

POLITICS AS “CUSTOMER RELATIONS”: SOCIAL MEDIA AND POLITICAL AUTHENTICITY IN THE 2010 MUNICIPAL ELECTIONS IN CALGARY, CANADA

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Abstract

A political leader's authenticity has always been a site of struggle: politicians have tried to control their own image, while mass media has promised to reveal the “real” self behind the electoral campaign. In recent years, social media such as Facebook, Twitter or YouTube have gained a positive reputation as electoral tools. This paper seeks to critically engage with this reputation, by focusing on how these services become discursively articulated with the notion of political “authenticity” in the case of the 2010 municipal elections in Calgary, Canada. In these elections, the intense use of social media by the winning candidate has been seen as proof of the democratic power of these communication technologies to bring together politicians and citizens. A qualitative thematic analysis of 86 undergraduate essays reveals how participants collectively talked about political “authenticity.”

The paper argues that political “authenticity” becomes articulated as a result of the intrinsic features of social media, reinforcing the longstanding technological determinist view of technology as the guarantor of a better citizen/politician relation. The discursive articulation of social media and political “authenticity” portrays politics as a customer relations service, providing little insight into how we are to understand and relate to democratic politics after elections.

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Introduction

The relation between politics and mass-mediated communication has been a central problematic in communication studies. Mass media have been envisaged as safeguarding democracy, by keeping political and economic elites accountable to citizens. Yet, the role of media vis-à-vis democratic politics depends, to a great extent, on the way in which politics is *conceptualized*; James Carey, for instance, has argued that “the meanings of democracy and communication are historically variable. The meaning of democracy changes over time because forms of communication with which to conduct politics change. The meaning of communication also changes over time depending on the central impulses and aspirations of democratic politics” (1993, 2). This paper starts from Carey’s premise, mapping collective talk about “democratic politics” and “social media” in the specific case of the 2010 municipal elections in Calgary, Alberta. Both the traditional media coverage and the everyday stories produced by the respondents in this study position these elections as shaped by the winning candidate’s use of Facebook, Twitter and YouTube. These communication technologies – commonly understood as “social media” – are imagined as the solution to the wider problems of democracy: deceitful politicians; civic apathy; lack of information and rapport between citizens and politicians; insurmountable gap between citizens’ concerns and politics.

Such accounts of the power of social media to improve democratic politics are now part of collective imaginaries: from Barack Obama’s use of social media in the 2008 elections in the U.S., to the use of social media by citizens opposing political and economic systems across the world, an unrestrained hype promises that social media will improve politics. But, going back to Carey, how does communication through social media change our understanding of democratic politics, and vice versa? In this paper, the focus is on the ways in which social media’s role in, and effects on, politics were *conceptualised* by a sample of 86 undergraduate students at the University of Calgary (Canada). The paper advances two research questions: how are the notions of “social media” and “political authenticity” discursively brought together; and, what understanding of politics does this articulation recommend?

The paper argues that “political authenticity” becomes understood as a result of the intrinsic features of social media. This view is both compelling and problematic: it draws from a longstanding determinist view of technology as the “solution” to the problems of democracy. This view, I argue, effaces the power struggles within democratic politics and leaves us unprepared to deal with our relation to politicians after elections. The juxtaposition of “social media” and “politics” does seem exciting; in that sense, it opens up the possibility of becoming enthusiastic once again about politics (which may – or may not – result in a renewed engagement). Yet, this excitement rides the novelty wave over a technology seen as “cool” or “fashionable.” If the history of previous communication technologies serves as an indicator, the further stabilisation the social role of these media will be accompanied by their appropriation by the existing power structures and a growing skepticism around their “revolutionary” effects on society. Furthermore, this view ends up positioning politics as a customer relations service, with the implication that our relations with politicians are (a) intimate, yet individualised (where we “personally know” each other), and (b) a communicative exchange between the

politician/sender and the citizen/receiver, that instantly gratifies the citizen and gives her a sense of “empowerment.” These are highly problematic implications, particularly in their resonance with a wider neo-liberal ethos that has come to define contemporary social life.

The Role of Authenticity in Contemporary Politics

The philosophical principle of “authenticity” was developed in an attempt to deal with the ontological relation between Self and Others. Initially, authenticity was articulated as an ethic for living in a democratic polis, where the individual was not only resisting a stifling power structure, but was also responsible for its transformation into a more egalitarian and equitable polis (e.g. Berman 1970; Taylor 1991; Rossinow 1998; Heter 2006). The political project behind authenticity was one of resistance to conservative and prescriptive social norms and structures. From its beginnings, authenticity was a political project: an attempt to organise social life, inspired by the democratic ideal of a society structured along the principles of equality and freedom. The possibility of individual happiness and self-fulfilment demanded the recognition that everyone else, regardless of their position in society, need to be provided with the same possibility of self-fulfilment. It is this link between self and others that makes the possibility of an “authentic” life a site of struggle: what social arrangements are best suited for ensuring it? What leaders will best serve this goal?

