> Another line, represented by, among others, Russell J. Dalton and Pippa Norris<sup>5</sup>, argues contrarily that the forms of participation are merely changing and are taking on new forms, as post-materialist values become more salient.<sup>6</sup> Instead of enrolling in political parties and other formal organisations, citizens are now to a greater extent canalising their engagement through various types of protest, such as boycotts and buycotts, civil disobedience, internet activism and through the means of informal networks.<sup>7</sup> These tendencies arguably run parallel to the global nature of several contemporary political issues, as well as the circumscribed autonomy of the nation state and increasing complexity of governance relationships.<sup>8</sup>

Another debate of interest for this chapter concerns the effects of the ever more dispersed and advanced use of digital communications technologies - e-mail, web pages, mobile phones, social media - on political mobilisation and participation. Within political science, this discussion tends

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to be focused either on the causal effects of such technologies on the level and type of social capital, which is thought to spur participation, or on the effects of social or 'new' media use on political knowledge and attitudes, also thought to spur participation.<sup>9</sup>

However, it is also important to remember that technology itself cannot be taken as a given. The design of social media is deeply related to existing social structures and ideologies in society. Services might contribute to increased elitism, surveillance and competitiveness. The interfaces they use might be produced by and for certain types of people - stereotypically young, web-savvy, able-bodied people. Thus, whether social media platforms will have beneficial or adversarial effects on grassroots mobilisation depends in part on active choices of designers.<sup>10</sup>

The discussion about social media and social capital is also linked to assumptions of the increased importance of social networks in late modern society.<sup>11</sup> In this case it is also possible to distinguish between different strains of thought present in the debate. On the one hand it is argued that the dominant effect is a decrease in social capital; on the other hand it is argued that new communications technologies in combination with a waxing network society are in fact contributing to an increase in social capital. A third position maintains that the internet and other arenas of digital communication function as a useful compliment to traditional types of social capital.<sup>12</sup>

Concerning the effect of social media on political knowledge - together with education an important factor behind political participation - the discussion also divides into an optimistic and a pessimistic strain. Some researchers have found causal effects of social media on political knowledge and participation in empirical investigations, explaining the effect with the 'surprise effect' of unexpected political social media content, offsetting the effect of already politically interested people actively searching for political information on the internet.<sup>13</sup> Others have pointed to how social and other digital media correct mistakes in traditional mass media, reinvigorate the public sphere and provide a base for a more diverse political discourse, peer production, citizen journalism, and so on.<sup>14</sup>

Empirical evidence has, however, also been provided for the hypothesis that social media in combination with other types of media, producing an overall wider media choice for consumers, have resulted in a larger knowledge gap between politically interested and disinterested citizens, most strikingly so in the work of Markus Prior.<sup>15</sup> The American political scientist Matthew Hindman presents convincing empirical evidence for that in the blurry field of 'Internet politics', there is a strong tendency to winner-takes-all behaviour, power law distributions and a reinforced influence for traditionally strong groups in society in his book 'The Myth of Digital Democracy', deploying terms like 'Googlearchy' to describe how a

few heavily linked web sites completely dominate discourse in the American political universe.<sup>16</sup>

It is fair to say that there will be no consensus on whether social network sites and other forms of social media, or the internet in general, are 'bad' or 'good' for 'democracy', whether that means a more oligopolistic or more fragmented public sphere, a more or less emancipated electorate, centralised or decentralised decision making, etc. Soon enough, the technologies will become so ubiquitous that they turn invisible to us, and the amount of new research dedicated to establish causal relations between 'the Internet' and 'democracy', or between 'social media' and 'democracy' will decrease.<sup>17</sup> However, a few unclarities must be sorted out. In the debate between techno-utopians and techno-dystopians, false dichotomies are abundant. Social media does not make everything new. Old hierarchies remain. But still, everything is not quite the same. The inequalities in representative democracy prevail, but are transformed as political strife and discourse take on new shapes and new actors are involved. It is also important to distinguish between what is, what could be, and what ought to be.<sup>18</sup> Proponents of deliberative democracy would like to see an informed public evolve through a more inclusive digital public sphere, but if what we actually have is an elitist competitive democracy, that should be taken into account. And empirical research departing from a competitive democratic model should not be confused with saying that there ought not be a more egalitarian political system or that it is not possible for the digital public sphere to facilitate informed deliberation on public issues. It is my strong belief that students of Internet-mediated politics, as in all other fields, must be aware of that. That this chapter departs from a view of representative democracy in post-industrial countries as unequal and that political mobilisation aided by social network sites might even increase power inequality does not mean that I as an author support elitism. I am actually a huge fan of egalitarianism.

