

# Table of Contents

Social Media and the Networked Public Sphere . . . . . 1



# Social Media and the Networked Public Sphere

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Can social media increase and improve civic participation? If so, in what ways? There's a lot being said and written about the subject these days, but it is difficult to get a clear overview of the opinions.

I attempt here to collect viewpoints both for and against the premise that social media is creating a better public sphere, and analyze them in the context of what constitutes a public and its antithesis, a mass. In presenting what are sometimes extreme positions within this debate (too idealistic v. too critical), my hope is to begin to understand the reality that lies in the middle, and come closer to understanding social media's potential (and limitations) as a tool to bring about social change.

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At a general level, we could say that on one side of the debate are those who believe that social media can increase civic participation and shift the balance of power away from the institutions that currently stand in the way of change. On the other side are those who warn that social media can only offer a reduced form of participation, that it diminishes the value of individual contributions, and that it leaves social systems more prone to manipulation by lowering their intelligence to the minimum common denominator (i.e., stupidity or mediocrity).

Thus, the debate can be framed in terms of whether social media can engender democratic publics that embody an intelligence and capacity for action greater than the sum of its members, or whether it will merely continue to support the production of anti-democratic masses of disenfranchised and alienated consumers. Of course, social media is a big label encompassing many different technologies, and even the same technologies can be applied differently in various contexts. But while features and applications might differ, the people contributing to this debate are obviously focused on the aggregated impact that social media is having on our societies rather than on specific examples of applications.

The effects of social media are probably most visible in emerging forms of public discourse and collaboration. Given that our notions of democracy are closely tied to the ability to voice one's opinion and to the ability to organize collective action, this is not surprising. The more opportunities for discussion and collaboration (such as those allegedly generated by blogs and wikis), the healthier the public sphere and the healthier the democracy, goes the argument.

In his book *The Power Elite* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1956) C. Wright Mills summarized, with a touch of dry humor, this model of democratic "authority by discussion:"

The people are presented with problems. They discuss them. They decide on them. They formulate viewpoints. These viewpoints are organized, and they compete. One viewpoint 'wins out.' Then the people act out this view, or their representatives are instructed to act it out, and this they promptly do. (pp. 299-300)

Idealists believe that social media improves the processes described above by giving us more efficient tools for discussion and for 'acting out' what comes out of these discussions. But the problem is that, in practice, democracy does not unfold so neatly. Mills argued that an unequal distribution of power and knowledge allows a small elite to impose its viewpoint on the population (through the media, for instance) while convincing them that it is the people's will that the elite is carrying out on its behalf. Authentic democracies require an informed public to operate. Conversely, oligarchies require the

consensual passivity and ignorance of a mass. But what role exactly do publics and masses play in each situation?

Below, I extract from Mills' argument three features of a democratic public sphere and present his analysis of how a public reflects those characteristics, while a mass doesn't. I then summarize some arguments from the social media debate which suggest how social media realizes, or fails to realize, that particular feature of a public sphere. I would like to point out that although there are many people contributing to this debate, I am only citing some of the authors I am most familiar with.

## FEATURES OF A DEMOCRATIC PUBLIC SPHERE:

### 1) Balance between the ability to produce and consume ideas

In a public, according to Mills, "as many people express opinions as receive them." In a mass, "far fewer people express opinions than receive them; for the community of publics becomes an *abstract collection of individuals* who receive impressions from the mass media" (Mills, 1956, pp. 303-304; my emphasis).

Advocates of social media argue that it represents an opportunity to reverse a process of massification and returns people to the status of a public. This is because social media, they argue, allows individuals to become producers, not mere consumers, thus making it possible for as many people to express as to receive opinions. This position is captured in Jay Rosen's manifesto [The People Formerly Known as The Audience](#). According to Rosen, users of social media are saying to the old media: "You don't own the press, which is now divided into pro and amateur zones. You don't control production on the new platform, which isn't one-way. There's a new balance of power between you and us." I also have [suggested](#) that the alternative models of participation, collaboration and ownership that social media makes possible can have a significant social transformative power. If you change the ways of producing and consuming culture, you change society.

Alternatively, critics of social media are not convinced that it fundamentally changes the balance between production and consumption. As I have [argued](#) (yes, I tend to argue both sides!), when looking beyond exceptional examples, the new forms of production that social media affords amount to nothing more than new forms of consumerism for the majority of users. Production is the new consumption. Indeed, social media generates more opportunities for people to express themselves. But the majority of people remain equally susceptible to impressions from the mass media because they fail to evolve into anything more than an "abstract collection of individuals," as Mills puts it (this [recent Pew study](#) seems to support the claim that most bloggers, for example, prefer to talk about themselves and avoid political topics). In other words, giving means of expression to each individual in a mass is not enough to transform the mass into a community of publics. The other features of a democratic public sphere will further clarify why this is the case.