The emphasis on equality and fairness made authenticity appealing to left-wing politics. Doug Rossinow’s (1998) comprehensive review of the new left movement in the U.S. during the 1940s – 1970s stands apart as a unique foray into the re-appropriation of authenticity in contemporary politics. Within this Marxist intellectual environment, authenticity remains a site of tension, constantly re-conceptualised to make room for religious and nationalist ideologies that would further help rallying the support of different groups in the effort to challenge the existing political and economic arrangements. Rossinow’s work reveals the discursive political prowess of the notion of “authenticity”: the efforts of the American left to mobilise citizens around the ideal of the authentic life, opposed to the alienation produced by the capitalist regime, failed by the 1970s. Yet, “surprisingly, authenticity has remained a salient term of discussion in the United States even as its opposite, alienation, has dropped from sight” (1998, 340). “Authenticity” shifts from a focus on the social to a focus on the self; as Rossinow seems to suggest, this change in meaning also led to the marginalisation of public discussions about alienation, the structural inequalities produced by capitalism, and “public demands for more democracy” (1998, 345).

Other scholars locate the quest for authenticity in politics within wider transformations of the ways in which politics is run and conceptualised. The quest for the “honest politician” has been accompanied by a growing sense of inauthenticity in politics. The latter is related to other worries about contemporary politics, such as citizens’ disengagement from politics, increased skepticism about politicians’ agendas, concerns over growing social inequalities, and an emergent belief that democratic decision-making is simply not working. Hay, Stoker and Williamson argue that “contemporary political disaffection is not ... a story of the decline in civic virtue – it is one of disenchantment, even hatred, of politics and politicians. It is not that we have stopped caring ... but our emotive and impassioned responses are increasingly negative in tone and character” (2008, 2; see also Wodak 2009).

Anna Inés Langer (2011) describes this transformation of politics in terms of two intertwined processes: the presidentialisation of power (accumulation of political power in the hands of individuals) and the personalisation of politics. The latter is further broken down into two elements: an increased focus in the public arena on the politician's leadership qualities, and a focus on the personal life and human qualities. This focus on the personal, she argues, is a relatively new expectation within politics: an increasing demand that politicians make their personal lives and qualities publicly available. Furthermore, the personal has now become a key criterion for assessing, and as a reason for identifying with, a politician (Langer 2011, 47-50). In other words, we are invited to judge politicians through the lens of their "authenticity." The character of the politician becomes revealed in her personal life, and mass media play a crucial role here. By virtue of being positioned as the gatekeepers of democracy, media certainly promise to make politicians "known" to us, the citizens. Other trends, such as the weakening power of political parties to elicit citizens' loyalty, the politicisation of personal lifestyle and consumer choices, and the increasing preoccupation with the intimate lives of public figures coalesce in creating the conjuncture within which "authenticity" becomes the lens through which we evaluate a politician and decide to place our faith in her.

Politicians themselves encourage this trend. Although not all fall under this category, iconic presidents such as Bill Clinton or Vladimir Putin often entertain the media's – as well as the electorate's – quench for the "personal," making available images of themselves playing the saxophone or horse-back riding *sans* shirt, depending on the collective values associated with good leadership. In their discussion of Clinton's authenticity, Parry-Giles and Parry-Giles argue that "the dominant characteristic of politics in post-modern America is its hyperreality – a condition created by the dominance of representation and the explosion of media" (2002, 1). The constant bombardment with images of Clinton's private life promised Americans that they will get to "know" the "real Clinton," by following what he did, felt and thought in his private life. This "personal" information authenticated his sincerity, not only in terms of who he was as a person, but also in terms of his presidential actions (Parry-Giles and Parry-Giles 2002, 126). On the other hand, the mediated coverage of the personal lives of politicians transforms voters into "audiences" that can be targeted by specific electoral marketing campaigns: voters become "more fragmented, more scopophilic, more sceptical than ever before. They are repeatedly told that their political system does not work ... and they long for a real, genuine, authentic politics, as if such a community has ever existed or will ever be possible" (Parry-Giles and Parry-Giles 2002, 15).

This mediated political environment, in which the sharing of "personal" details brings along the promise (or perhaps the illusion) that the politician is, indeed, sincere, is further fueled by the rapid rise of social media. The latter have been presented to the general public as more adept at revealing the "real" self. The mere denominator for these technologies – "social" – seems to indicate that they are qualitatively different from other communication media in their ability to maintain and create social ties. The vocabularies that have accompanied the public discussion of what Facebook, Twitter or YouTube "do" include other similar signifiers: "share," "friends," "followers," "connect," etc. While this vocabulary is still shifting, John (2013) has argued that it focuses on an imperative call for

“sharing” and “connecting.” The “personal” thus becomes something that *has to* be revealed, regardless of what this “personal” may in fact be (i.e., things you like or do; thoughts and emotions; knowledge, opinions, and beliefs; past, present, and future actions; surroundings and the company you’re in; etc.). “Authenticity” is part and parcel of the imperative to “share and connect”: Facebook and Twitter require users to both create an individual profile, and to “articulate and make visible their social networks” (boyd and Ellison 2007, 211). These two dimensions of participation in social media are often seen as encouraging “users to construct accurate representations of themselves and participants do this to varying degrees” (boyd and Ellison 2007, 219).

