York, Oakland, Quebec, Barcelona, and Chicago challenged the status quo of finance and politics.

To put human faces on the pioneers, mention could again be made of the prominent exemplars whose workings on politics and organization are considered transformative by the social media of the world. The United States is credited with introducing social media into high politics. Other figures like Governor Howard Dean of Vermont laid the groundwork of digital activism for political causes and office. However, Barack Obama is rightly celebrated as the political figure who pioneered such methods and changed political communication, fundraising, and mobilization worldwide.

Candidates to congresses and parliaments, governors, and leaders in public institutions now engage their constituencies through digital media. A good example of the power of the Facebook effect has been Oscar Morales, a Colombian citizen who confronted the guerrilla politics of kidnapping. His mobilization of demonstrations throughout world's cities using Facebook resulted in the release of a hostage.

In Russia, Aleksei Navalny, an anticorruption blogger, is acknowledged as a maverick who sparked an opposition movement through a Russian equivalent of Facebook, Vkontakte. Chinese dissident artist Ai Weiwei is recognized as a voice of alternate politics mediated by social media. Wael Ghonim, who spearheaded the mobilization of followers in Egypt through Facebook and Twitter, is honored as a pioneer in the region. Ory Okolloh's online campaign on Ushahidi moderated the brutality of political violence in Kenya. Kim Ou-Joon and his colleagues, with their satirical weekly podcast called *Neneuen Ggomsuda*, also pioneered a political paradigm of multilateral engagement of public discourses with academic and political constituencies.

The list of innovators and participants linking social media and political pioneers with momentous events and transformed realities is long. Nevertheless, the salience of the revolution and its huge number of actors spanning geographic, cultural, and ideological boundaries cannot be exaggerated.

Alem Hailu
Helen Bond
*Howard University*

**See Also:** Activists and Activism, Digital; Facebook; Twitter; Zuckerberg, Mark.

### Further Readings

Chatora, Arthur. *Encouraging Political Potential of Social Media Platforms*. Pretoria, South Africa: Africa Portal, A Project of the African Initiative, 2012.

Dyson, Freeman J. *The Sun, the Genome, and the Internet: Tools of Scientific Revolutions*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1999.

Kirkpatrick, David. *The Facebook Effect: The Inside Story of the Company That Is Connecting the World*. New York: Simon & Schuster, 2010.

Leader, Brian D. and Dan Mercea, eds. *Social Media and Democracy: Innovations in Participatory Politics*. London: Routledge, 2012.

O'Connor, Rory. *Friends, Followers and the Future: How Social Media Are Changing Politics, Threatening Brands*. San Francisco: City Lights Books, 2012.

# Platform

Microblogging sites such as Twitter, video-sharing sites such as YouTube, and social-network sites such as Facebook are social media platforms. The metaphor of a platform refers to a horizontal structure raised above a particular situation; for example, a stage for public speakers. Translated to the digital realm, the platform renders social media sites accessible for ordinary people to voice themselves. This understanding of a platform as an empty vessel of communication rests on the combined notions of equal opportunity and technological neutrality. Framing social media sites as neutral platforms, however, tends to conceal a key tension in their relationships to politics. The public use of social media platforms for political discourse is structured by the commercial imperatives behind these sites.

Social media platforms have become strategic political fields, as citizens across the world use them to gather together, express their opinions, protest injustices, and mobilize around civic initiatives. Politicians also use them as platforms for campaigning and public communication. The

large user base of platforms like Facebook, YouTube, and Twitter are the product of not only their usefulness in communication practices, but also of the profit incentives guiding their provision of a "free" communication infrastructure. The drive to profit from user data and behavior shapes Web site architecture and policies primarily in the service of private interests, rather than public spheres.

The central function of the term *platform* in this context is to elide the power differential between commercial actors and "ordinary" users. At the same time, however, the political activity of ordinary people using social media platforms is significant. Especially in massive political mobilizations such as the Arab Spring of 2011 or the Québec student protests of 2012, social media platforms played a central role in facilitating physical demonstrations that in many cases led to political change. As ordinary people increasingly circulate their views on the Web, for the first time in history, the breadth and scope of citizen perspectives and debates becomes archived and accessible.

However, as Tarleton Gillespie argues, platforms are not neutral. The promise of the platform as a level playing field for social participation obscures asymmetrical power dynamics between users and corporate powers that exploit and appropriate user participation. Advertising is the central mechanism through which social media platforms exert control over users. Personal information about users is collected in exchange for their access to commercial social media sites, in accordance with the terms and conditions agreed to upon signing up. Further, user behaviors online, such as page visits, clicks, and search terms, are also monitored and compiled as part of "behavioral advertising" models that seek to predict future consumer behavior based on the patterns of individual users.

