Political Participation in the Social Media Moment: the Emergence of Personal Politics

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Abstract

This thesis argues that we are moving toward a paradigm of political participation that is based on the assemblage of a personal politic, characterised by a decline in group loyalites. This indicates a shift away from traditional understandings of political participation that are referenced to the state or an institution. This thesis provides an evaluation of social media’s role in the formation of these new understandings and practices of politics and political participation. It argues that social media are part of a complex media landscape, but that they and political communication within them should be understood as a complementary rather than superseding force.
Statement of Authorship

This thesis contains no material which has been accepted for the award of any other degree or diploma in any tertiary institution, and that, to the best of my knowledge and belief, contains no material previously published or written by another person, except where due reference is made in the text of this thesis.

Signed:

Ben Calder
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Introduction

Political behaviour is changing. In Australia and elsewhere, emerging political practices grounded in personal choice and referenced to individual lifestyles are informing an emerging paradigm of political participation that has at its core the disruptive, connective power of social media. Traditional views of political participation and public action are being challenged. The Internet has played a role in this paradigm shift, opening up technologically mediated environments that have reconfigured the ‘political’ (Loader and Mercea; Dahlberg 2001). As Coleman contends:

[In the hyperpluralistic environment of online social connection and expression, there is a conspicuous sense in which civic political behavior is diverging, in both its communicative styles and substantive foci, from formal, institutional politics (383).]

Discussing the impact of new technologies on social and political interaction is not unique to the present era, but each technological development occurs in a new social and political context. It is this that lends legitimacy to the continuing study of technology and social and political change. The emergence of personal politics and the impact of this ‘environment of
social connection and expression' on a paradigm of personal politics is the focus of this thesis. Writing in 2011, Fenton and Barassi noted that we are at a critical juncture where 'the interrogation of the nature of political participation on offer through social media practices becomes paramount if we are to fully understand and critique the broader claims made for the transformation of political participation in society' (180).

Since the 1960s and 1970s, scholars of social change have talked of the move from a society defined by the industrial age to one defined by the flows of information resulting from developments in communications technology (see Machlup 1962; Bell 1973). Social media have become a part of daily life, particularly among young people, who have ‘embraced digital technology’s interactive capacities and quite reasonably expect the old politics and the old media should too’ (Watson).

Voting, campaigning, political party membership and donations of time or money have long been seen as essential political acts. Since the turn of the century, studies have shown that these more traditional types of participation are in decline, particularly among young people (Delli Carpini 2004; Harris, Wyn, Younes 2007; Putnam 2000; Zukin et al 2006; Jenkins 2006). There is a long tradition of scholarship that highlights the centrality of these acts to the effectiveness of a democracy (see Barber 1984; Berelson et al. 1954; Dahl 1989; Habermas 1984; Lazarsfeld et al. 1944; Milbrath 1965; Putnam 1995, 2000; Verba & Nie 1972
in Wyngarden 6), and while they to some degree demonstrate levels of democratic practice, they no longer tell the whole story. As Wyngarden asks, ‘[i]s it possible that traditional measures of political participation do not capture all of the ways that citizens are participating today?’ (1).

Our growing dependency on the Internet is changing the way we access information, mobilise, and connect with each other. Given these changes, we need to look to non-traditional and less visible arenas of politics to better understand the reality of contemporary political participation (Bakardjieva). My exploration of these themes is broken into three chapters.

In Chapter One, I provide an overview of the history of scholarship in the field of Internet studies and political participation, outlining the ideas that have dominated analysis of the social and political impact of the Internet since the 1980s when Internet-enabled communication technologies first emerged. I then discuss the desire to provide definitional clarity when studying political participation, but note that to do so can overly limit the scope of investigation. Following this, I outline current debates about the impact the Internet is having on political participation, noting the importance of considering young people specifically.

In the second chapter, I examine the fragmentation of collective political identities and the move toward an era of individualised expression. This expression is deeply rooted in the connectivity
of social media. Following a discussion of activity in the private sphere that is opening up new understandings of political participation and an exploration of an emerging paradigm of citizenship, I outline some criticisms of the political potential of social media channels.

In Chapter Three, I use the Occupy movement — commenced in New York in September 2011 — as a case study to demonstrate the complexity of the emerging paradigm of personal politics. I interrogate the place of social media in contemporary political action using Bennett and Segerberg’s (2012) theory of the ‘logic of connective action’, Juris’ (2012) theory of the ‘logic of aggregation’, and Chadwick’s (2013) ‘hybrid media theory’. My synthesis and application of these contemporary theories explains why the Occupy movement is a leading example of modern collective mobilisations that straddle the online and offline worlds of political action.

The rise of personal politics has been accompanied by the rapid growth of social media use. It is important to acknowledge the disruptive and connective power of social media, but they must be understood as a complementary rather than superseding force. Existing state and institutional structures have not been displaced altogether, and are still the centres of power. Both the new and old organisational and communication structures have an impact on the construction of modern political identities.
In this chapter, I examine the history of the social and political impact of the Internet, charting the move from rhetoric to research based on empirical evidence. I then discuss the definitional complexity surrounding terms like ‘politics’ and ‘political participation’, and the multidimensionality of the Internet’s impact on political participation now that it has become an ‘embedded technology’ — entrenched in daily life and societal structures, coexisting with other technologies rather than displacing them, and allowing users to consume as well as create content (Howard and Jones 22). I outline predominant narratives in the literature on the Internet and political participation, discussing young people particularly. There is a young generation that has not experienced a significant period of their lives without the Internet. This generation are the most likely to be online, occupying online spaces and using social media far more than others (Vromen 2007; Hargittai and Shaw 118). It is important to
consider them specifically if we are to understand the construction of contemporary political identities.

My synthesis of studies in this field shows that a simplistic binary in which the Internet is either good or bad for political participation does not exist. Its impact is complex and we must understand this if we are to comprehend the unfolding of a new paradigm of political participation in the Internet age.

The field of literature I have drawn upon in the development of this thesis is limited to the European-American tradition. While I acknowledge the rich history and rapid development of Internet studies and political participation scholarship in the Asian, South American, and African traditions, political economies and identities in the developed world differ greatly from those in the developing world, and this literature falls outside the scope of my enquiry.

**A Brief History of Internet Studies**

Scholars have studies the effect the Internet has had on the way we interact with each other and with political institutions, and the characteristics of political activism since the 1980s when Internet-enabled communication technologies first emerged. Findings varied greatly, establishing a dichotomy of the social and political potential versus the social and political destructiveness of the Internet. After the 1990s, once the Internet was more established as a gathering space for large groups of people,
reactions ranged from curiosity to debates and dreams about the possibility for it to reinvigorate what was seen as a troubled democratic system (Bakardjieva 91).

In the 1990s and early 2000s, Castells (1996; 2005) produced seminal works on networks and the impact of the information age on societal structures. In them, he claimed that the networked form of organisation, facilitated by new technologies like the Internet, had ‘pervasive[ly] expand[ed] throughout the entire social structure’ and constituted a ‘new social morphology’ (1996: 469). Though not without some questionable assumptions, it is the work of scholars like Castells that throws into sharp relief the impact that developments in communication technology have on the way society organises itself and the way people connect. Complementing this, the foundational work of critical theorists such as Habermas ask us to question the impact of technological development on political practices (419).