“Authenticity” on social media also becomes a strategy: businesses, for instance, are advised to “manage” themselves online by ensuring that their “online profile does not contradict [their] activity in the ‘real world’ and that [their] messages are authentic” (Douta 2010, 4). Henderson and Bawley (2010) discuss authentic dialogue as a form of ethical public relations, where the goal is not to persuade, but rather to allow the publics to ask questions and express their opinions. On the other hand, Marwick and boyd’s research suggests that social media users perceive a tension between self-promotion (particularly “personal branding”) and authenticity: “consciously speaking to an audience [on Twitter – m.n.] is perceived as inauthentic” (2011, 10). It is plausible to suggest that, in spite of the hype, there is nothing intrinsically “authentic” about social media; what needs to be questioned, however, is the assumption of authenticity that these technologies seem to generate, particularly in the context of electoral communication. “Authenticity” remains a battle ground: politicians, political campaigners, journalists, experts of various kinds and citizens engage in discursive games, hunting the elusive “true nature” or “authentic” core of (some, but by no means all) politicians. What are the “promises” social media seem to advance when it comes to political “authenticity?” (Such promises, it should be emphasised, are always made by specific social actors, on behalf of technology). Do social media continue these personality politics trends? Do they promise to bring us closer to the elusive “authenticity” that other media nearly revealed for us?

A Discursive Approach to “Authenticity” and “Social Media”

“Authenticity” is, of course, a problematic notion, as the post-structuralist critique of the self has convincingly argued.¹ In that sense, the “real” person is a myth: it prompts us to think of the politician as a “coherent” and “stable” self that will somehow guarantee her future decisions. This effaces an understanding of politics (and identity) as a complex process of mediating between different agendas. The promise of “knowing” the “real” politician brings with it a passive delegation of power after the moment of election: once we have decided who is authentic, and elected her, we “know” how she will act.

The post-structuralist critique prompts, however, a different approach to “authenticity.” By refusing the notion of a “real” and a priori self awaiting discovery, this critique shifts attention to the legitimating functions of the concept of “authenticity.” Foucault uses the analytical notion of “discourse” to refer to the relation between how something is conceptualised and the practices of power

recommended by such conceptualisations. A discourse is a rather abstract, yet systematic “way of understanding” something, which “enables thought to operate upon the entities of our world, to put them in order, to divide them into classes” (Foucault 1970, xvii). Here, authenticity is approached in this discursive manner, trying to map the ways in which respondents talked about politics by relying on the notion of “authenticity.”

Since the interest here is in political authenticity and its relation to social media, Stuart Hall’s discussion of articulation has also informed this project. Articulation refers to a temporary linkage between the elements of a discourse: “an articulation is thus the form of the connection that can make a unity of two different elements, under certain conditions. It is a linkage, which is not necessary, determined, absolute, and essential for all time (Hall and Grossberg 1986, 53). This theoretical notion provides a model for how words and meanings are temporarily brought together in an act of signification that legitimises particular agendas and mobilises particular configurations of social actors. Hall relied on this notion in his discussion of the rise of Thatcherism to power; by looking at various official speeches, Hall (1979) concluded that Thatcherism has been facilitated by a shifting articulation of “national interest” and “people.” In an effort to expand its electoral base, the Left started to address its supporters as “citizens” (rather than “workers”). This was accomplished by invoking the notion of “national interest” (at the expense of its previous class-based discourse). But in addressing “citizens,” the Left opened up an opportunity for its base (workers and unions) to be amalgamated into a broader and more elusive “national interest,” giving the Right the ability to position itself as a defender of the “national interest.” In essence, Hall sees this as a shift in interpellation: as workers were invited to identify as citizens, they also recognized their collective interests to be those of the “nation,” rather than those of the “working class.” Hall argues that meaning-making practices are sites of struggle; articulations not only alter how we come to understand the world (an attempt at “fixing” the meaning of the world), but also call upon the speakers and the audience to identify with them and to rally behind particular configurations of social forces and power networks. Informed by this theoretical position, this paper looks into how the notions of “political authenticity” and “social media” are discursively constructed in order to bring to light the possibilities of political action enabled and constrained by such articulations.

