

Cristian Vaccari and Augusto Valeriani, **Outside the Bubble: Social Media and Political Participation in Western Democracies**, New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2021, 287 pp., \$63.29 (hardcover), \$19.33 (paperback).

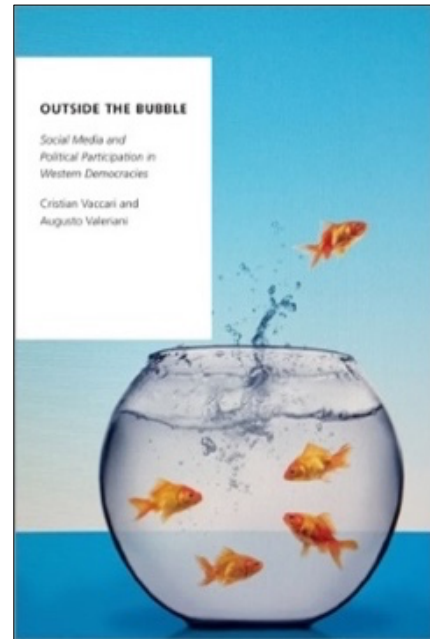
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Outside the Bubble: Social Media and Political Participation in Western Democracies comes in the context of Brexit and the election of Donald Trump to the presidency of the United States in 2016. The two most important political events of the last decade are generally considered as expressions of power of different populist movements and political proposals. These movements, making astute use of digital media, maximized their political benefits, namely leading to the exit of the United Kingdom from the European Union and the election of an American president with ties to Russia and markedly xenophobic and misogynistic positions.

Cristian Vaccari and Augusto Valeriani have developed several works in the last decade and a half in the fields of sociology, communication, and political science. Their research has addressed the impact of digital media on social and political activity, both at an institutional level and on a more informal and spontaneous level. A latent goal in the authors' latest work is to understand how digital media can induce interest in politics among social groups that are chronically distant from the political and institutional sphere. The authors see the consistent decrease in levels of institutional and political trust in various Western societies with liberal democracies as one of their main problems and suggest that we are currently facing a point of inversion of trends. The strong electoral mobilization that has taken place in particularly polarized contexts, such as the United States or Brazilian presidential elections, with historic levels of voters, indicates a growing interest in politics. It is in this context that the authors want to explore the mobilizing role of digital media by asking: What if digital media are benefiting democratic political processes by mobilizing those traditionally uninterested in politics? What if digital media is not empowering populist movements and their leaders?

The study reveals its originality when it theorizes users' exposure to political content as an informal, spontaneous, and accidental process, which increases interest in political activity and consequently decreases the number of citizens traditionally uninterested in politics. In this way, the authors demonstrate that the increase in political participation depends on social, cultural, political, and economic factors that lie upstream of the appropriation of digital media.

The authors define political participation as "a constellation of political actions performed across the online and offline domain—that aim to influence specific policies, the selection of public officials who determine



such policies, and the political preferences and behaviors of other citizens” (pp. 22–23). This definition has the advantage of astutely articulating offline and online political practices. Concretely, political participation in digital media implies exposure to political content without any action; proactive conduct of a political nature without the aim of influencing third parties; and actions that dare affect third parties in political terms. This definition enables a more diversified participation perspective, going beyond the vertical logic to encompass communicational flows of a horizontal nature arising from and characteristic of digital media.

With this investigation, Vaccari and Valeriani question the premise that digital media have negatively impacted political activity, as media tools available to populist movements. To be precise, *Outside the Bubble* argues that digital media—in particular digital social networks such as Facebook or Twitter—are not contributing to the accentuation of political homophily. The questionnaire, which gives empirical support to the work, includes nine countries (United States, United Kingdom, Denmark, Germany, France, Italy, Poland, and Spain), thereby allowing the authors to consider more than one quarter of the world’s citizens living in democratic regimes. Based on their empirical evidence, the authors contend that digital media are far from being the polarizing agent that many claim it is (Klein, 2020). The authors discern that, among the traditionally politicized group, the levels of participation tend to be relatively stable—that is, they do not grow at the same rate as the politically disinterested, which contributes to bringing normally excluded citizens into the debate and thus making the political space more public and diverse.

These new communication and interaction channels enhance new participatory opportunities, allowing a redistribution of political resources among citizens. The empirical evidence collected allows the authors to speak of a kind of “rising tide” of political participation. The main empirical evidence points to an increase in mobilization and political participation among different social categories. In other words, digital media are bringing more heterogeneous citizens into the public sphere and thereby contributing to a more diverse debate. Along this line of reasoning, the authors note that citizens who self-identify as being at the ideological extremes (left and right) show smaller increases in mobilization and participation compared with others. Ultimately, inequalities in access to public space can be mitigated.

The work is extremely relevant and timely. Its relevance is very significant if we consider the ongoing debate about the impact that digital media are having on the political process and the erosion of trust in the institutions that structure Western liberal democracies in particular. It is also current in that it contributes to the ongoing debate on how to regulate the use of digital social networks in the political sphere.

Despite the fact that the book is a scholarly work following the typical format of academic writing, whether due to conceptual rigor or the laborious empirical work carried out, it is written in a simple and direct manner, not raising any difficulty of interpretation for an interested reader outside academia.

It is also an innovative work, insofar as it integrates online and offline political experiences into the analytical equation. It simultaneously considers the political experiences that result from active behaviors, and those that happen in an unusual and unplanned way in which citizens are exposed to content, that contributes to the formation of their political opinion.

The book's conclusions about the increase in participation, especially among those who are chronically disinterested in politics, provide a fruitful starting point to building a more equal society, in particular through the mitigation of sociopolitical inequalities in contemporary Western societies. In this way, the main conclusions of the authors imply that contemporary populist movements are more strongly anchored to sociological factors, such as strong economic and social inequalities, produced and intensified above all in the context of a globalized and competitive market economy, as is argued by Eatwell and Goodwin (2018), and less to sociotechnical determinants such as the emergence of digital media.

Outside the Bubble constitutes a reference work for researchers who focus on digital media's effects on the political sphere and on the quality of liberal democracies. It is a pivotal work in the debate within the academic community itself, as it convincingly updates the theoretical discussion. One example is the cases of accidental political experiments that are enhanced by both the informality and the fluidity of communication and interaction dominant in digital social networks. It is suitable reading for policy makers and publics, as it contributes to more reflective political practices that allow for more effective dissemination and reception of the political message. The reading is also recommended from the perspective of understanding and combating phenomena such as hate speech, racism, xenophobia, or even misogyny that proliferate in digital social networks.

Reading the work raises several questions, among which is whether the increase in political mobilization and participation is worth it in itself. For example, is it healthy for public life to bring to the public sphere ideological ideas that call into question the freedoms of individuals and minority groups? On the other hand, placing emphasis on the qualitative character of participation, do greater mobilization and participation through digital media correspond to a quality contribution to the public and political process? Perhaps engaging with these challenges will allow us to overcome some limitations of the current social contract in contemporary Western societies.

References

Eatwell, R., & Goodwin, M. (2018). *National populism: The revolt against liberal democracy*. London: UK: Penguin.

Klein, E. (2020). *Why we're polarized*. London: UK: Profile.