Earl and Kimport note that early research on the social and political impact of the Internet ‘focused on who was going online, how fast Internet usage was spreading, and the potential inequality represented by the digital divide’ (21). Initially, public concern was in large part fuelled by the trade off between time spent online and time spent offline, and the belief that this would result in a generation of digital centric recluses. It was also largely a fear of the unknown. The Internet was a technology that had allowed unprecedented levels of both connectedness and autonomy, and
scholars did not really know what to make of it or its potential to change politics.

A great deal of research focused on the negative social and political impact the Internet may have. Nguyen and Alexander argued that the spread of the Internet, with people increasingly sharing discursive space, was having and would continue to have a negative impact on individual and social consciousness. They claimed that, ‘on the Internet — boundaries — temporal, spatial, associative and identity-forming — all dissolve’ (in Earl and Kimport 99). Arguing that new technology ‘abstracts us from our existence as physical beings in the world’ (99), this view of the impact of the Internet asserted that we were ‘ignor[ing] the boundedness of experience that leads to knowledge’ and that this was ‘dissolv[ing] our political communities, our polities’ (99).

Even in the early stages of the Internet’s existence, there were scholars who held more positive views. Some praised ‘not only the wide-ranging technical possibilities but … the social potential of the Internet to increase political engagement and participation’ (Bakker and de Vreese 454). Howard Rheingold, a critic and writer who specialises in the social, cultural and political impact of new communication media, asserts that online communities could offer ‘substantial moral and practical social support as well as build thick communities of mutual concern and affect’ (in Earl and Kimport 22). Beginning with his book *Virtual Reality* (1991), Rheingold has written about the formation
and sociopolitical potential of virtual communities. He was a precursor for the Internet evangelists — those who believe in the politically and socially transformative power of the Internet — that have increased in number since the 1990s, and before the conversation evolved from one based on rhetoric into one based on empirical evidence.

Once the Internet became an embedded technology (in the mid-2000s, from the point of view of the literature), it became clear that the reality of its impact was complex. Bouliane conducted a meta analysis of 38 studies on the impact of the Internet on civic and political engagement, finding that, while there is ‘little evidence to support the argument that Internet use is contributing to civic decline’ (205), the average positive effect of it is small. Studies showed that the Internet was complementing rather than displacing existing media and patterns of political behaviour (Loader 80). Polarised claims about the participatory potential of new technologies gave way to ‘more nuanced and circumscribed understandings of how Internet use adapts to existing patterns, permits certain innovations, and reinforces particular types of change’ (DiMaggio et al 307).

This shift from a consideration of the potential or projected impact of the Internet on social and political norms to research based on empirical evidence meant social and political commentators were able to examine how Internet-enabled technologies could
‘fit into, expand, or question existing theoretical models about social life’ (Earl and Kimport 22). As Bakker and de Vreese note:

recent studies acknowledge that Internet use is not a unidimensional concept and does not — if at all — affect all groups in society similarly; rather, its effects depend on a complex combination of personal and social characteristics, usage patterns, and the specific content and context of the medium (452).

Once the Internet became an embedded technology, it became necessary to examine its use in more specific terms, particularly in the context of social and political capital (see, for example, Putnam). This research trajectory is similar to that experienced by scholars who concerned themselves with studying the effects of watching television (Bakker and de Vreese 452). Those scholars gradually gained the capacity to examine the effects empirically, resulting in deeper understandings.

In Australia, Vromen (2007) found that a better predictor of political participation than Internet use was socioeconomic and demographic factors. This link has been taken a step further, with research suggesting that such variables ‘appear to moderate the relationship of Internet use and political engagement’ (Hargittai and Shaw 118) as well as the connection between social media use and political activity (Pasek, More, Romer in Hargittai and Shaw 119). To develop a nuanced understanding of the social and
political impacts of the social media moment, it is important to understand the many variables that affect levels of participation.

**Defining Politics and Political Participation**

In an electoral system such as Australia’s, traditional political acts like voting or being a member of a political party have been the subject of a significant amount of research. Many terms, both specific and general, have been used to describe civic and political involvement, ranging from the generic — ‘social capital’ (Putnam), ‘civic literacy’ (Milner), and ‘political engagement’ and ‘civic engagement’ — to more particular terms like ‘membership’, ‘political knowledge’ and ‘turnout’ (Bakker and de Vreese).

The notion of ‘participation’ has roots in several social science fields, and remains somewhat fluid, varying with the contexts of its use. As Carpentier notes, ‘[i]n media and communication studies, especially where social and political engagement is on the research agenda, a lack of clarity or fixity is notable’ (in Dahlgren 2012: 27). It is with this in mind that I unpack the terms ‘political participation’ and ‘politics’.

In 1977, a seminal study by Milbrath and Goel defined political participation as ‘those actions of private citizens by which they seek to influence or to support government and politics’ (in Fyfe 38). Verba, Schlozman, and Brady offer another definition, arguing that it is:
[a]ctivity that has the intent or effect of influencing government action — either directly by affecting the making or implementation of public policy or indirectly by influencing the selection of people who make those policies (38).

These definitions are based on a conception of politics in which participation requires presence in the formal political arena. This fails to consider action that occurs outside that arena. Both definitions are limited to acts that have the intent of influencing those in positions of traditional political power.

In contrast, Delli Carpini conceives of political participation as something that is ‘part of a wider notion of “democratic engagement”’ (396). This provides a broader, ‘catch all’ definition, while maintaining some reference back to the idea of involvement in a state or institutional-centric system. Dahlgren argues that political participation is more than simply a feeling one has; it involves some ‘activity’ (2009: 80). Van Deth, writing in 2001, made a similar claim about other definitions of political participation, saying they made several assumptions including that participating meant taking action rather than simply expressing interest or observing from the sidelines (in Wyngarden 7).

Dahlgren contends that despite the concepts of political engagement and participation being used synonymously at
times, it is worthwhile distinguishing between them. He asserts that engagement refers to a person’s subjective state, a ‘mobilized, focused attention on some object’ (2009: 80), which is a prerequisite for participation. Political participation involves some ‘connection to practical, do-able activities, where citizens can feel empowered’ (2009: 80 – 81). He cites reading the news each day as an example of an engaged citizen who merely has the potential to be a participating citizen. At some point, he argues, ‘[engagement] must be realized as participation if it is not to dissipate’ (2009: 81). This transition from engagement to participation may involve something like an act of communication (2009: 81). Dahlgren makes the point that while both engagement and participation are anchored in the individual, ‘the political realm requires collectivities; the engagement and participation of the citizen are predicated on him/her being connected to others, by civic bonds’ (2009: 81).

Dahlgren declares that some forms of engagement are directed at nonpolitical areas, such as private leisure (2009: 81). However, the private world, including that of leisure, is potentially fertile ground for understanding the new paradigm of participation. As Wyngarden notes, being too restrictive with such definitions tends to ‘lead scholars to focus on political activities with established measures, such as voting, donating money, or working for a political campaign’ (7).
Bakardjieva, a Canadian Internet studies and political participation scholar, developed a concept called ‘subactivism’, which is ‘a kind of politics that unfolds at the level of subjective experience and is submerged in the flow of everyday life’ (92). This kind of politics, constituted and defined by ‘decisions and actions that have either a political or ethical frame of reference’ (92) is, I argue in Chapter Two, an important part of how we must understand the contemporary political experience. Individual, personal actions that may occur in the private sphere are what we should be analysing to comprehend contemporary understandings of political participation. Broader conceptions of participation ‘can incorporate a fuller range of activities that individuals may perceive, in some way or other, as political’ (Hargittai and Shaw 118).