The Case: The 2010 Municipal Elections in Calgary

The 2010 municipal elections in Calgary have captured the public’s imaginary in various ways: a virtually unknown candidate won, seemingly against all odds; the candidate became “newsworthy” primarily in terms of his electoral use of Facebook, Twitter and YouTube; the personal context of the candidate (a member of a visible minority) was in itself symbolic of ongoing tensions over the need for cultural change in Calgary. Within Canada, Calgary is renowned for its political and cultural conservatism, being often stereotyped as the fiefdom of rich oil and gas industrialists with a cowboy mentality. A relatively young contender to the status of a major urban centre, Calgary is caught up between its reputation as a booming economic place and its reputation as a “redneck” place. This is also fuelled by Canadian inter-provincial rivalries, with a general feeling among elites

in Alberta² that they are replenishing the federal coffers without being given the proper say on the management of these resources. In this context, the 2010 municipal elections have been interpreted by the news media – as well as by the respondents in this study – as proof of demographic and cultural transformation in Calgary. This transformation was often understood as a victory of the young generation, eager to develop a new reputation, and craft a new cultural and political role for themselves and for the city.³

The elections were also characterised by an unusually high voter turnout. In provincial elections, governing parties have historically won, taking the bulk of the votes, and stayed in power for lengthy periods of time. In municipal elections, voter turnout has generally been low. In 1980, Calgary witnessed a similar scenario of an unlikely contender (Ralph Klein) winning the elections. The elected mayor stayed in power for nine years, moving on to becoming Alberta's premier for eight more years. In 2001, Calgary again elected a mayor (Dave Bronconnier) who stayed in power for the next 9 years (see Table 1 below). In 2010, Bronconnier announced he will not seek re-election. In itself, this announcement made the upcoming electoral race interesting, as there was no sense of potential successors. Among the 15 candidates running in this election, Naheed Nenshi was relatively unknown, although he had previously been an unsuccessful contender for a position in the city council. Nenshi was known mostly as a business professor at a local college, as well as an advocate for urban regeneration (e.g. Nenshi 2002). Furthermore, he ran as an independent candidate.⁴

Initially, Nenshi was overshadowed by the leading candidates (Ric McIver, a well-known alderman, and Barb Higgins, a local TV anchor). By the end of the campaign however, journalists had become increasingly interested in him, primarily because of his online presence consisting of a Twitter account, a Facebook profile and a series of YouTube videos. Journalists indulged in comparing the candidates in terms of the number of Facebook friends and Twitter followers, suggesting a direct relationship between electoral success and social media use. In the end, the elections were marked by the highest turnouts in the history of the city.

Table 1: Voter Turnout in Municipal Elections in Calgary, 2001-2010 (Government of Alberta, n.d.).

Year	Voter Turnout	Elected Mayor
2001	38%	Dave Bronconnier
2004	19.8%	Dave Bronconnier
2007	32.7%	Dave Bronconnier
2010	53%	Naheed Nenshi

This research project sought to understand how participants discuss the role of social media in these elections. Data came from 86 opinion essays submitted as course assignments in five different courses taught by the researcher.⁵ These essays, introduced as “opinion sections,” were one aspect of a more comprehensive assignment; the essays asked students to talk about the role of social media in the 2010 municipal elections from their own perspective. Students were instructed to

simply provide their own thoughts; the instructor emphasised that there were no expectations of additional research for this section.⁶ The second section of these assignments asked students to critically engage with their own opinions by relating them to some of the theories discussed in the course. Recruitment was done by an independent recruiter, who kept the informed consent forms until the end of the semester and made them available to the researcher only after the grades were submitted. About 30 percent of the students participated in this project.

The project is rooted in an interpretive epistemological position: research is driven by an interest in understanding and bringing to light participants' meaning-making practices. Meaning-making consists of an interplay between participants' own perspective, the wider discursive repertoires available to participants (but not necessarily originating from them), and the specific context of the research project. Thus, the data discussed here represents an effort to make sense of the social world by strategically using the discursive resources available at the time, as well as by responding to the perceived expectations around academic assignments.

The essays were analysed by relying on a qualitative thematic analysis. First, the data was de-personalised (since the demographic details of respondents were not seen as relevant to the questions asked here). Second, the researcher read the data and performed a manual coding, writing down the main points about the relation between social media and politics. By the end of the first reading, the researcher noticed a recurrent explicit use of "authenticity" to describe the elections. The second reading was focused on the contexts within which "authenticity" was used; two major uses were identified – authentic communication and the authentic politician. The third reading reconsidered the entire set of data with an eye to how the ideas of "authentic communication" and "authentic politician" were articulated. In this case, the interest was not solely in instances where the word "authenticity" was used, but in what aspects of communication or of a politician resonated with the idea of "authenticity." For example, discussions of honest, direct, unmediated or personal communication between politicians and citizens were seen as part of the discursive articulation of "authentic communication." The next section provides an overview of these two articulations.

Analysing Discursive Articulations

The discursive articulation of "authenticity," "politics" and "social media" became first circulated by both journalists and Nenshi himself. Upon announcing the results of the election, news reports quoted Nenshi declaring: "We really sought not just to use Twitter and Facebook as kind of a press release mechanism, but an opportunity to engage in really authentic two-way dialogue with people" (CBC News 2010). By that time, Nenshi's electoral campaign had become newsworthy in itself, as several journalists set out to explore what made his social media campaign successful. Nenshi's strategist revealed that, throughout the campaign, Nenshi had worked on ensuring the messages sent through social media portrayed him as "authentic." This "authenticity" meant that nobody but Nenshi himself answered his Facebook posts and responded to tweets addressed to him.