As much as the field of political participation and mobilisation aided by social media is emerging as an interesting and important field of research in the social sciences, it is still an under researched field. It lacks standard definitions and it though the interdisciplinarity of web research makes it fascinating and vital, it is also a crossroads for heaps of theories and classic literature in so many established disciplines. As a web researcher, it is difficult to know all. The reason for why I have chosen to develop new concepts for network-driven political mobilisation (viral politics) and for the emerging sub-group of people in the stratas of political power using this phenomenon as a successful way to political influence (the temporal elites) is that I do not find that there are really good concepts available for talking about these things. I believe that taking parts from classic democratic theory and classic elite theory and using them in combination with newer work on

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the information flows in social networks for interpreting this confusing world of Twittering rebels and Facebooking anarchists is a productive way of moving forwards.

The next section will give a short introduction to social network sites and develop the concept of viral politics.

## 2. Social Networks, Social Network Sites and Viral Politics

Social network sites are a prominent type of the various forms of user-generated social media that sometimes are grouped under the term 'Web 2.0'.<sup>19</sup> Quoting the by now minor classic 2007 article on social network sites by Danah Boyd and Nicole Ellison, they are:

web-based services that (1) construct a public or semi-public profile within a bounded system, (2) articulate a list of other users with whom they share a connection, and (3) view and traverse their list of connections and those made by others within the system.<sup>20</sup>

By using social network sites, it is possible to maintain off-line connections in an on-line environment, making it possible to communicate with close friends as well as casual acquaintances regardless of where they happen to be situated in time or space. It is also possible to form more or less contemporary groups, connecting people from different networks on the basis of common interests, membership in formal organisations, sharing jokes or promoting political and social causes. Another typical feature of social network sites is the interconnectedness with other types of social and mainstream media. It is easy to upload or link to media content, post it to your personal profile or to a group, or forwarding it to the contacts in your network, as well as integrating your personal profiles in different types of social media. To take an example: someone draws your attention to a funny video clip of a politician making a fool of her- or himself on television. You favourite it on your personal YouTube page, post it on your blog with a comment, tag it (assign a label to it in order to find it easily later) and store it on your del.ici.ous folksonomy page, forward the blog post to your Facebook profile, post a tweet (write a short blog post on the microblogging site Twitter) with a link to your blog post about the video clip, pass it along to your friends via e-mail, through Facebook, an SMS, etc. Your friends will in their turn assess whether they think that the clip is worthy of passing on, forwarding it or not. Someone might edit the original footage, adding music, snippets of other clips, texts, thereby creating a mash-up, a new piece of media, which in its turn might be passed around.<sup>21</sup> Different tools allow the interactive audience to discuss and see how other people have interpreted and rated the media content. There are special services available that collect the

forms of media content that are most circulated at the time. In the end, the sharing of the media content might in itself be a story worthy of mentioning in mainstream media, thereby creating a feedback loop between the different forms of media. In effect, your social network provides a media filter for you, passing on media content that are found to be especially interesting.

This is the art of viral sharing, one of the defining characteristics of the contemporary media structure. Perhaps most applied to the logic of new marketing techniques, it is also a concept most useful to describe how post-organisational political mobilisation might occur through activist mediation.