**Current Debates**

There are two predominant narratives in the literature on contemporary political participation. Broadly speaking, one is based on the idea that modern society’s social fabric is unraveling. This narrative suggests there is a generational disconnect from politics and public life. Young people particularly — digital ‘natives’ born into a digital world — are increasingly disinterested in and disconnected from formal political activities like voting and being members of political parties, and care less about traditional civic activities like volunteering out of a sense of public or civic duty (Putnam; Morozov 2011). In this narrative,
social media plays a disruptive rather than cohesive role, dragging participants’ focus away from the formal, ‘legitimate’ arenas of participation (see, for example, Enjolras et al).

Putnam’s landmark study of social capital and civic life in America, *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community* charted the breakdown of civic bonds in modern society, underscoring the extent to which people in the United States are less willing to participate in civic associations of various kinds and reporting lower levels of electoral participation. Writing at the dawn of the new millennium, Putnam attributes this change partly to a growing sense of the diminishing relevance of formal political processes to American people, noting that:

> [i]f you don’t know the rules of the game and the players and don’t care about the outcome, you’re unlikely to try playing yourself. (35)

In contrast, the other narrative is optimistic about the potential for social media to facilitate and promote new forms of engagement with politics and public life, rejecting the idea that the best and only measure of engagement and participation is to look at formal, electoral-centred activities (Hargittai and Shaw; Bennett and Segerberg; Vromen 2008, 2011).

Zukin, Keeter, Andolina, Jenkins and Delli Carpini recontextualise the decline charted by Putnam, finding that young people in the
United States have not abandoned civic and political participation, but have instead found new modes of engagement that had been overlooked or downplayed. They point to novel forms of political action such as participation in online communities in which people connect with like-minded peers around specific issues, arguing this is demonstrative of a shift from formal, electorally centred politics to a new, digitally mediated form. Bennett, Wells and Freelon call this form ‘actualising citizenship’, a model based on peer-to-peer connectedness that is largely facilitated online, building on the argument that it is necessary to adopt a more nuanced perspective of political activity and participation in public life if we are to understand the contemporary paradigm of citizenship and participation.

**Disaffected Citizenship and Cultural Displacement**

These two narratives — one claiming that society’s social fabric is unraveling, accelerated by the disruptive force of social media, and the other more optimistic about the potential for social media to reinvigorate an ailing model of politics and citizenship — form the basis for much of the scholarship in the field of Internet studies and political participation.

Hargittai and Shaw link the first narrative with the idea of ‘disaffected citizenship’, wherein declining rates of youth participation in political and civic activities indicate a worrying withdrawal from public life (117). This relies on a relatively
narrow set of markers of political participation: voting; donating to, volunteering for or being a member of a political party; and directly contacting political representatives. To understand the nature of contemporary political participation, we must move beyond such narrow conceptions. Hargittai and Shaw call the second narrative one of ‘cultural displacement’, suggesting this withdrawal from traditional political activity ‘underscores how young people’s rejection of the modes of civic and political engagement favoured by their parents and grandparents has been accompanied by the rise of new practices of public participation’ (117). These new practices are often played out online, as that is where young people now spend a large portion of their time (Palfrey and Gasser).

The cultural displacement model offers a richer imagining of participatory possibilities than the rigid and outdated disaffected citizen model of participation. In the social media moment, it is important to understand citizenship as something that incorporates the connective power of online communication technologies.

**Zooming in on Youth and New Ideas About Democracy**

It is worth considering that though these emerging ideas about politics and political participation apply to a broad spectrum of people, there is an age, or generational, element that cannot be
ignored. In the modern world, the Internet has become pervasive; an ‘inexorable and commonplace feature of how societies, organizations, and individuals operate in the modern world’ (Dahlgren 2009: 150).

Young people have come to rely on virtual connective spaces for almost all the information needed to live their lives (Palfrey and Gasser 6) and, as a section of the population, are key users of social media. No longer just consumers, but ‘active participants and creators of this new media environment’ (Montgomery and Gottlieb-Robles 132), today’s youth are reworking the rules by which civic and political life operates (Jenkins 8 – 9). Though they may be participating less in traditional political acts, they are engaging in activities such as protests, boycotting and petition signing, often online (see, for example, Mackinnon, Pitre and Watling; Vromen 2008, 2011). Young people are mobilising in relation to issues or causes rather than in relation to the state or an institution.

In Australia, ‘the … Government’s approach to youth participation is underpinned by the idea that young people need to be enabled through strategies that will empower them to become active and responsible citizens’ (Vromen 2011: 960). This policy approach betrays an assumption that young people are ‘citizens in waiting’ rather than already being citizens of value, relevance and consequence. To thrive as a liberal democracy, Australia
needs its young citizens to feel as though they are invested in and play an active role in the future of society.

To move toward a fuller understanding of political participation in Australia, political authorities need to embrace this ‘aspirational’ view of democracy. Contemporary policies, however, fail to treat young Australians as active political agents with existing preferences derived from their lived experiences (Vromen 2011: 961). With the emphasis on ‘top-down highly structured consultative and participation processes’, young people’s agency and rights as citizens are not being adequately addressed (Melville 2).

The significance of the Internet, particularly social media, should not be underestimated here, as tapping into online opportunities to take action on issues fits in with contemporary lifestyles and the growing demand for choice and flexibility. As Bennett notes, ‘[w]hile older citizens may lament the trouble with youth today, young people are forging ahead in many areas of politics and making it up as they go along’ (30). The Occupy movement, largely driven by and made up of young people (Reimer), is a good example of young people making up political participation as they go along. The decision-making processes drew on repertoires of action from the past; such as the way the protestors organised their general assemblies using consensus procedures and direct democracy practices (Bennett), though the actual effectiveness of these assemblies is questionable.
As well as being influenced by past practices, the protestors were innovators, displaying ‘openness to individual-level innovation aided by clear avoidance of formal organisation, leaders, collective identifications, divisive ideologies, or hierarchy’ (Bennett 30). As I discuss in Chapter Three, social media played an informational and mobilising role during the protests, but perhaps the deeper, more profound impact is social media’s influence on logics of action and connectedness, and how this has informed an emerging paradigm of personal politics.

**From Group Loyalties to Personal Politics**

Studies into the social and political impact of the Internet have produced a wide range of positive and negative results. Over time, as the scholarship moved beyond rhetoric, it became clear that the connective power of the Internet was having a complex and multidimensional impact, creating more nuanced changes than initially proclaimed. This complexity of understanding extends to current debates about the state of contemporary citizenship and political participation of which social media is an important part.

As I have highlighted, the paradigm shift in political participation has at its heart a change from emphasis on political mobilisation in relation to a state or institution, to an emphasis on mobilisation in relation to issues and causes, informed by a personal and
individual political reference point. This is the focus of the second chapter. In it I discuss the emergence of personal politics and connective power of the Internet, social media in particular.
This chapter explores the fragmentation of political and social collectivities and the emergence of an era of personal politics. As part of this change, people are mobilising based on a more personal connection with issues, reflecting individual lifestyles, as the relevance of political identities built around institutions or formal structures (ie: political parties) diminishes. In the last fifteen years, there has been a steady decline in political party membership in Australia. This year, there are more people on the waiting list for the Melbourne Cricket Club (MCC) than the total number of rank-and-file members for all Australian political parties (Alexander).