Perhaps ironically, this coverage of the campaign recommends "authenticity" as the new strategy to be emulated by other politicians. In her discussion of the personalisation of politics, Langer proposes that one of the implications of the

modern emphasis on authenticity in politics is the growing expectation that a good political leader is one willing and able to disclose her/himself, “to acknowledge vulnerability, to own up to (inevitable) errors, to appear unscripted, and to maintain a high level of consistency between staged and unstaged and on and off performances” (2011, 172). Such an expectation may in fact act as a filter in the selection of politicians, negatively affecting those lacking the ability (or unwilling) to make their lives public. The elections under discussion here are certainly going in this direction, articulating the practice of “authenticity” through social media as the new electoral winning card.

The news media constructions of authenticity constitute a preamble to the ways in which the participants in this project wrote about social media, politics and authenticity. To a great extent, these participants relied on news media to form or further legitimise their opinions.

The Authentic Politician

In their discussion of the elections, participants collectively painted the picture of an ideal authentic politician. Within this theme, “authenticity” was articulated in relation to two traits the politician had to exhibit: a genuine concern for citizens and their problems, and a willingness to share her private life. Social media appeared as both the arena where these traits were being displayed, and the means of checking their “genuineness.”

In North America, daily use of social media such as Facebook and Twitter among the young and educated has primarily socialising functions (boyd and Ellison 2007; boyd 2008). As these social media become ubiquitous, their users also gain a certain tacit expertise in assessing the content made available to them; i.e., how to “read” posts, how to differentiate between various types of “friends,” how to construct online identity, etc. Respondents implicitly assumed that social media are an intimate space of personal connection and trust; they also felt confident in their ability to spot “fake authenticity.” To be a “genuine” user of Facebook and Twitter, the politician must not only respond to comments addressed to him, but also be willing to disclose her/himself in these responses in a personal and intimate way. Respondent 50 argued that citizens want to “know what these politicians do that makes them human,” while Respondent 64 explained that “the public felt as though they knew what kind of person Nenshi actually was behind the suit and the formalities.”

What does the “authentic politician” reveal on social media? For example, s/he makes her/his opinions known, and, in so doing, “lets these social media into their homes, [...] gain a level of trust with voters that is almost impossible to achieve by debating their platforms over mass media” (Respondent 50). By creating personal profiles and constantly responding to others in the network, Nenshi appeared relatable, less formal, and no different from the regular social media user: “Nenshi was someone who you could easily reach, not someone who was hidden in a world behind the screen or print and away from public access” (Respondent 64). For respondents, this social media connection turned the politician into a social media “friend”:

On Facebook, voters were able to become friends with mayoral candidates; on Twitter voters were able to follow their preferred candidate... No longer was

that particular candidate just a figure in a suit standing behind a podium, but they were now a friend who voters wanted to see win (Respondent 35, my emphasis).

For this social media savvy sample, this use of Facebook and Twitter invites identification. Through the use of technology, the politician demonstrates s/he “truly” understands citizens. To these respondents, social media use was signalling that the politician was “one of them”:

[Nenshi] really understood the city issues because he was where the people were (Facebook and Twitter). I believe by doing [this], he was able to ‘connect to people’ because by posting comments and asking questions, we were able to have some input in what we thought the city needed, and this feeling made him more likeable in our eyes (Respondent 14).

Furthermore, social media also seemed to close the gap between politicians and citizens. The former now appeared only “one click away” from any citizen:

Since Nenshi himself ran his own Twitter account, and carried a Blackberry everywhere he went, every citizen of Calgary essentially had Nenshi’s phone number. Any John Doe could tweet him their own questions at their heart’s content, and it seems that he answered as many as possible (Respondent 33).

The politician appears as always there, ready to take on your questions. Yet, there is little indication of the kind of questions and issues the politician faces and answers. Use of social media by the politician also came to metonymically stand for “good leadership”; i.e., the politician represents and addresses the needs of citizens. Respondent 69 explained that as Nenshi encouraged citizens to reach him through Facebook and Twitter, this showed “that he cared about what Calgarians had to say about their City ... Nenshi’s speed of response to these comments from his followers also demonstrated his dedication to the people of Calgary.” This metonymical relation draws from a wider technological determinist frame portraying technology as both an inevitable form of progress and a panacea to social problems. In the particular case of political communication, communication technologies (print, television and now the internet) have been largely understood as transforming the game of politics; this transformation has been valued as a positive “modernization” of political communication (Ward 2008; Karlsen 2010). Nenshi’s electoral use of social media thus appears as an improved form of campaigning because it rides the technological wave. By personally handling his Facebook and Twitter accounts, and by constantly replying to citizens, Nenshi becomes accessible and approachable round the clock. In turn, this demonstrates genuine concern for citizens: “social media allowed [Nenshi] to collaborate and relate with his public by creating an environment where he is able to directly respond to people, making them feel he cares ...” (Respondent 4).