The buzz word concept of viral marketing came into use in the mid 90s and was connected with marketing strategies on the Internet.<sup>22</sup> The basic idea is that in a world where the Internet makes it possible for anyone to be a publisher, it is difficult, if even possible, to shout down the immense mass of information produced. Thus, the best way to reach out is to make consumers themselves do the advertising by sharing information about products with their friends.<sup>23</sup> An early well-known example was the way that Hotmail automatically attached the line 'Get your free email at Hotmail' to every outgoing message sent by a Hotmail user. The recipient then knew that 'the sender was a Hotmail user, and that this new free email seemed to work for them'.<sup>24</sup> Campaigns for the Google webmail service Gmail and the music streaming service Spotify used the social networks of their customers in that it was only possible to sign up for the service through invitation from a user.

The metaphor of the virus builds on the notion that the spreading of the information is similar to the adoption pattern of a virus, with 'spatial and network locality', only with a much wider scope and velocity than had been possible in the pre-Internet era. Viruses 'thrive on weak ties'.<sup>25</sup>

Viral sharing can be defined as 'getting the right idea into the right heads at the right time'.<sup>26</sup> The features needed for any media content to be truly viral are evocative images and consistency with existing world views in the minds of the audience. In the field of political and social activism, I call this phenomenon viral politics.

The use of the term 'viral' in this context is not uncontroversial. According to Henry Jenkins, the concept of viral media pictures transmitters of viral messages as passive individuals passing on unchanged pieces of information - involuntary hosts infected by an evil virus. In reality, a core feature of so-called viral sharing is that transmitters are empowered to change the message and fill it with new meanings. And while viruses replicate themselves, communication depends on acts of human will. Instead, Jenkins suggests a new concept, spreadable media, which would basically mean the same phenomenon but with a strong focus on the active role of consumers/citizens.<sup>27</sup>

The reason I choose to keep viral as a concept is basically that it has been used for describing the phenomenon of my interest in other spheres of

human communication for more than a decade. Although I admit that the metaphor does not hold all the way through - Jenkins is right in his critique - I do not find using 'spreadable politics' a viable way to create a functioning concept. That would take an even greater effort to explain what the concept contains. Taking into account the weaknesses of the wording, I thus suggest viral politics to mean the rapid sharing of evoking media content in social networks online in the realm of political and social activism.

The place of social network sites in relation to other media is complex. On the one hand, the high-modern media structure of the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, characterised by the sharp boundary between consumers and producers of media content and the professionalisation of journalism, seem to give way to an ecological media structure characterised by a blurring of boundaries between producers and consumers and the rise of citizen journalism.<sup>28</sup> On the other hand, the monopolistic tendencies of media concentration and cultural homogenisation become more articulated as generic content flourishes in movie theatres, television, radio, newspapers, magazines and bestsellers. A defining characteristic of this ecological media structure is convergence.<sup>29</sup> Much of the content passed around in social media sites emanate from traditional media outlets. YouTube started out as a channel for purely user-generated content, but ever since the beginning, users have uploaded large amounts of copyrighted content.<sup>30</sup> The reverse is also true: mainstream media try in various ways to reach out to their audience by inviting readers, viewers and listeners to comment, share, upload own media content or rework existing content.<sup>31</sup> Thus, it is not correct to describe or define social network sites or social media in general as the opposite of traditional or mainstream media. That is also true in the realm of politics. Although social media sometimes are viewed as a playground for grassroots mobilisation, traditional political actors like political parties and interest groups are using these new communication tools for enhancing the internal organisation, political advertisements, and tapping into new mobilising structures.

The effects of sharing political media content on political participation using social media is an under researched field. Previous research has established a strong connection between social capital and political participation; in particular, the link between weak ties and participation. According to Mark S. Granovetter, 'people rarely act on mass-media information unless it is also transmitted through personal ties; otherwise one has no particular reason to think that an advertised product or an organisation should be taken seriously.'<sup>32</sup> This relationship has been found in the political field in several empirical studies. Jan Teorell's 2003 study found that as the number of weak ties increases, the likelihood of participation also increases. Although education is a very strong predictor for engagement in societal affairs, people still have to be recruited. If a person's

social network is large, the chance that he or she will be asked to participate is higher.<sup>33</sup>

The importance of the personal dissemination of media content and calls for action is not new. The qualitative difference with social network sites and social media is the efficiency with which information can be spread.