Looking to actions that occur in the private sphere is an important part of reconceptualising political participation, allowing it to be understood as something that is embedded in daily life. I explore this idea, using Canadian scholar Maria Bakardjieva’s work as a
platform. The individualisation of politics is linked to an emerging paradigm of citizenship (deeply related to the connective power of social media channels) that has displaced traditional ideas of citizenship that are based on duty and sacrifice (Bakardjieva; Bennett and Segerberg 2011).

It is worth distinguishing between ‘personal’ and ‘personalised’ politics. Personalised politics are characterised by an emphasis on charismatic political leaders, while personal politics are largely informed by individual choice and lifestyle — a product of ‘individuation [having become] the modal social condition … particularly among younger generations’ (Bennett 22).

**Globalisation, Individualisation, and Personal Politics**

In the contemporary political landscape, where trust in political authority is low (Harris, Wyn and Younes 2010; Coleman), the world of politics has become one in which individuals break away from the political identities and ideologies given to them by political parties, structures of the state, and mass organisations. They begin to construct political causes and commitments of their own, ‘immigrat[ing] to new niches of activity and identity’ (Bakardjieva 94). People now ‘produce, stage and cobble together their biographies themselves’ (Giddens in Bakardjieva 95), leading to the construction of an individualised personal politic.
The arrival of the Internet brought with it an opportunity for connectedness not previously experienced. Accompanying this greater connectivity has been a globalising of political issues that now cuts across conventional social movement sectors. Labour and human rights issues are often interrelated, occupying common political agendas, and economic and environmental concerns align in a way not previously seen. This has led to a demand for a greater flexibility in defining issues (Bennett and Segerberg 2011: 771).

This demand for flexibility in defining issues and constructing a political identity has led to the framing of participation based on a more personal, individualistic expression of political action. As Bennett puts it:

[s]ocial fragmentation and the decline of group loyalties have given rise to an era of personalized politics in which individual expression displaces collective action frames in the embrace of political causes (37).

This fragmentation of collectivities into an era of individual expression and personal politics has a communicative element, and has been accompanied by the exponential growth of social media channels as a form of social and political connection.
Personal Media and Networked Individualism

Some scholars claim that the growth in the use of new technologies and the multi functionality of devices like smartphones, with their capacity to link people to their online social networks and identities wherever they go, has led to an era of 'networked individualism'. This is a claim that:

social relationships are being reconfigured away from the place-based collectives that were dominant in previous eras (families, communities, associations) and towards a new pattern of sociality built around increasingly autonomous individuals (Postill 2011: 69).

The impact the proliferation of personal media — devices such as laptops, tablets, and smartphones and their connection to social media channels — has had and is continuing to have on social relationships in the modern world has been the subject of a significant amount of research. New patterns of sociality and connection are connected to this proliferation, and the constant social interaction and connectedness afforded by mobile devices.

There are scholars who are sceptical of the role played by personal media in the transformation of the communicative landscape, and while not denying that it has had an impact, they suggest that the distinction between mass media and personal media is not as sharp as it appears (see Agar et al 2002; Amit 2007; Green

Personal media should be understood as ‘part of an increasingly complex and shifting communicative landscape’ (Postill 2011: 70). They have altered social and political behaviour in a real and multifaceted way, but have not brought about an era of ‘networked individualism’. Castells (1996) predictions about the networking form of organisation replacing formal political and social institutions’ organisational structures, and individual social and political networks becoming the foci of power have proven not to be true. Changes to patterns of social and political behaviour are not solely attributable to personal media. As Bennett notes, ‘[t]here are still plenty of old-fashioned institutions wielding power, and the last time I checked, the state … seemed alive and well’ (28).

**Personalised Communication and Mobilisation**

Bennett and Segerberg define personalised communication as:

(a) the presence of cues and opportunities for customization of engagement with issues and actions; and

(b) the relative absence of cues (including action frames) that signal ideological or definitional unanimity (2011: 772).
Communication that fits this definition is ‘at odds with the emphasis on unity and alignment conventionally associated with the communication processes of effective collective action’ (Bennett and Segerberg 2011: 772). Social movement scholars have expressed concern about the coherence of action taken outside collective identity frames (Bennett and Segerberg 2011: 772), but political activity launched from these platforms of loose, personal connection to any number of issues (often affiliated with frequent and sustained use of social media) is often impressive in how quickly it is mobilised and its ability to focus public attention on an issue or set of issues for a short term (Bennett and Segerberg 2011: 773).

There are several types of personalised political participation repertoires. Some, as Bennett and Segerberg write, ‘involve [the] merging of multiple issues and others involve intense engagement in a single cause’ (2011: 771). In their analysis of Put People First (PPF) — a UK civil society coalition of over 160 development NGOs, trade unions and environmental groups — around the time of the 2009 G20 Summit in London, Bennett and Segerberg addressed some of these differences by examining how PPF invited ‘different degrees of flexibility in affiliation, issue definition, and expression’ (2011: 771) through their communication strategies.

In this analysis, Bennett and Segerberg tried to understand what notable difference, if any, there was in the public engagement, policy focus, and mass media impact between coalitions that
offered looser organisational affiliations, and coalitions that presented a more rigid protest framework with fewer social media platforms (personalised affiliations). PPF was, according to their criteria, a coalition that offered highly personalised affiliation. Interestingly, Bennett and Segerberg concluded that ‘the coalition that adopted more personalized communication strategies … did not seem to have sacrificed much organizational control or political capacity’ (2011: 794). On the basis of their research, personalised appeal is what people want, but it can exist alongside more traditional political control and appeal, demonstrating the complexity of the new participatory paradigm.

In early 2012, the US Congress was considering a pair of Bills (the Stop Online Piracy Bill and the Protect Intellectual Property Bill) that would have created new laws about government access to information gathered by large Internet companies, such as Google. Positioned as a cyber-security law that would target national security threats, the legislation would have given the federal government power to filter the Internet for information and turned online companies into police agencies. It was backed by ‘old media’ companies, but widely opposed because of the impact it would have had on privacy and individual online freedom (Bennett 2012: 29).

Spearheaded by Wikipedia and Google, a protest involving hundreds of sites directed millions of individuals to contact their representatives about the two Bills. More than seven million
people signed a google.com petition, and on 18 January 2012, an estimated 10,000 websites voluntarily blacked out as a form of protest (Gross). Lasting 24 hours, this protest pushed enough of the sponsors of the bills to withdraw support, forcing backers of the legislation to regroup (Bennett 29).

The interesting aspect of this story is the lack of a clear objective frame that mobilised people. Rather than a collective appeal for individuals to take action for one particular reason, the online protest offered ‘a rainbow of reasons to act’ (Bennett 29), including threats to business and innovation, invasion of privacy, opening up vulnerabilities of the Internet, and threats to jobs. There was a common thread, being ‘a loose call to prevent government censorship of entities ranging from the entire Internet, to the safety of personal communication, to the independence of favorite sites’ (Bennett 29), but this was a backdrop to the story of people being mobilised based on more personal and individualised identifications with issues. This rapid collective mobilisation, based on a ‘shared late modern ethos of diversity and inclusiveness’ (Bennett 21) has come to represent contemporary political identifications in an era of personalised politics and individualised action frames. Research indicates new forms of individualised and micro-political action are featuring in the participatory repertoires of young people. These are actions typically related to everyday life — action as a consumer, or signing an online petition, for example. These new orientations ‘result in engagement with politics as an expression of personal
hopes, lifestyles, and grievances’ (Bennett and Segerberg 2011: 743). This is linked with the decreasing relevance of ideology and formal group identifications as places where political identities are constructed. Individuals now ‘increasingly code their personal politics through personal lifestyle values’ (Bennett 22). Concerns such as climate change are thought about in terms of an individual carbon footprint; labour standards in terms of fashion and brand choice; fair trade and animal welfare in terms of food consumption habits. Individuals have subsumed political action into their everyday activities, and rely less on an institution such as a political party to validate the action as political and worthwhile. The reference point for an issue is no longer the party or institutional position.

