Most observers are in agreement that democracy in Western societies is in dire straits, even if there are differing views on why this is the case and what should be done about it. Clearly the onslaught of neoliberalism and its market motives, together with globalisation and a decline of the relative power of the state, are central to understanding democracy’s ills. The corrupting influence of moneyed interests on politics is also a key factor, as are the various (often informal) mechanisms of exclusion that undercut the political efficacy of citizens. Other voices point to rampant individualism and diminished solidarity, or growing social and cultural heterogeneity. National narratives have some variation, while the democratic deficit of the EU is grasped by most citizens in the member states. There is a general consensus that the vitality, perhaps even the very survival, of democracy cannot be taken for granted; ironically, this has particularly been the case since the collapse of communism.

Among the dilemmas facing democracy is the general decline in civic engagement. Party loyalty is declining; voting patterns display declining stability. Citizens demonstrate a growing sense of powerlessness and cynicism. Yet, at the same time, alternative politics, outside the electoral system, is also on the upswing, while protest parties, mainly on the right, are also springing up, these also include ideologically mixed groupings such as the Pirate Party. One must note, however, that the numbers of people involved here are...
mostly small compared to the number of citizens who appear to be dropping out of mainstream politics in various ways. Social media are seemingly all around us, and it is not surprising that some analysts (the enthusiasts) see here some kind of “quick fix” for democracy’s difficulties. Sceptics, for their part, contend that social media will not make any real difference, and can in fact even be detrimental for democratic development. Let’s look at some of the main arguments.

The enthusiasts celebrate the fact that social media can promote horizontal (civic) communication, putting individuals and groups in touch with each other. Also, the new technologies associated with Web 2.0 are quite inexpensive and easy to use, and this facilitates a good deal of creative involvement. Enthusiasts also note that social media have become a key vehicle for opinion formation via discussions that often link political and personal domains. Politics can easily “break out” on social media, mobilizing engagement, or “go viral”. Especially for those involved in alternative politics, social media provide an immeasurable resource; in fact, it is argued that much activity among political activists, social movements, civic alliances, NGOs and other actors would not exist without the help of these media.

Further, social media can provide feelings of competence, such as a sense of empowerment; growing numbers of citizens are even engaging in activities that resemble journalism. Not least, the modes of expression in social media are characterized by diversity and are not locked into a strict rational form. This allows many different voices with different inflections to be heard.

The sceptics counter with the evidence that access to the web, and social media in particular, does not per se lead people to engage in politics; such participation builds on the interplay of many other factors. Moreover, politics tends to come very far down on the list of activities for which people use social media. Indeed, in the web environment, with its intensive competition for attention, people are confronted with this intensively dynamic milieu is to adapt oneself to a personal frames of reference; this can be enriching, but also can involve stress in keeping up with it all – also known as FOMO – fear of missing out. When online, the role of the citizen can readily switch to that of the consumer.

Further, the sceptics assert that net harassment and bullying are also, regrettably, quite common, and at times lead voices to be silenced. Moreover, in authoritarian regimes, social media can be used for political control; and we have recently become aware of how much even democratic governments use social media for political surveillance.

Such, in bare bones form, are some of the key arguments from the two camps. If we pose the somewhat crude question, “Can social media save democracy?”, the simple answer must clearly be “No”. Democracy’s dilemmas are not about a lack of screens or keyboards. Yet, if we think of how profoundly social media impact on other spheres of social life, it would be odd if it were not making a difference in the realm of politics as well. The first step towards enhancing our realist perspective is to propose that both the enthusiasts and the sceptics in certain ways overstate their cases. Let us probe the issue a bit further.

**A DAILY ENVIRONMENT**

The web as somewhat of a catch-all term includes not least what we call social media, which is often the most relevant aspect of the web for participation. Moreover, the frequent use of the term social media may draw attention away from the fact that a variety of different technical platforms can be used for different purposes. Thus, we need to be fairly specific when talking about social media and careful about drawing conclusions about one form based on evidence from another.

For example, Facebook offers richer communication possibilities for discussion, than, say, Twitter; while Twitter is more useful for spreading short messages to large numbers of people very quickly, such as when coordinating a large demonstration. YouTube, by contrast, is very functional for, among other things, broadcasting audiovisual documentary material from live political events, while blogs are better for presenting a personal political view. The contexts of use are very important.

Social media have come to constitute an environment where more and more people spend much of their time for an array of purposes, from social interaction with friends to gossip blogging, from searching for music to news, from shopping to finding a partner. Social media have become the taken-for-granted sites in which much of daily life is increasingly embedded. We can and should still distinguish between online and offline contexts, but our daily lives have become dependent on their entwinement, a feature that of course is important for participation; politics, it would seem, can thus be more readily accessed through social media.

Such media also deepen the patterns of networking as a form of social organization. Networks are important because they facilitate horizontal communication: people and organizations can directly link up with each other for purposes of sharing information, for providing mutual support,organising, mobilising, or solidifying collective identities. They offer a communication structure well suited for non-hierarchical democratic social relations. Networks are constantly evolving in response to internal and external impacts, and adapting as circumstances change; they are never fully fixed. This adaptability is of course also significant for engagement in the life of democracy.

Finally, the mediated terrain of social life can be understood as constantly in flux, with a steady flow of novelty in terms of content and forms of expression. To engage daily with this intensively dynamic milieu is to adapt oneself to a culture of incessant change – even if users of course develop their own stabilizing routines in dealing with the web. Social media often involve a dramatic expansion of people’s personal frames of reference; this can be enriching, but also can involve stress in keeping up with it all – also known as FOMO (Fear Of Missing Out). In short, the entwinement of social media with the settings of everyday life is both a strength and a distraction.