### 2) Affordable and effective means of producing ideas

In a public, Mills argues, "communications are so organized that there is a chance immediately and effectively to answer back any opinion expressed in public." In a mass, "the communications that prevail are so organized that it is difficult or impossible for the individual to answer back immediately or with any effect" (Mills, 1956, pp. 303-304; my emphasis).

Again, supporters of social media claim that we are entering an age when it is indeed possible for individuals to respond to any public opinion. The cost of becoming part of the networked public sphere has become negligible, and new models of participation are being developed and tested. Jimmy Wales, founder of Wikipedia, recently launched an [initiative](#) that seeks to redefine the political

process: "If broadcast media brought us broadcast politics, then participatory media will bring us participatory politics. One hallmark of the blog and wiki world is that we do not wait for permission before making things happen. If something needs to be done, we do it." While not everyone will use this opportunity to become a full-fledged activist, Ross Mayfield [argues](#) that social media can provide different levels of participation to accommodate even the most apathetic: "few of us have time or interest in politics, but there is a way for us all to have civic engagement within our means. That way is through social software." He goes on to describe how social software is changing the public sphere:

The cost for personal publishing has fallen to zero. It's common for citizens to express a facet of their identity online. The cost for group forming has fallen to zero. Networked appeal has proven itself as a fundraising mechanism. A broad conversational network and common sense repository supports collective sense making. Today social software has gained use broad enough to support civic engagement.

While individual opinions can be dismissed, argue enthusiasts, social media represents a more effective public sphere because it aggregates the voices of thousands and is able to respond to issues immediately (the 'collective common sense' Ross is talking about). Using James Surowiecki's thesis about the '[wisdom of crowds](#),' advocates propose that social media engenders an intelligence of its own, an intelligence aggregated from individual contributions but greater than the sum of them, and which allows for a more effective process of generating and selecting the best ideas and responses.

Immediate and low-cost response? Yes. Effective? Not so much, say the critics of social media. In an [article](#) that has generated a fair amount of debate, Jaron Lanier warned of the danger of endowing social media with a more effective intelligence than our own: "The beauty of the Internet is that it connects people. The value is in the other people. If we start to believe the Internet itself is an entity that has something to say, we're devaluing those people and making ourselves into idiots." In a follow-up [interview](#), Lanier elaborated:

"Let me be specific: I don't like people pretending something better than themselves exists in the computer. This is a great danger... You get a bunch of people together on a project, and they quickly become anonymous. They contribute to some sort of computer-mediated phenomenon, and treat the results as an oracle."

Supporters of social media have [contested](#) Lanier's claims that it undermines individual contributions and suggested that it is effective precisely because of them. Wales, for example, says that "authoring at Wikipedia, as everywhere, is done by individuals exercising the judgment of their own minds." Clay Shirky adds that "individual motivations in Wikipedia are not only alive and well, it would collapse without them."

It is because we believe (rightly or wrongly) that social media aggregates the best of individual contributions that we trust the results. But what is at stake here is precisely the way the computational processes of social media get to define what constitutes sociality. Trebor Scholz, for example, [describes](#) how individual contributions are not simply channeled by social media, but fundamentally transformed in the process (in this case, he is talking about social bookmarking):

Individual goals of participants are not always shared by the "group," which gives the del.icio.us project a decisively non-collaborative character. What does collaboration mean? Collaboration is generally a risky, intensive form of working together with a common goal. The gain or loss is shared among all. Cooperation, on the other hand, is a less intensive form of working together in which participants account for gain or loss individually. Contributors have individual goals.

According to these definitions, while social media users may cooperate, they might not necessarily be collaborating. Could this be enough to distinguish a public from a mass? I had made a related argument [previously](#) (again, talking about social bookmarking): "tags have to make sense first and foremost to the individual who assigns and uses them. And yet, the whole point of distributed classification systems (DCSs) such as del.icio.us and flickr is that the aggregation of inherently private goods (tags and what they describe) has public value..." However, if the code aggregates contributions by disaggregating goals (individualizing motives), what exactly is the public value of social media?

In other words, we should ask whether in processing individual contributions, social media's code engenders affordances more along the lines of a public or a mass. The answer to that question is directly related to Mills' last feature of a democratic public sphere.

### 3) Ideas are translated into action

According to Mills, in a public, "opinion formed by such discussion readily finds an outlet in effective action, *even against—if necessary—the prevailing system of authority.*" In a mass, "the realization of opinion in action is controlled by authorities who organize and control the channels of such action" (Mills, 1956, pp. 303-304; my emphasis).