Despite being written ten years ago, Norris’ assessment of this generational shift as a move from the ‘politics of loyalties’ to the ‘politics of choice’ remains relevant. Norris charts a shift from mass mobilisation in relation to the state, with widespread following of established ideologies (a politics of loyalties) to mobilising in relation to issues or causes, based more on individualised repertoires of action and individual agency (a politics of choice). As Bakardjieva writes, this politics of choice has a ‘generative, or substantive nature’ (95). It concerns:

political issues which flow from the process of self-actualization in post-traditional contexts, where globalizing influences intrude deeply into the reflexive
project of the self, and conversely where processes of self-realization influence global strategies (Giddens 214).

This creates an association between the personal world — from where the process of self-actualisation stems — and public displays of politics. The world of the private life — the 'small world' as Bakardjieva refers to it — is critical when trying to understand how political identities are formed and how political issues are engaged with. This 'small world' is where the most spirited political conversations take place (Eliasoph 1998) and where 'media representations and discourses concerning issues of the political community are received, interpreted, and negotitated' (Bakardjieva 95).

There is evidence to support the conclusion that everyday thoughts, conversations and activities have a bearing on more traditional politics (see Dahlgren 2003, 2006; Hermes 2006; Hermes and Dahlgren 2006; Couldry 2006; Couldry et al 2007 in Bakardjieva 92), but this everyday activity may constitute political participation in itself. Bakardjieva has a useful term for this kind of politics: subactivism. It is a politics that ‘unfolds at the level of subjective experience and is submerged in the flow of everyday life’ (92).

Such a conception of politics is defined by actions that occur on an individual level and are small in scale, and have either a political or ethical frame of reference. These frames of reference
are ‘fluid and constantly shifting, responding to the ongoing dialogue between the subject and the cultural discourses permeating his or her social environment’ (Bakardjieva 96). Thinking about politics in such a way enables us to conceive of it as something inherently related to the process of self-identification as a political actor, informed by actions such as ‘the silent act of reading and interpreting political news [or] conversations around the dinner table’ (Bakardjieva 96). This extends to the semi-public areas of everyday life, such as neighbourhood activities and initiatives, and school boards, for example. When we think about everyday activities in this light, decisions and actions that arise spontaneously and are often non-permanent, such as new dimensions of work, homemaking, parenting or entertainment become sites of political activity (Bakardjieva 96).

**Citizenship Paradigms**

Predominant conceptions of citizenship are evolving. The idea that being a good citizen is inextricably bound to participation in public life out of a sense of duty is fading, making way for a more personally expressive paradigm, based on a ‘shared late modern ethos of diversity and inclusiveness’ (Bennett 21). I argue in the following sections that we are experiencing a paradigm shift.

Bennett, Wells and Freelon talk of the ‘dutiful citizen’ and the ‘actualising citizen’. The established and more traditional model is that of the dutiful citizen. Its core characteristic is that:
individuals participate in civic life through organized groups, from civic clubs to political parties, while becoming informed via the news, and generally engaging in public life out of a sense of personal duty (Bennett, Wells and Freelon 838).

As Putnam and others have suggested, these characteristics are being eroded over time among younger generations. As modes of participation evolve, behaviours, interactions and perceptions of politics are changing. This is the foundation of the ‘actualising citizenship’ model, and includes:

the rise of more personally expressive cause-oriented politics based on lifestyle concerns such as consumer behaviors, and the emergence of direct action protest networks in a variety of local to global arenas (Bennett, Wells and Freelon 838 – 839).

With its rejection of hierarchical information structures, actualising citizenship is related to a different brand of politics in the Internet age, emphasising the importance of examining the role of social media in connecting people and maximising individual expression (Bennett, Wells and Freelon 839). This suggests a conceptual shift, thinking about political participation less in terms of top-down information receiving — where members of groups respond to cues out of a sense of duty toward or regard for public authorities — and more in terms of personal
engagement with peer networks (Bennett, Wells and Freelon 839). In this paradigm it is crucial to recognise the importance of social media in connecting people and maximising individual expression. It represents a fundamental change in political action, particularly among young people, and in the organisation and expression of modern protest behaviours.

**Actualising Citizenship in the Social Media Moment**

It is clear that ‘the mere presence of the Internet in society does not result in the transcendence of longstanding social inequalities’ (Shulman 2009 in Hargittai and Shaw 130). Despite this, a new wave of technological optimism has accompanied the relatively recent explosion of personal media and the second wave of Internet democracy pundits is distinct from the first. The first wave was focused on the idea that the arrival of the Internet brought with it greater equality of access to information and a decentralisation of power structures (Shirky), while the second was born out of the eventual embedding of the Internet in societal structures and people’s daily lives. As Loader and Mercea put it:

> [t]he distinctiveness of this second generation of Internet democracy is the displacement of the public sphere model with that of a networked citizen-centred perspective providing opportunities to connect the private sphere of
autonomous political identity to a multitude of chosen political spaces (758).

This view represents quite a dramatic departure from more traditional notions of rational deliberation that are quite constrained, focused more on formal political arenas; the realm of the dutiful citizen. This second generation looks at the role of the individual — the citizen-user — as a driver of change, relying on the ‘self-actualized networking of citizens engaged in lifestyle and identity politics’ (Loader and Mercea 758) as the force behind democratic innovation.

This is a view more closely aligned with the actualising citizenship paradigm. As outlined above, actualising citizenship is characterised by ‘the emergence of direct action protest networks in a variety of local to global arenas’ (Bennett 2012; Inglehart; Norris; Zukin et al in Bennett, Wells and Freelon 838 – 839) and proposes a conceptual shift, thinking about political engagement less in terms of the top-down receipt of information and more in terms of personal engagement with peer networks. Within this paradigm, we must recognise the growing importance of social media in connecting people and maximising individual expression (Bennett, Wells and Freelon).

Enjolras, Steen-Johnsen and Wollebaek examined the network structure underpinning social media technologies — the ‘strength in weak ties’ argument (see Gladwell for a critique
of this contention) — finding that they have shaped the way political information is received and interpreted (2). This has lead to social media’s position as an alternative mobilising structure that exists alongside the mass media and more entrenched political organisations (Enjolras, Steen-Johnsen and Wollebaek 15). This finding is supported by the ‘malleability’ of social media networks. They offer alternative modes of political communication that are not subject to the same constraints as communication in more formal arenas, such as the mass media. Social media, with their capacity to personalise engagement with causes, may ‘facilitate organizational communication and coordination at the same time as they enable flexibility in how, when, where and with whom individuals may affiliate and act’ (Bennett and Segerberg 2011: 771). However, this malleability and flexibility brings with it a new range of problems, and it is important to retain a critical perspective. If citizenship is thought of as a personal endeavour, and the primary reference point becomes individual choice and action, there is potential for its implicit reduction to one of many lifestyle choices (Dahlgren 2009: 820).