Organising weak ties in social network sites allows for an individual to stay connected to brief acquaintances also when moving to another geographical area, thereby creating maintained social capital. This offsets the deterioration of social capital in society as a product of increased mobility.<sup>34</sup> Online relationships are provisional, but off-line relationships in an on-line setting are not.<sup>35</sup> This affects the size of the network.

As the size of social networks increases, the chance for any two people being connected to each other also increases. The Small World Pattern explains the expression 'It's a small world' exclaimed by 'newly introduced individuals upon finding that they have common acquaintances'.<sup>36</sup> Small World networks are composed both of small groups of people dense ties and of larger groups with weaker ties. Important for networks to grow extremely large is the existence of individuals with a wildly disproportionate amount of connections, being able to connect a large number of smaller dense groups with one another: 'In fact, social networks are not held together by the bulk of people with hundreds of connections but by the few people with tens of thousands.'<sup>37</sup> New communication technology enhances the stability of these networks, making it easier to connect to other social networks.

The velocity of viral sharing implies that millions of people can be reached through word of mouth in a matter of days. Whereas meeting in person, phone chains, or other older methods of spreading rumours or information, took days and months to pass on media content to a larger group of people, social media reduces this time to a matter of minutes. Spreading a message through your personal network through social media will, by the logics of maintained social capital and the small world pattern, through viral sharing reach a global crowd at short notice (provided that the message is attractive enough to be virally shared, which is an essential part of viral politics.).

The social forces behind viral politics are, as stated above, not new. I would like to point this out one more time because it is often assumed that technology is changing human behaviour in revolutionising ways. However, human culture and basic biologic factors tend to change slowly. The reason that viral politics can be seen as a partly new and potentially transforming factor in political life is the increased velocity and scope of the communication.

In spreading media content to their personal network, individuals manifest their commitment to their existing beliefs and move closer to political action. They also invest their personal status as an acquaintance -

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their ethos - in forwarding a message through their social network. This is probably just as much a strategy of identity management - what kind of person do I want to be in the eyes of my peers and what does this piece of information tell them about me? - as a will of influencing society. I will return to this in the final part of this chapter. By finally reaching into mainstream media, the content will reach people who already does not share that commitment.<sup>38</sup> Through the electronic organising of social networks, the 'personal' information flow increases and the threshold for participation is lowered.

### 3. Temporal Elites

The era of the Internet - first during the 1.0 wave in the 90s and later during the 2.0 wave in the mid- and late 2000s - has sometimes been seen as heralding a new dawn for inclusive, non-hierarchical politics. In some ways, the increased importance of social media has led to the dilution of the power of traditional political actors, at least when it comes to opinion formation. However, I would like to argue that the dynamics of social media does not merely change existing structures in society: old rules of thumb for who participates - and thus has influence over agenda-setting and political outcomes - still apply. It can be the case, quite contrarily to some popular notions of the age of social media, that networked politics of the kind described in this chapter might actually increase elitism in society as well-connected social networks, political knowledge and technical skills become more even important to build effective campaigns. In this section, I try to provide a preliminary sketch of how a partly novel group of highly skilled people in the network society becomes increasingly more influential as viral politics becomes a political strategy in the everyday life. I call this group of people 'temporal elites' to denote their limited influence to certain fields and the highly unpredictable success in exerting influence over policy outcomes and agenda-setting.