This metonymical relation between social media use and the “authentic politician” is further enhanced by bringing up the alleged “hindrances” to electoral communication posed by traditional media. Where television was once seen as enabling this personal connection, respondents in this sample described television as an “inherently” biased medium, hindering the citizen/politician relation. To foster this personal connection, the authentic politician now uses social media, encourag-

ing citizens to make their opinions public and taking note of these opinions. While such narratives speak of a normative expectation that politicians should represent citizens' interests, they also efface two important aspects that need to be recognised as part and parcel of democratic politics. First, there is a pervasive taken for granted assumption across this sample that all citizens are present on social media. The idea of citizens who do not have access to or are not present on social media appears only once in this sample. In that sense, the interactional politics evoked here remain permeated by racial, ethnic and class differences. These structural dimensions shape access to and integration of social media into everyday practices. Second, this articulation instigates a slippage from feeling that as a citizen, you are listened to, to acting on those concerns. It is sometimes assumed that politicians fail to follow through public interest merely because of a communication/information failure. In other words, policy-making fails to take into account the interests of citizens because those interests did not reach the decision-making elites. The articulation of the "authentic politician" as the one who knows citizens' concerns, and of social media as the tool making this knowledge possible (mostly by removing problematic intermediaries such as traditional media) feeds off this logic. The problem here is that the politician is not simply an input/output device, i.e. s/he collects citizens' concerns and transforms them into adequate policies. The politician often has to mediate between different sets of concerns: "politics requires compromise, which can be easily perceived as personal dishonesty" (Langer 2011, 172).

Authentic Communication

While this theme overlaps with, and further reinforces, the ideal of the "authentic politician," the emphasis here is on the quality of the connection between the two parties involved in the process of communication. Respondents explained how "every Tweet you read on your account was and still is from Mayor Nenshi. There isn't some wizard behind the curtain of any of his social media accounts" (Respondent 6). In turn, this ensured that Nenshi connected to people in a "sincere manner" (Respondent 14). Sincerity, in this case, appears as a direct consequence of the "proper" use of social media – that is, being the person that your profile claims you are, and updating this profile on a regular basis. Sincerity is thus the result of an exchange between the parties involved in communication. Participants talked about how Nenshi "directly" and "personally" addressed all posts and tweets, which in turn meant that he was providing "real" answers. As already argued, this type of "authentic" – i.e., honest – communication acts to legitimise the politician as genuinely interested in listening to and solving citizens' problems. Furthermore, "authentic communication" also seems to be the solution to an outstanding problem of democracy, that of political apathy. By establishing this direct sender/receiver communication line with voters, the politician engages the latter. Some respondents implied that just because the politician listens, people are finally gaining real access to power: "the multitude ... got their wants" (Respondent 19).

Another element that makes social media communication "authentic" (i.e., what legitimises it as "better" than previous forms of electoral communication) is the sense of instantaneity of reply. Respondent 8 provides an example of this:

The best part of all this is how quickly social media works, and how quickly such a busy person as Naheed Nenshi can reply to anyone's question... for

example, [Twitter user] asked Nenshi ‘new to Twitter. Honest question: would two high powdered floodlights pointed at the protesters at night be an infraction?’ Forty minutes ago on Twitter, Nenshi replied: ‘we’ve discussed many things like that, but we must be very careful not to violate people’s rights’. This example ... shows how fast social media works and even someone as busy as a mayor can reply in seconds.

By emphasising how busy a mayor is, yet how easy it is for him to address citizens’ concerns, this respondent articulates political communication as a question-and-answer process. The “right” politician is the one who is always available and responsive. However, what is missing from this articulation of authentic communication is a sense of the quality of the exchange and of the outcome. By emphasising the “authenticity” of the sender, as well as the speed of reply, this articulation opens up a specific discursive space within which we are invited to evaluate the act of communication solely in terms of the act of responding (and, perhaps, at the expense of the content of that communication). The politician’s reply on Twitter or Facebook becomes a marker of successful communication, bringing the interlocutor a feeling of gratification (of the type “the busy politician is taking the time to answer me!”). This says nothing about the type of question that was asked of the politician (e.g., was the question one that held the politician accountable for her or his own politics?) or about the quality of the response.

In this articulation of authentic communication, social media seem to guarantee the sincerity of the direct citizen/politician exchange. This sincerity contrasts with the view of electoral campaigns as highly controlled by professional public relations and image consultants. Karlsen (2010) argues that the arrival of ICTs coincides, in fact, with greater image management and the transformation of political communication into “permanent campaigns”: “It is not clear whether it is the politicians or the political consultants who are in charge. Essential in our context is how the technological development is perceived as a driving force behind such professionalization” (p. 217). Arguing the politicians are now campaigning all the time, Elmer, Langlois and McKelvey (2012) propose social media force politicians and their staff to be constantly aware of the political possibilities of these new platforms – including the possibility that their statements, image or material will be re-claimed and re-mixed. Thus, it appears that politicians have to be involved in an ongoing work of proactively intervene and foster partisan ties. While it may be argued that, to a certain extent, the traditional forms of electoral communication (e.g., press releases, platforms and position papers, political ads, etc.) no longer fit with the logic of social media (i.e., short, intimate and constantly changing updates), this does not mean that the politician/citizen ties enabled by Facebook or Twitter are necessarily changing from an instrumental logic to a Habermasian form of communicative rationality (Frankel 1974).