While individual choice, micro-political action and the ‘small world’ of private life are spaces where emerging forms of political participation and engagement with civic life are occurring, it is important to understand them as part of what makes up civic behaviour, not its totality. In the next section, I problematise the political efficacy of communication on social media channels. Social media is positioned as an alternative mobilising structure,
and they may serve a powerful, politically generative function, but their role in a hybrid media landscape must be critiqued. The contribution of communication on social media channels to rational, deliberative exchange is questionable.

**Social Media’s Political Potential: a Critical Approach**

While communication in the mass media is dictated by mostly tempered, deliberative exchanges, the same cannot be said for communication on social media channels, which is more often characterised by blunt and sometimes emotional exchanges (Loader and Mercea 761). Caution should be exercised when focusing on the individual political agency enabled by social networking technologies, as it can lead to a failure to comprehend ‘how the self-centred forms of communication that these platforms enable can challenge rather than reinforce the collective creativity of social movements’ (Fenton and Barassi 180). Next, I outline three important reasons political communication on social media should be analysed critically.

First, in a world of abundant communicative practices, putting faith in an individualised and personally expressive form of communication to deliver political change in the traditional political arenas demonstrates a lack of criticality. This view fails to understand the institutional reality of existing political and commercial systems. Even if is accepted that communication
in a social media network engenders expressive and creative individualised communication, as a single person or small organisation with limited resources, there is little chance of rising to the top of the ‘Google hierarchy’. As Hindman argues:

[s]ocial media cannot escape, and indeed are part of, the stratified online eyeball economy. In this economy, the traditional and the mainstream are still dominant. Mainstream news and information sites still attract the most traffic just as certain celebrities and elites generate the largest networks (in Fenton and Barassi 190).

Second, in a modern political landscape characterised by the rise of individualism and personalised participation repertoires (Bennett; Bennett and Segerberg 2011; Coleman), people are retreating to the private sphere, resorting to social media activity for their dose of political action — a means of communication they feel they have more control over (Fenton and Barrassi 191). A problem here is that if participation in the private domain is built on ‘mutual privatism’ (Fenton and Barrassi 191), where individualism and people’s private affairs are the sole focus, we risk losing the idea of valuable collective political endeavour. While the personally-centred world of social media is certainly worthy of exploration as a site of political participation, if it focuses attention on the ‘personal politics of self-representation’ to the exclusion of contentious, contested issues, ‘it will remain as a network of singular acts of self-organizing production’
(Fenton and Barassi 191), offering little in the way of meaningful, deliberative engagement with issues.

Third, within social media networks, with their emphasis on self-empowerment, there is potentially little concern for broader political and social contexts. These contexts involve ‘the dominant framings of acceptable political action and social organization as well as the broader positioning of political activity within neoliberal discourse’ (Fenton and Barassi 191). This idea is picked up by Morozov, who asserts that individual action — where there is no experience of a feeling of solidarity or group belonging — has no political dimension, as there is no change in the control of power (2013).

Despite these shortcomings, communication on social media channels has political value. When considering participation in public life, it is important to examine the rational-critical discourse of the public sphere, where public opinion is formed. In the next section I examine the impact of online communicative spaces on the evolution of the idea of a normative public sphere. I argue that, despite the apparent lack of real world political impact to come from communication on social media channels, this is not what we should be expecting or looking for within these interactions. They should be viewed as part of a multilayered, hybrid system of political communication and identity building; as political conversation in the ‘small world’ that is a springboard for action in public life.
Online Communication Spaces and the Public Sphere

The public sphere is, ideally, a space ‘free of state and corporate interests where private individuals can come together as a ‘public’ and rationally deliberate … upon issues of common concern’ (Dahlberg 1998: 71). It is a social sphere defined by rational-critical discourse where public opinion can be formed ‘through which official decision making can be held democratically accountable’ (Dahlberg 2001: 2). Habermas’ normative notion of the public sphere has become ‘central to theorising the role of the media in democratic society’ (Dahlberg 1998: 71). I use Dahlberg’s — an Australian public sphere and digital democracy scholar — analysis of it to examine the position of online interactions in the emerging paradigm of participation and citizenship.

The Internet has opened up a vast number of new public interactive spaces. Much has been said about the democratising potential of such spaces, with claims that they provide ‘the means for a revival of the Greek Agora, New England town hall meetings and eighteenth-century Parisian café culture’ (Dahlberg 1998: 71), and may constitute an expansion of the public sphere. Proponents of this view argue that social hierarchies and power relations are ‘undercut by the “blindness” of cyberspace to identity, allowing people to interact as if they were equals’ (Dahlberg 1998: 72). The asynchronous nature of interaction on social media channels is seen to ‘encourage community and dialogue rather than the
isolated and passive reception associated with the mass media’ (Dahlberg 1998: 72).

As I will argue, the discussion on social media channels falls short of this normative notion of the public sphere, but should not be dismissed.

It is no longer appropriate to think of the public sphere as a space constituted only by face-to-face interaction (Poster 3). Now, the ‘thick culture of information machines provides the interface for much if not most discourse on political issues’ (Poster 4). Political discourse has long been mediated by technology (first radio, then television), but the issue now is that the interactivity of the Internet enables ‘new forms of decentralized dialogue and … new individual and collective “voices” … which are the new building blocks of political formations and groupings’ (Poster 4).

Dahlberg (2001) does not believe the reconfiguring of the ‘political’ brought on by a ‘decentralized dialogue’ online is a healthy direction for political debate and ideas about political participation. He asserts that vibrant exchange of positions and rational critique cannot take place in online communicative spaces for the following reasons:

- There is no autonomy from state and economic power online, and this positions participants as consumers rather than freely interacting citizens;
The disjointed ‘rhythm’ of computer-mediated communication — the exchanges of short messages, and rapid movement between arguments — runs counter to the ‘rational, dialogic form of conversation required within the public sphere’ (5);

There is not enough reflexivity in online communications as ‘the bite-sized postings often involved, the non-linear structure of conversations, and the rapidity of the exchanges don’t allow space for meaningful deliberation and reflection’ (6);

Online spaces do not allow individuals to put themselves in the position of others to more fully comprehend and appreciate their perspective on a given issue as there is generally ‘far too much talk and not enough respectful listening’ (9);

It is too easy to mislead others with deceptive identity claims online, which undermines the whole deliberative process and can be damaging to online deliberations of public importance; and

Access limitations and inequalities mean that these spaces may in fact be reinforcing existing power and social disparities, homogenising public opinion as the information elite communicates among themselves.
Even if Morozov and Dahlberg are right — if communication on social media channels lacks the critical analysis present in the mass media, and doesn’t shift power structures — there is still political value in such communication. It makes up part of an ongoing political discourse in the contemporary communicative landscape. Social media channels are still vibrant places for debate. The erosion of dutiful ideas about citizenship and political participation is not a direct result of social media, and has not resulted in an utterly disaffected and disengaged body politic. It is better to think of social media spaces as part of a complex media landscape where an individual’s politics unfolds at the subjective level.