Viral politics emanates from political entrepreneurs, that most often will be directly affected people of a certain event or phenomenon (the 'victims') and/or groups and organisations, both NGOs and political parties devoted to this particular cause (Burma Action Committee, Doctors Without Borders, Amnesty International, United Nations, Oxfam, political parties or politicians). In some cases, they will be individuals acting only on behalf of themselves, but usually being a part of a wider network of people sharing views and notions of political strategy. These individuals spread information and media content by word of mouth to wider groups of people through personal interconnectedness. If successful, the content/information will catch on and spread rapidly through the mechanism of viral politics, influencing the formal political system directly through personal contacts with political

representatives and indirect through the feedback loop provided by mainstream media.

The political entrepreneurs of a successful campaign of viral politics form, together with temporary supporters of the cause to be found in interconnected social networks, a temporal elite, having the necessary knowledge, skills and (perhaps above all) the motivation to promote the cause.

Sometimes, the concept of elite is put in opposition to the concept of democracy. It can however also be seen as an important part of well-functioning democracy, as in the tradition associated with competitive democracy, where the electorate is seen as fairly passive between elections, choosing between political alternatives depending on track record or promises, thus legitimating political representatives:

a small group of political leaders [...] with perhaps an intermediate section of more active citizens, who transmit demands and information between the mass and the leadership.<sup>39</sup>

The political entrepreneurs serving as a backbone of the temporal elite associated with viral politics are a group of people that fit well into this description of the intermediate section of David Miller's competitive elitist democracy model evident in the quote above. I would argue, though, that to the group of key political entrepreneurs in viral politics should be added a wider group of people, also belonging to the elite in the respect that they help spreading the campaign and provide a bandwagoning force for a successful cause to break into the traditional mass media outlets, but distinguished from the 'mass' by their political interest, knowledge and activism. In order to bring this group of people into our understanding of the temporal elites, I would like to point to Robert Putnam's classical model of political stratification.

In the model, based on empirical studies of national elites in various countries in the 1970s, the citizenry is divided into six strata, organised to form a pyramid of power:<sup>40</sup>

1. Proximate decision makers: incumbents in key official posts. This is normally a very small group of people.
2. Influentials: powerful opinion makers and people to who decision makers look for advice - high-level bureaucrats, interest group leaders. This is also a small group.

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3. Activists: This stratum is made up of the group of citizens who take active part in politics - as members of a political party or on a more private level. This is a larger group of people.
  4. Still larger is the stratum of the attentive public, which consists of citizens who follow the political debates as some kind of spectator sports. They rarely do something actively.
  5. The big bulk of citizens are the voters who have very limited, if any, political influence. They vote and that is it.
  6. Finally, the nonparticipants do not even vote and have no politic power what so ever.

The temporal elites would therefore serve to modify the second and third stratas, where the political entrepreneurs, or the core of the temporal elites, fit into Putnam's group of influentials, while the wider group of activists neatly fit into the group of activists. The major difference posed to this model of political stratification by the concept of temporal elites proposed here is that the political entrepreneurs of the temporal elites contain people who would not normally be counted as influentials. The initiative taker of, for instance, the 2007 Support the Monk's Protests in Burma campaign, a Canadian exchange student, was very influential in that the campaign gained hundreds of thousands of followers globally and forced governments and corporations to rethink their policies towards Burma/Myanmar, but a Canadian exchange student would not normally be counted to the group of 'powerful opinion makers'. The activist's stratum is also challenged by the temporal elites as they are made up by individuals participating in politics in a plethora of ways: organised, unorganised, postorganised.

According to Karl Deutsch's concept of the 'Opinion Cascade', the flow of information and persuasion between these political strata flow from the top down: emanating in the political and socioeconomic elite, transmitted by the mass media and opinion leaders to the mass public.<sup>41</sup> Could it be the case that the stability of the downward flow of information might be distorted by the rise of digital media, rising levels of education, post-materialist values, and that 'opinion leaders' should be constructed in a more inclusive way, and also that influence might flow upstream as well as downstream? The concept of temporal elites would point in that direction.