One of the implications of the theme of authentic communication is that social media are fundamentally different from traditional media; as such, it is claimed that they are able to ensure the politician’s honesty in her/his desire to be in the service of citizens. First, respondents feel that on social media, it is easy to figure out if a politician is not truly open to dialogue. Interestingly, this is one of the first requirements of the Habermasian communicative rationality (Frankel 1974): participants have to orient themselves towards each other and be ready to genu-

inely understand the other point of view. Using the characterisation provided by news articles, respondents constantly refer to the “two-way communication” that Nenshi fostered:

Campaign conversation was sustained among ordinary Calgarians in a ceaseless, horizontal and less paternalistic manner in a way not possible in the traditional media ecology.[...] Facebook and Twitter however enabled candidates to by-pass mainstream media making instantaneous communication with mass audience in an interactive and participatory manner possible (Respondent 20).

For some participants, social media communication is trustworthy because it passes through the filter of the social networks users have. One’s friends and family are there to double-check and analyse the content of this communication. Respondent 10, clearly using coursework material on Habermas, argues that social media provides not only the opportunity to share a message, but also to discuss it with others: “In sharing and interacting with each other’s social networks, a public sphere arises as the ability for a rational debate is formed.” For another respondent, social media enables voters to see what others had to say about the candidate; in being able to take the pulse of their own social networks, voters are now in a better position to find out both the positives and the negatives of a candidate. In turn, “this ease of access to information forces the candidates themselves to run a cleaner, smarter campaign, as people are more likely to expose their flaws and weaknesses. People will also not be so easily swayed by the false slander and mudslinging of the candidates” (Respondent 40). It appears here that the mere features of the technical platforms, enabling different networks to become visible to each other and circulate information in a viral manner, engender trust. Placement of trust (as well as sincerity) is warranted not by expertise, but rather by what one of the respondents calls “the power of the multitude.” Echoing the popular dictum of “power in numbers,” this view of interconnected networks of friends and family members legitimises an understanding of social media as guarantors of “authentic communication.”

Discussion

The articulation of social media and politics above can be understood as a normative discursive horizon describing how the “real” politician communicates to, and engages, citizens. But what are the discursive possibilities and closures opened up by this articulation? In her own work on the articulations of democracy, Aletta Norval describes them as “a horizon of what is sayable and doable at any given point in time, as well as what we may expect from others and what others may expect from us” (2007, 8). The metaphor of the horizon prompts us to question the loosely shared expectations that may be instigated by the articulation of technology and politics discussed here.

In this sample, social media are conceptualised as the new tools and spaces of an improved communicative relation between politicians and citizens. This communicative relation is broadly understood as a private dialogue between the two parties, where the “authentic politician” has to both reveal her/ his private life, directly participating in social media practices, *and* provide answers and support to the citizen’s questions and needs. In spite of its one-on-one nature, the politician/

citizen relationship is also public, visible by virtue of the nature of social media ties and, as such, subject to collective scrutiny. Thus, social media appear as both the sites where “political authenticity” is performed, and the guarantors of its sincerity.

This articulation reminds us of the deep and unsatisfied desire for democracy, understood as a political arrangement where people’s voices are taken into account. For Respondent 19, people “want their ideas influencing the political decisions.” Against on-going debates in political science over civic disengagement and increased individualism, it is important to recognise that these respondents saw the realm of politics as an intrinsically participatory one, where citizens matter. It is in the context of this desire that the juxtaposition of “social media” and “political authenticity” becomes exciting, thus opening up the possibility to become enthusiastic once again about politics. Importantly, this enthusiasm about politics is intrinsically connected to the desire to be taken into account in the political decision-making. On the other hand, this excitement also signals the dissatisfaction over the lack of real avenues for meaningful engagement. Cases like the one discussed here represent moments when the efforts to stabilise new articulations create the discursive space where different horizons of possibilities are opened up – i.e., the possibility of a political system that is both representative of and inclusive of citizens.

Yet, there are also reasons to be skeptical of these possibilities. The excitement over social media very much rides the novelty wave. The enthusiasm over the possibilities allegedly opened up by new communication technologies is gradually encroached upon by both economic and political actors, who take over these communicative spaces to promote their own claims to power. It is highly likely that social media will suffer the same fate as television, with the next generation conceptualising them not as spaces of authenticity, but rather as intrinsically prone to manipulation and deceit. The problem here is precisely the technological deterministic view discussed earlier (e.g. Wyatt 2008): the belief that technology is the solution to the problems of democracies leaves us unprepared for a). the appropriations of these technologies for marketing and propaganda purposes; b). understanding the struggle over power at the heart of politics. As critics point out, such a view of technology as the source of social change is problematic in that “it leaves no space for human choice or intervention, and, moreover, absolves us of the responsibility for the technologies we make and use” (Wyatt 2008, 169). Our efforts to foster critical thinking should be aimed at both the interplay between technology and power, and that between power and democratic politics.