Ultimately, the advertising imperative that underlies social media platforms effectively limits the scope of users' online action by consolidating Web content into the interface of a particular social media platform. Facebook, for example, compiles various online content in its newsfeed, and at the same time, Facebook's trademark "like" button is ubiquitous across the Web. The corporate monopolies of Facebook, YouTube, and Twitter are leading to an increasing enclosure of users' radius of online action. Instead of an open and accessible network, the Web is increasingly fenced off in proprietary walled gardens.

Thanks to the apparent equality and neutrality of a platform, this transformation and its attendant power dynamic tends to go unnoticed in everyday social media use. Most users remain unaware of how their actions and personal information generates value for platform owners. The political consequence of this is a widespread penetration of surveillance practices into the very architecture of social media platforms. While this surveillance is ostensibly a function of the platforms' advertising models, it can also be used for political ends, such as in the aftermath of the Arab Spring, in which particular organizers were identified and targeted by repressive governments through their social media activities.

On the surface, social media platforms seem to provide an equal opportunity for all users to participate in public debate over a neutral communications infrastructure. Yet, the commercial motives behind sites like Facebook, YouTube, and Twitter seriously undermine the political promise of platforms in rendering users into commodities through what are effectively practices of online surveillance. The consequence of having commercially owned public spaces can be seen especially in politically turbulent situations, when corporate control over the means of communication tends to side with powerful private and authoritarian interests, as opposed to the public interest. In this way, platforms are not neutral; they structure and regulate political discourse and freedom of expression.

Koen Leurs
*Utrecht University*
Tamara Shepherd
*Ryerson University*

**See Also:** Activists and Activism; Advertising and Marketing Aggregation; Arab Spring; Privacy; Social Networking Web Sites.

## Further Readings

Campbell, John Edward and Matt Carlson. "Panopticon.com: Online Surveillance and

EBSCO Publishing : eBook Collection (EBSCOhost) - printed on 7/14/2017 6:54 AM via UTRECHT UNIVERSITY
AN: 713043 ; Harvey, Kerric, Sage Publications.; Encyclopedia of Social Media and Politics
Account: s4754244

the Commodification of Privacy." *Journal of Broadcasting & Electronic Media,* v.46/4 (2002).

Cohen, Nicole S. "The Valorization of Surveillance: Towards a Political Economy of Facebook." *Democratic Communiqué,* v.22/1 (2008).

Gillespie, Tarleton. "The Politics of 'Platforms.'" *New Media & Society,* v.12/3 (2010).

MacKinnon, Rebecca. *Consent of the Networked: The Worldwide Struggle for Internet Freedom.* New York: Basic Books, 2012.

# Podcasts

Podcasts are audio recordings that are disseminated via the Internet through a sound file. According to the latest Pew Research Center's 2012 State of the News Media report, there are approximately 91,000 podcasts in existence and 25 percent of Americans reported listening to podcasts in 2011.

Podcasting began as an offshoot of blogging, when technology evolved to a point that it became possible to embed audio files into a blog post and disseminate them through the same channels as a blog. The term *podcast* was developed as a derivative of Apple Corporation's iPod, an audio device that facilitates digital downloads and playback of audio files. The earliest appearances of the word in the lexicon date back to 2004; however, its adoption was quite rapid, as the *New Oxford American Dictionary* named "podcast" the word of the year for 2005. The term *podcast* is a bit of a misnomer because it infers that podcasts are only available for consumption via an iPod device, when in reality, they can be consumed via any computer if the proper software is downloaded. The podcasts are usually produced as an MP3 file for convenience because most players can accommodate that file type. Podcasts can be produced quickly and easily, and disseminated through a variety of social media channels. There are millions of podcast episodes in existence across a wide variety of genres, from education to sports, science to news, and politics. Listeners interested in a particular podcast series can also subscribe via an really simple syndication (RSS) feed, so that each new episode will automatically download on the user's device, instead of the user having to search for it on the Web. A variation of the podcast is the video podcast or "vodcast." This is similar in concept to the podcast, but adds a visual element.

## Attributes and Drawbacks

Podcasts offer the user the benefit of convenience and portability. They can be listened to during a commute to work or during an evening run, whenever and wherever is convenient for the listener. Improvements in technology even allow an amateur to produce a podcast that sounds as good as something a professional might create. However, this does not mean that every podcast is created equal. Without planning and attention to details such as acoustics, vocal quality, ambient noise, and good content, a podcast will fail. To be successful, podcasts should be relevant, on topic, and thoughtful.