This new concept of elites does not mean that classic elites are not important; on the contrary. Financial and political elites are becoming increasingly powerful in an era of multilevel governance, ruling through

networks, hiding behind markets, making power invisible where there used to be a throne, although it is also true that power elites are not as stable as before.<sup>42</sup> The temporal elites might instead be seen as a potential counterforce, or at least complementing traditional elites in democracy. The brave new world of viral politics, networked individualism, and general social media carnivals, might not be a quick-fix for the problem with the unequal power distribution in representative democracies, but it is also not a reason to prophesy doom for all mankind: new developments should be compared to the status quo, not to an unattainable democratic ideal of total inclusivity. It is, however, also important to point out that, for those who have an ideal cherishing democratic equality, the potentially disproportional representation of a young, well-educated generation of native born citizens might widen the political elite in society, but also put more influence firmly in the hands of the well-off. Having said that, studies of political participation conducted in the past five decades have consistently shown that well-educated people with a high socio-economic status are more likely to participate than others. Technology alone will not offset this structure.

I would like to finish this section by elaborating on how the flexibility of Internet-mediated communication might lead to more people being able to join the ranks of ‘activists’.

An often-mentioned sociological phenomenon in the field of Internet sociology is the power law distribution. When analysing, for example, the contributions to a Wikipedia page, one of the most characteristic features is the huge difference between contributors in the number of contributions made and the size of each individual contribution. Some individuals contribute substantially more than others, and the ‘normal’ contribution is typically very small in size (compare with the discussion above on small world networks). There is no point in analysing average contributions, because the number and size of contributions among contributors is not normally distributed. Instead, the  $n$ th position has  $1/n$ th of the first person’s rank.<sup>43</sup>

The same is true for civic engagement in the setting of the post-organisational viral politics of social networks. A few individuals (political entrepreneurs) invest a very large amount of time in a political or social cause. These individuals constitute the inner core of the temporal elite associated with the cause in question. As they spread information about the cause in their social networks, some people will feel encouraged to invest an equal amount of time and join a temporal elite, some people will invest less, and most people will do little or nothing. The possibility of flexible engagement makes it attractive to more people to engage, as they can easily adapt the work effort put down to their personal priorities.<sup>44</sup>

The total sum of engagement may be equal or even higher than before, despite decreasing levels of membership in formal organisations

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devoted to social and political causes. The emergence of temporal elites and viral politics might in this way save democracy, although what will be saved is not the egalitarian ideal model of democracy, but the elitist realist model we actually live in.

#### **4. Identity Management and Annoyed Participation**

In a 2008 study, a small number of Swedish Facebook users were interviewed, using virtual focus groups, about their attitudes towards political content and mobilisation on the social networking site.<sup>45</sup> The participants were divided into two groups, one of which consisted of individuals who are active or have recently been active members of formal political organisations, while the other group consisted of individuals not having a formal political engagement.

I will cite a few of the results here in order to put some light on how complicated motives and actions of participants in viral politics are, and how further research must take that into account.

There were no major differences between the answers from the politically active participants and the non-active participants concerning the attitudes to political mobilisation in Facebook, except for the fact that several politically active participants reported that they have incorporated Facebook among other forms of communication in their formal political engagement. The participants in the focus groups had generally a sceptical view towards political campaigns in Facebook. Many of them maintained the notion that participating in political campaigns online in various forms filled mainly two functions: building your public or semi-public identity by expressing political views and concerns; and being an excuse not for taking a more active part in a campaign. Off-line activity was viewed in general as being more important or real:

To me, most Facebook causes seem utterly pointless as political/opinion forming tools. My impression is that they function more like markers for a group or an attitude that the user wants to identify with. Quite simply they become statements that you pose with on your Facebook page. It's really the same function as the summary of facts on the user profile, although they give a more active and engaged impression. (Participant)

The respondents also complained about the large number of requests for support from political campaigns, among an enormous number of other types of requests and invitations, leading to Facebook fatigue and a general reluctance toward any type of action.