**Toward an Individualised Politics of Choice**

Individuals are mobilising, communicating and constructing political identities differently, coding their politics through personal and lifestyle choices. This politics of choice unfolds at the subjective level of experience. It has informed an emerging model of citizenship, linked with the self-actualising and connective nature of social media. While it is important to critically analyse political communication on social media channels, the significance of that communication should not be dismissed, as it plays a role in the formation and operation of a new paradigm of personal politics.
In the next chapter, I discuss the Occupy movement. With its emphasis on peer networks and cause-oriented politics (rather than ideology or party-based politics), as well as its active social media presence, it is an ideal case study in personal politics and connectedness. Its makeup corresponds with the contemporary paradigm of political participation and identity building that is developing in a hybrid media world, influenced by both existing and emerging power structures.
On 17 September 2011, nearly two thousand people gathered in the heart of Wall Street, New York City. They met at the charging bull statue in the middle of the financial district, marched, then set up camp in Zucotti park — a privately-owned public space in Lower Manhattan. Those there that day had responded to a call from Canadian counter-cultural magazine Adbusters, which had sent out an email to ninety thousand of its supporters on July 13, proclaiming a Twitter hashtag (#OccupyWallStreet) and a date. This was the beginning of what was to become a worldwide political movement; one of the largest global protests against economic and social injustice in history. Its reach extended to some 951 cities in 82 countries (Balardini 35; Schneider 13).

Social movements are understood as ‘networks of social actors who engage in sustained collective actions, have a common
purpose and challenge established elites’ (Tarrow 22). Analysts of collective action have tried to make sense of them for decades, looking at their structure in an attempt to understand the intricacies of their organisational dynamics and networks. (Diani 1) The ties — social and otherwise — between participants or prospective participants, substantially inform collective action, but this is not a new discovery (Diani 1). What has interested analysts and scholars more recently is the relationship between social movements and social networks (Diani 1), and research in this area has grown significantly since online social networking technologies first came into existence. It continues to grow in depth and breadth as we move into a new era of communication and connectedness with corresponding consequences for the operation and organisation of social movements (Bennett; Coleman; Castells 2012).

Bennett and Segerberg identify two elements of large-scale connective action formations (such as the Occupy movement) as particularly important:

1. Political content in the form of easily personalized ideas such as ... we are the 99 per cent. ... These personal action frames are inclusive of different personal reasons for contesting a situation that needs to be changed.
2. Various personal communication technologies that enable sharing these themes (2012: 744).
These elements will be the focus of this chapter.

The interactive capabilities of social media are having an impact on traditional political participation and the way political movements organise. In this chapter, I use the theoretical frameworks of Bennett and Segerberg, who theorise an emerging ‘connective logic of action’ and Juris, who uses a theory of the ‘logic of aggregation’ to frame a discussion of Occupy’s place in the new participation landscape and the impact social media had and is continuing to have on the movement.

I outline why the Occupy movement is an example of this emerging logic of action, and symbolic of the emerging paradigm of personal politics discussed in preceding chapters. I begin by unpacking Bennett and Segerberg’s theory of connective logic before examining Occupy’s organisational structure. I then discuss the use of social media before, during, and after the protests and argue that their use was emblematic of the core characteristics of a connective logic of action. Next, I examine the effectiveness of social media for contemporary social movements in the context of Chadwick’s ‘hybrid media system’ and Juris’ theory of the ‘logic of aggregation’.

**Unpacking the ‘Logic of Connective Action’**

Bennett and Segerberg (2012) suggest that, in a political landscape increasingly characterised by an individualisation of choice and a ‘dissipation of established solidarities and an entrepreneurial
mode of engagement’ (Flanigan et al 2006 in Loader and Mercea 762) ideas about collective action are taking new forms.

There are two logics of action to consider when examining contemporary political mobilisations and protest behaviour: ‘the familiar logic of collective action and the less familiar logic of connective action’ (Bennett and Segerberg 2012: 743). The logic of collective action is associated with high levels of organisational resources and the formation of collective identities. It refers to organisation and action informed by traditional sources of a political or ideological reference point such as political parties, churches and other mass organisations (Bennett and Segerberg 2012: 739).

The less familiar logic of connective action is responsive to the expression of a more personalised politics and a more personalised political identity, informed less by traditional centres of content sharing and identity formation and more by individuals sharing content across personal networks, usually social media networks (Bennett and Segerberg 2012).

In personalised action formations:

the nominal issues may resemble older movement or party concerns in terms of topics ... but the ideas and mechanisms for organizing action become more personalized than in cases where action is organised on the basis of social
group identity, membership, or ideology (Bennett and Segerberg 2012: 744).

A formation built on connective logic is likely to have loose organisational coordination of action, loosely linked networks, and make use of social technologies (Bennett and Segerberg 2012: 757).

In contrast to the familiar collective action paradigm, in a connective logic, ‘taking public action or contributing to a common good becomes an act of personal expression and recognition or self-validation achieved by sharing ideas and actions in trusted relationships’ (Bennett and Segerberg 2012: 752). Even though the relationships may be with people on the other side of the world, a connection can be made without needing to be a member of a club or political party, and without having to share an ideological frame. The starting point shifts from a group getting an individual to contribute, to the ‘self-motivated … sharing of already internalized or personalized ideas, plans, images, and resources with networks of others’ (Bennett and Segerberg 2012: 753). In this sense, connective action logic is quite individually empowering.

**Occupy’s Personal Organisational Logic**

The Occupy movement’s formation has deep roots in the shifting shape of political participation repertoires and motivations in
modern society. It is emblematic of the rise of action based on a personal politic.

The movement was not organised on the basis of a particular social group identity, membership or ideology (Schneider). While some of the expressions of personal politics are rooted in consumer culture — defined by individual actions and concerns — larger individualised collectivities such as Occupy do emerge around broader political agendas. Although people join these actions in large numbers, ‘the identity reference is more derived through inclusive and diverse large-scale personal expression’ (Bennett and Segerberg 2011: 744), distinct from identification with a group or ideology. This is reflected in the way the movement was organised and the way decisions were made.

There was no desire to recreate the kind of decision-making process aligned with the very system being opposed; that is, one with a structured policy platform, organised around an ideology and with identified leaders. Instead, the protestors experimented with different ways of organising and making decisions, through deliberation and collaboration. This demonstrated a commitment to a more horizontal, networked platform of democracy. As Castells notes, ‘this [was] a fundamental feature of the movement. Instrumentality was not paramount. Authenticity was’ (2012: 178). With no national, local or global leaders of the movement, no traditional, rational or charismatic leadership, it was truly a social movement organisational experiment (Castells 2012: 178).
As Bennett points out, characteristics of Occupy’s organisational logic — such as the use of consensus procedures and other direct democracy practices — were taken from previous protest movements, drawing on their action-taking repertoires (31). A key difference however, was the openness displayed to each individual. It was central to the movement’s ideas about and practice of democracy that everyone have an equal say. Ultimately, ‘individual-level innovation aided by clear avoidance of formal organization, leaders, collective identifications, divisive ideology, or hierarchy’ (Bennett 30) ensured every issue raised at General Assemblies was considered and voted on. This emphasis on sharing, horizontality and peer-to-peer connection is indicative of a decision making process based on a connective logic. It is worth noting, however, that despite the innovative and experimental nature of the decision making process, the General Assemblies were certainly inefficient, marred by an inability to reach resolutions. They were never ending and, ultimately, unworkable (Postill 2013).

**Occupy, Social Media, and Connective Logic**

Occupy embodies the core characteristics of the connective logic of action. It was ‘born on the Internet, diffused by the Internet and maintained its presence on the Internet’ (Castells 2012: 168). Much of the diffusion of messages occurred on social networks, particularly Twitter and Facebook. The rapid growth the movement experienced across geographical boundaries reflected
its ‘viral diffusion on the Internet’ (Castells 2012: 168). This is an important element of the movement’s link to the connective logic of action, as a cornerstone of a connective logic is ‘sharing’, and the personalisation of political activity ‘leads actions and content to be distributed widely across social networks’ (Bennett and Segerberg 760) which in contemporary society, are primarily facilitated online.