It is important to recognize that almost anyone can produce a podcast and claim to be an expert on a topic. Podcasts are often not put through the same sort of editing or fact checking as would a piece produced by a media company. As a result, finding podcasts that are worth the time invested to listen to them is a challenge. If a podcast is embedded within a blog, there is often an opportunity to preview the content through an episode guide or synopsis so that the listener can evaluate the creator's credentials and credibility and determine whether or not it is worth the time to listen. Podcasts are also one sided. They do not allow the listener to engage with the speaker as they might during a live broadcast. However, if the podcast is embedded within another medium like a blog, the author can use the comments feature in the blog to allow for interaction with the listeners.

Access to technology should also be considered with regard to the appropriate use of podcasts. Though it may seem otherwise, not everyone has Internet access. As a result, only a fragment of the population may be able to benefit from a podcast.

## Podcasts and Politics

Podcasts have been used by a number of different political entities. Both major political parties and individual politicians have podcasts. At last count, there were over 250 different podcasts listed under the "News and Politics" category heading

EBSCO Publishing : eBook Collection (EBSCOhost) - printed on 7/14/2017 6:54 AM via UTRECHT UNIVERSITY
AN: 713043 ; Harvey, Kerric, Sage Publications.; Encyclopedia of Social Media and Politics
Account: s4754244

on iTunes, Apple's library of downloadable pod-casts. *The New Yorker* magazine, for example, produces the *Political Scene Podcast*, hosted by the magazine's executive editor, Washington correspondent, and others. The podcast discusses the previous week's White House activity. As private individuals can produce a podcast almost as easily as *The New Yorker*, it is now easier than ever for interested parties to contribute their voices to political discourse.

John Dolan
*Pennsylvania State University*

**See Also:** Audience Fragmentation/Segmentation; Blog Syndication; Blogs; Embedding; RSS Feeds; User-Generated Content; Web 2.0.

**Further Readings**
Educause. "7 Things You Should Know About Podcasting." http://net.educause.edu/ir/library/pdf/ELI7003.pdf (Accessed September 2012).

Pew Research Center. "The State of the News Media 2012." http://stateofthemedia.org/2012/audio-how-far-will-digital-go/audio-by-the-numbers (Accessed September 2012).

"'Podcast' Is the Word of the Year." Oxford University Press. http://www.us.oup.com/us/brochure/NOAD_podcast (Accessed September 2012).

Ralph, Jason. "Pol-Casting: The Use of Podcasting in the Teaching and Learning of Politics and International Relations." *European Political Science*, v.9/1 (2010).

# Polarization, Political

Political polarization is a process by which political opinions in a given population diverge toward extremes, generally along party lines. This process leads to a reduction in dialogue between people of different political views, and to a decreased chance of political compromise between them. Social media can be seen as both a causal factor in this process and a force that is shaped by it. The content of social media is often not original to that platform, but instead consists of articles, images, or videos that are shared from other media outlets. Coupled with the rise of partisan news channels, talk radio, and Web sites, there is a substantial amount of information that is presented in a way that confirms the views of its consumers, often offering only a token of dissent or none at all, which can be posted to a person's social networking pages and shared with their social networks.

This in turn allows these polarized versions of news stories to "go viral" and quickly circulate among these political communities. The effects of this polarization are debatable, and the extent to which social media increases polarization is likewise contentious. However, there is a substantial discourse surrounding political uses of social media, and their impacts on political polarization and this discourse seems likely to be influential for the foreseeable future.

## Pro-Polarizing Effects

Much of the political discourse on social media tends to reinforce and accelerate the processes of political polarization. This is because social media users tend to subscribe to news from sources that share their ideological perspectives, and that are unlikely to challenge their views in any significant way. The sheer abundance of choice in this politically tailored media can even give the impression that one is exposed to a multitude of views, which is supposedly essential for the effective running of democratic governments.

However, the fact that people can see an enormous number of commentators and reporters echoing the same views and purported facts means that this impression is not only likely to be in error, it is also highly probable that their politically polarized views are reinforced by the sense that most people agree with this view. In other words, this self-selection of media is compounded via social media to create false impressions of majority belief and the unquestionable rationality and truth of one's political preferences. Genuine shock at election results that contradict one's expectations can result. Although this surely existed before the rise of social media, the potential problem for democracies is that this shock could be translated into questioning the validity of the results and the political process itself, which undermines the ultimate legitimacy of the