The articulations discussed here are also problematic in the imperative that “authentic politicians” participate on social media. As Langer (2011) points out, this focus on the politician takes away from the structural conditions that affect politics; it excludes certain people from politics (e.g. those who are not on social media); and it can have negative consequences on politicians themselves, as any inconsistency with the “authentic” self may lead to the exclusion of the politician from politics. The other side of this imperative is that it recasts citizens as users of technology; in that sense, to be a participant in the polis is to take on the responsibility, duty and pleasure of becoming a social media user. This is a prevailing and uncritical perspective echoed by the respondents in this sample: Naheed Nenshi, argued Respondent 21, won because he “listened to the voice of social media users.” Respondent 69 added: “he encouraged people to send him questions via online

sources and he would respond. Never before had a candidate been as accessible and approachable to the individual citizen." The slippage between "social media user" and "citizen" is dangerous, since in fact only a privileged group of people are social media users. Thus, the politician's "connection to the people" via social media needs further deconstruction: who are these people? Are they, in fact, representative of the disenfranchised groups who are traditionally excluded from political decision-making? What type of knowledge and material infrastructure is needed in order to be *able* to participate in politics? Only Respondent 1 engages with these questions in arguing "the problem is ... that all these information tools require two things: a computerised device of some sort and the ability to use one. This effectively eliminated the poor and the elderly from having any notable social media influence on the campaigning. If tweets and likes were what Nenshi was relying on to gauge viewer support on important civic issues, these two marginalised segments of Calgary's population were rendered virtually silent." It is crucial that we recognise the ways in which a middle-class understanding of technology as inevitable, progressive and ultimately desirable silences and excludes those who either do not want, or cannot share this narrative.

Lastly, this view of social media as the sites and guarantors of "political authenticity" positions the citizen/user as a customer, awaiting a response and a solution from the politician. The implication here is that the relation between citizens and politicians is one that is at the same time intimate and individual: the politician and the citizen come to "know" each other in a "direct," "unmediated" manner. Furthermore, the politician can be told of the problems encountered by the citizen, and subsequently address them. However, this articulation is silent on exactly what the politician is being asked, and how she will address these issues once elected. In particular, I argue that this articulation simply does not help us grasp the complexity and messiness of political decision-making. The view of the politician as a customer relations representative, answering each individual citizen, says nothing about the necessity to negotiate political decisions with other authority-holders, or about the necessity to consider these individual exchanges in the context of a political system that caters not only to the needs of the individual, but also to the needs of all citizens. Most importantly, by conceptualising this relation between citizens and politicians as an individualised information exchange, questions of structural inequalities and social justice are being sidelined. Contrary to what we may have been told, the problem of contemporary political systems is not that politicians do not have information (i.e., do not know about citizens' concerns). Rather, the problem is that of recognising and balancing the often contradictory needs of different groups in a manner that is not necessarily "efficient," but rather equitable for all parties involved. The articulation of "social media" and "political authenticity" discussed here leaves us unprepared for understanding democratic politics beyond electoral communication. In prompting us to imagine our relation to politicians as an individualised communicative relation, this articulation cannot help us engage with and assess the often puzzling outcomes of politics. More importantly, this articulation operates an important erasure from our conceptualisation of politics: that of how power relations are involved in and further legitimised through politics. These implications are problematic in their resonance with a predominant neo-liberal ethos characterising contemporary social life.

Notes:

1. I'm thinking here of Foucault's (1982) work refuting the idea of the "self" as an inner core waiting to be revealed to others, and reconceptualising it as both an effect of the distribution of power relations in society, and the means through which these relations become re-produced.
2. Calgary is the largest city in Alberta in terms of demographics, but not its capital. Canada is a federal state, with two levels of government: federal (located in Ontario) and provincial. Alberta is one of the 13 provinces and territories of Canada.
3. In the mid-2000s, Alberta has experienced an economic boom. Calgary in particular was the destination of inter-provincial as well as international immigration, with the media often declaring that the city was experiencing a zero-vacancy rate for rentals or real estate. Although this paper does not discuss these matters, it is important to point out that this movement of people is inevitably changing the demographic composition of the city in terms of values, aspirations, mentalities, spoken languages, etc.
4. The details of the relation between Calgary mayors and political parties is beyond the scope of this paper. Nevertheless, it is important to mention here that Calgary's last two mayors represented the conservative party in Alberta (although one of them started his political career as an independent).
5. The project received ethical clearance from the Conjoint Faculties Research Ethics Board at the University of Calgary (file #7017). Participants were recruited from five courses offered in the Faculty of Arts and dealing with topics related to communication studies. However, one of the courses had an eclectic student base, as it constituted a social science optional for students outside the Faculty of Arts.
6. In cases when respondents did not have first-hand knowledge of these elections for various reasons, they were asked to talk about how, as a response to this assignment, they are forming an opinion of the past events.

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