However, most participants reported that they had actually taken part in off-line activities as a direct result of mobilisation using Facebook. They also reported, without exceptions, that they were indeed members of various groups on Facebook supporting political and social causes. One participant described this seemingly paradoxical behaviour as ‘annoyed participation’.<sup>46</sup> It was also clear, interestingly enough considering the importance of recruitment through social networks traditionally found in network studies and political participation studies, that who sent you a request to participate was just as important for whether one of the participants would join a cause or campaign as the subject itself.

This might be an indicator for people engaging in viral politics might not be aware of their own importance for a successful campaign and that empirical evaluation of the proposed model must be aware of this.

## 5. Conclusions

This chapter has tried to establish two new concepts in the academic debate over the development of political participation in the light of changing uses of computer-mediated communication. Viral politics, with connections to viral marketing and network theory, is used to describe a way of dispersing information through social networks, evident in later years and possibly an important ingredient in political participation in an era of networked individualism. Temporal elites, with connections to classic elite theory and to elitist democratic theory, denotes the people behind viral politics: a group of individuals, well-connected, well-educated and motivated to take an active part in politics, but not necessarily through joining political parties or even interest groups. It is my hope that these concepts might be found useful as the study of viral politics and of political participation in social media takes a much-needed empirical turn, informed by developing political theory.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> These propositions are made by a score of democratic theorists. Pippa Norris lists Rousseau, James Madison, J. S. Mill, Robert Dahl, Benjamin Barber, David Held and John Dryzak in P Norris, *Democratic Phoenix. Reinventing Political Activism*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2002, p. 5.

<sup>2</sup> D Held, *Models of Democracy*, Polity Press, Cambridge, 2006, pp. 125-157.

<sup>3</sup> P Bourdieu, 'The Forms of Capital', in *Education: Culture, Economy and Society*, A H Halsey, H Lauder, P Brown & A Stuart Wells (eds), Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1997, pp. 46-58.

<sup>4</sup> R Putnam, *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community*, Simon & Schuster, New York, 2000.

<sup>5</sup> R J Dalton, 'Citizenship Norms and the Expansion of Political Participation', *Political Studies*, vol. 56, 2008, pp. 76-98; Norris. See also B O'Neill, 'Indifferent or Just Different? The Political and Civic Engagement of Young People in Canada.' Canadian Policy Research Networks Research Report, 2007.

<sup>6</sup> R Inglehart, *The Silent Revolution. Changing Values and Political Styles Among Western Publics*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, 1977, esp. pp. 262-321.

<sup>7</sup> M Micheletti, *Political Virtue and Shopping: Individuals, Consumerism, and Collective Action*, Palgrave Macmillan, Basingstoke, 2003.

<sup>8</sup> G Stoker, 'Governance as Theory: Five Propositions', *International Social Science Journal*, vol. 50(155), 1998, pp. 17-28.

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<sup>14</sup> Y Benkler, *The Wealth of Networks*, Yale University Press, New Haven, 2007, esp. pp. 176-272.

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<sup>17</sup> On the invisibility of established technologies, see D Beer & R Burrows, 'Sociology and, of and in Web 2.0: Some Initial Considerations', *Sociological Research Online*, vol. 12(5), 2007, viewed on 12 August 2009, <<http://www.socresonline.org.uk/12/5/17.html>>. For an early influential example of a study linking the mere existence of the Internet to democratisation, see C Kedzie, 'Democracy and Network Connectivity', *Proceedings of the INET'95 International Networking Conference*, Honolulu, Hawaii, 1995, viewed on 12 August 2009, <<http://www.isoc.org/inet95/proceedings/PAPER/134/html/paper.html>>.

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<sup>24</sup> Jurvetson and Draper, p. 1.

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<sup>32</sup> M Granovetter, 'The Strength of Weak Ties', *The American Journal of Sociology*, vol. 78(6), 1973, p. 1374.

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<sup>36</sup> Granovetter, p. 1368.

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<sup>38</sup> A Chadwick, *Internet Politics: States, Citizens, and New Communications Technology*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2006, p. 27.

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<sup>40</sup> R Putnam, *The Comparative Study of Political Elites*, pp. 8-15.

<sup>41</sup> *ibid.*, p. 13.

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