**MEDIATED PARTICIPATION AND ITS DYNAMICS**

While it may be more difficult these days to define “politics” with great certainty, given the many new forms that it is taking – including personal-, single issue-, life-, lifestyle-, cultural-, identity politics, and so on – at some point political participation must touch base with power relations. The power dimension is a part of all social relations, at the micro-level of our everyday lives as well as at the larger, structural levels of society. It is not that power relations can or should be eliminated, but rather that perceived imbalances or ille-
verage of 20.49 per minute. This suggests that there is a significant difference in the average number of words per minute between the two groups, indicating that the students who were taught the new teaching method have improved their reading speed.

The Mann-Whitney U test was used to compare the two groups. The results showed a statistically significant difference between the two groups, with a p-value of 0.001. This indicates that the new teaching method has a positive effect on improving the reading speed of students.

In conclusion, the new teaching method has been shown to be effective in improving the reading speed of students. The results of this study provide evidence that this method can be an effective tool for educators looking to improve the reading skills of their students. However, further research is needed to determine the long-term effects of this method and to explore the potential for using it in other contexts.
blending the political and the social with the personal, as well as civil society with consumption and pleasure.

These social media sites are also major suppliers of what is called big data, which refers to the massive amounts of mainly personal data that is routinely collected on the activities and transactions of web users. As a consequence, social media have become the sites of massive marketing efforts. Clicking the Like-button sends signals to networks where like-mindedness pre-structures considerable trust, and where this credibility becomes translated into promotional assets. The political-economic logic is ironclad.

As with Google, the data gathered is for commercial purposes, but again, changing social contexts can generate new uses and meanings of personal information. With Facebook, the spill-over from private to public is much easier (many examples are now part of urban folklore), resulting in embarrassment, entanglements, loss of employment, and/or defamation. Data theft is also easier, and has been accomplished a number of times; these digital storage systems are simply not fail-safe. Thus, to participate in Facebook and similar social media is to expose oneself to surveillance and to have one’s privacy put at risk.

The social logics may be less easy to clearly identify, but they are nonetheless operative. In Facebook’s role as a site for political discussion, the Like-button takes on significance. While it is only human to be drawn to people who are like oneself and think in the same way, this is not necessarily a healthy pattern for democracy or political participation. One clicks to befriend people and ideas who are “like” oneself, generating and cementing networks of like-mindedness (there is no Dislike-button).

A further social logic that seems to be emerging and which is worrisome in regard to participation and the culture of democracy, is a form of personalised visibility and self-promotion. When younger people (especially) turn to politics, it may well be that the online setting, with its powerful technical affordances, discourages engagement beyond itself: social, technical and political-economic logics thus interplay to prioritise participation in the media and constrain the significance of participation via the media. While such a retreat into an environment that many people feel that they have more control over is understandable, it introduces a historically new – and troubling – kind of democratic participatory mode.

RECLAIMING REALISM

The shifting, overlapping, and at times contradictory contexts of social media use, highlighted especially by the logics of the web themselves, render the question of social media’s significance for participation in democracy a rather complicated issue. We cannot provide a simple, unequivocal answer. Rather, we have to look at concrete societal contexts, with their political situations, their cultural currents, and not least, media attributes, to glean some sense of what is going on in any particular case.

From there we can begin to draw some generalisations, albeit cautiously. The enthusiasts and the sceptics have staked out their horizons; we can make use of them, but only by careful contextualization can we begin to piece together realistic perspectives of social media’s democratic contributions. Democracy will not be saved by media technologies; social media can make an important difference in this regard, but they can also function to exacerbate democracy’s difficulties. Ultimately only citizens can revitalise and extend democracy; that is our only realistic option.

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Of course, we’re not all alike. We all know people who need people and those who appear to need them much less. Does social contact matter more to some people than to others? Genetics suggests it does. Recent research hints that the biochemical carrier of the benefits of social support is the neuropeptide oxytocin. It is well known that oxytocin plays an essential role in the regulation of social behavior and attachment, and has throughout mammalian evolution. When administered to volunteers, for example, oxytocin reduces stress responses and increases prosocial behavior. Your genes enter the Rates of technology and social media use are therefore swiftly climbing. Facebook and Instagram alone boast a combined monthly user base of 2 billion people. Recent research by The Associated Press-NORC Center for Public Affairs Research found that teenagers aged 13 to 17 years old have shifted their preferred social media platforms and are now most likely to use Snapchat and Instagram. Key findings of the survey included the fact that around 76 percent of teenagers use Instagram, 75 percent use Snapchat, 66 percent use Facebook, 47 percent use Twitter, and fewer than 30 percent use Tumblr, Tw As such, media use facilitates democratic socialization and leads to more involvement in political behaviors. Ascertaining the Breadth and Distribution of Their Democratic Enlightenment and Its Sources, Political Studies, 63: 240–58. Corrigall-Brown, C. and Wilkes, R. (2014), “Media Exposure and the Engaged Citizen: How the Media Shape Political Participation,” Social Science Journal, 51: 408–21. Cortina, J. M. (1993), “What Is Coefficient Alpha?” Tufekci, Z. and Wilson, C. (2012), “Social Media and the decision to Participate in Political Protest: Observations from Tahrir,” Journal of Communication, 62: 363–79. Wang, S.-I. (2007), “Political Use of the Internet, Political Attitudes and Political Participation,” Asian Journal of Communication, 17 (4): 381–95.