This is where the virtual rubber must meet the actual road, so to speak. Advocates of social media believe in its power to unleash new forms of action extending beyond the boundaries of cyberspace into the 'real' world. The Open Planning Project's (or [TOPP](#)) mission statement, for instance, states that:

Instead of harassing our overworked public officials, TOPP believes in building tools that will ultimately aid them directly, increasing efficiency in true democratic decision making through projects that streamline citizen involvement and enable the accessibility and effective use of public information... TOPP wants to bring people out of the virtual and in to the real, where the network can have a huge effect, by motivating for change in a community, and bringing people together for action instead of just talking.

Not only are critics skeptical of social media's ability to ignite action in the 'real' world at a large scale but some, like Nicholas Carr, argue that new social media initiatives will end up merely replicating the same forms of authority and governance that are currently the source of the problem. This is because it is we who shape social media by encoding our forms of sociality into it, not the other way around. Thus, according to him, social media experiments are bound to result in un-innovative forms of social action. Citing an [interview](#) with some of its most active members, Carr [quips](#) that Wikipedia has "become more interesting as an experiment in emergent bureaucracy than in emergent content." He illustrates by pointing out that "the rules governing the deletion of an entry now take up '37 pages plus 20 subcategories.'" For anyone who still thinks of Wikipedia as a decentralized populist collective, the interview will be particularly enlightening."

The nature of the role that the individual plays in social media is what limits its potential to transform society, according to the critics. Previously, the concern was that social spaces like the blogosphere reinforced people's narrow group identities. For instance, Trebor Scholz (borrowing the concept of *plural monocultures* from Amartya Sen) [wrote](#):

The Internet becomes a fabulous host for this type of multiculturalism. Often, no two opinions have to confront each other. In their own inner chamber people can forget about racial, ethnic or economical differences and just talk about the very narrow interest set that connects them.

Now, asserts the critical camp, social media takes the next step by altogether removing any trace of the individual's identity in the name of a higher collective intelligence. Social media is built on individual contributions, yes, but the code must remove any present biases before aggregating them into a meaningful data set. Otherwise, the output would be too noisy. Social media's collective intelligence, its perceived 'wisdom of crowds,' is directly related to the degree that its code can accomplish this cleansing of personal opinion.

While valorizing this new form of computationally-derived intelligence might not necessarily lead to a devaluation of individual intelligence (as Lanier, Carr, et. al would seem to suggest), it's true that it might lead to a scenario where individuals must compromise their individuality in order to get through the filters of social media.

For example, Howard Rheingold, in his reaction to Jimmy Wales' new project, [wrote](#) that

One important contribution to political discourse that we could all adopt from Wikipedia is the "neutral point of view" process: Because anyone who disagrees with you can change your wiki entry with the click of a mouse, it is necessary to clearly articulate the different points of view on a subject -- and to state them well enough that someone who disagrees with your own point of view won't be motivated to edit your statement.

In other words: express your point of view in such a way that your opponent won't find anything to fault in it. If before communication was defined as the *sharing* of meaning, now social media provides a space where meaning can be assembled without being shared, and provides the mechanisms to enforce this kind of neutrality [for a response from Rheingold, see [this](#) post]. The problem is that meaning then becomes atomistic, a reflection of what the code has aggregated from detached individuals, not what has emerged through debate and cooperation. Paradoxically, social media provides less incentive for people to be social.

If the end goal is a neutral point of view, the danger lies not in erasing the individual's contributions, but in inadequately supporting the mechanisms that allow individuals to share meaning. Nicholas Carr's '[law of the wiki](#)' —which asserts that the more people involved, the lower the quality of the wiki— seeks to name this phenomenon: unlimited aggregation does not result in order, but in randomness. Wikipedia contributors themselves [recognize](#) that good articles are the result of small communities of experts working without interference from the larger public.

What can we conclude from the various perspectives I've summarized above?

Advocates of social media will point out that while there are applications such as wikis and social bookmarking that embody this 'unlimited aggregation' approach, the ecology of social media is balanced by the presence of other applications such as blogs and social networking where individuality and cooperation are alive and well. They might be right to an extent. By using a mix of social media, communities can benefit both from the wisdom of crowds and the wisdom of individuals.

Social media —which makes visible the connections between the online and the onsite— is helping us understand that reality doesn't just serve as a metaphor for computer-facilitated interaction; rather, it is its very medium. For the most part, critics are no longer using the 'virtuality' of the networked public sphere as an excuse to declare it unreal or less than real. Actions still speak louder than words, regardless of whether the words originate online or onsite. The question we are now interested in is whether these new forms of action can emerge even against the prevailing systems of authority, or whether they are still organized and controlled within the framework of the dominant sphere of debate. Will the old concepts of public and mass be enough to capture the possibilities?

*Offline Reference*

Mills, C. W. (1956). *The power elite*. New York: Oxford University Press.