The layers of social media employed to coordinate activity during the physical occupations are a key piece of the puzzle needed to understand the logics of action in modern protest cultures such as that of the Occupy movement (Bennett 37). The connective logic of action asserts that the use of social media allows for more flexible relationships, ‘enabling individuals to interact without the need for central coordination or a sense of unity in the display of collective action’ (Gerbaudo 19).

The material spaces — Wall Street’s Zucotti park, Melbourne’s City Square — made face-to-face interaction possible, and allowed protestors to share the experiences of enduring the elements, the interactions and altercations with police and the loss of comfort together. The occupation of public spaces served as ‘sites of autonomy’ (Castells 2012: 168). At the same time, flows of information on social media channels helped bring the world into the movement, as the discussion was amplified and disseminated online.
Complementing the ‘boots on the ground’ protesters, this occupation of online spaces ‘creat[ed] a permanent forum of solidarity, debate and strategic planning’ (Castells 2012: 169). The movement would not have been the same if either of these spaces — offline or online — were not occupied. Online networks of twitter followers, for example, were able to alert the protestors on the ground about police activity and ‘constantly distribute information, photos, videos and comments to build a real-time network of communication overlaid on the occupied space’ (Castells 2012: 171). Global and multidimensional, Occupy was ‘a hybrid movement that link[ed] cyberspace and urban space in multiple forms of communication’ (Castells 2012: 177). The online flows of information occurred predominantly on social media channels.

The communication systems between protesters were a hybrid of face-to-face interaction and flows of information on social media channels, but there was another hybrid system that connected not only protesters and interested parties, but the rest of the world to the movement.

**A Hybrid Media System**

The communication networks that served and were served by the Occupy movement existed in a ‘hybrid media system’. Though social media was certainly an important source of information, so was the mainstream media, and both were central to the
mobilisation of protestors. Both old and new media crafted the movement’s public image. Chadwick writes about media hybridity, politics, and power, arguing that a holistic approach to the role played by communication and information in politics is necessary; ‘one that avoids exclusively focusing either on supposedly “new” or supposedly “old” media’ (Chadwick 4). A hybrid media system is ‘built upon interactions among older and newer media logics’ (Chadwick 4).

Thinking about the media system as one that is hybrid helps us understand social movements such as Occupy as existing not inside a media dichotomy, but in a complex, multidimensional media environment. The hybrid media system ‘draws attention to flux, in-betweenness, the interstitial, and the liminal. It reveals how older and newer media logics in the fields of media and politics blend, overlap, intermesh and coevolve’ (Chadwick 4). This coevolution of the communicative media landscape reflects the complex and nuanced nature of political participation in the social media moment.

While acknowledging the merit of Chadwick’s theory as a conceptual framework for analysis of a social movement’s media interaction, the scope of my enquiry is limited, and I will focus on the role played by social media channels.

Social media played two central roles. Leading up to the movement’s materialisation in the occupation of public space,
they played an informational role, telling people what to expect. Interestingly, this was perhaps the phase of the protest where social media was least utilised as a means of choreography for the movement. As Gerbaudo notes:

[the emergence of Occupy Wall Street was characterized by a tortuous development in which social media were only partly used as a means for a choreography of assembly (102).

This is not to dismiss the role social media played in the moments immediately preceding the occupations. As protestors marched in Boston, for example, the information flows from Twitter were far more immediate and constant than the information being provided by mainstream media, and were relied upon by the protestors (Juris 259).

The next phase of the movement, once the occupations of public space were underway, however, was where the role of social media became more significant. Used to connect ‘physical occupiers’ and ‘Internet occupiers’, social media was used to ‘create a sense of attraction to the occupations, and to invoke a sense of solidarity’ (Gerbaudo 103). Following the occupations, the connections formed through social media networks have been what has been sustaining the movement.
Logics of Aggregation

Connective logic, and Juris’ ‘logic of aggregation’ are both based on connection across peer-to-peer networks such as social media channels. The logic of aggregation is:

an alternative cultural framework that is shaped by our interactions with social media and generates particular patterns of social and political interaction that involve the viral flow of information and subsequent aggregations of large numbers of individuals in concrete physical spaces (Juris 266).

It involves individuals coming together to ‘forge a collective subjectivity through the process of struggle’ (Juris 266) but is subject to the possibility of being disaggregated very quickly into its individual parts. This makes the element of physical congregation particularly important.

In Juris’ logic of aggregation, social media’s primary role in a protest is to ‘facilitate the mass aggregation of individuals within concrete locales’ (Juris 267). They allow information to be disseminated quickly, easily and cheaply from the personal worlds of masses of individuals, weaving their interpersonal networks together. According to Juris, because the main function of social networking channels is to host the very active ‘microbroadcasting’ of activists — the generation of viral communication flows — it
tends to amass crowds of people in physical spaces rather than mobilise ‘networks of networks’ (267). A problem with this is the speed at which the congregation of people in physical spaces can be disaggregated. Without the ongoing support of connectedness through an individual’s networks, commitment is easy to avoid and the effectiveness of a message can suffer.

Though they are not mutually exclusive, a balance between effectiveness and flexibility can be hard to achieve for a protest organisation, which is something Occupy grappled with. The demands for flexibility sought by individuals whose experience of politics is based on individual choice and personal connections can challenge the established models of collective action, where ‘organizational coalitions [have] shared political agendas expressed through ideological or solidarity-based collective action frames’ (Bennett and Segerberg 2011: 772), but the logic of aggregation suggests this challenge may be limited in depth and effectiveness. This presents a challenge for the fundamental success of protest organisations that, like Occupy, strive for a personalised brand of political participation based on connective action logic, as

the very features of a contemporary protest that are so impressive are also the ones that may undermine conventional political capacity such as maintaining agenda focus and strong coalition relationships (Bennett 2003 in Bennett and Segerberg 2011: 773).
Multi-issue movements like Occupy are easy to opt in and out of, and there is a concern that they are unable to generate ‘the commitment, coherence, and persistence of action required to produce political change’ (Tilly 2004 in Bennett and Segerberg 2011: 773). These criticisms, however, fail to consider a core achievement of the movement, which was to shift political rhetoric and national discourse.

**Loose Structures Shifting National and Global Discourses**

Much criticism of the Occupy movement focused on the lack of a clear, definable message or demand. In light of this chapter’s exploration of the movement’s place within an individualised society, and its position in an interconnected world, it is misguided to suggest it achieved nothing because of its lack of an explicable demand. In the United States and elsewhere, the movement has ‘focused attention on the failings of the pervasive neoliberal economic regime that became politically dominant during the recent era of globalization’ (Bennett 37). It helped shift national and global political discourses and raised questions about the sustainability of the capitalist project.

Coming from a loosely organised protest structure that lacked central coordination or a collective identity reference, this was a major accomplishment in itself. Occupy is part of an emerging pattern of political activism that is ‘dispersed, decentered, weakly
coordinated, and pegged to inclusive personal identity frames’ (Bennett 31) such as ‘we are the 99%’. It is unreasonable to point to these connective action characteristics as demonstrative of the reasons for a lack of more fundamental change, particularly given that ‘[m]any of the issues in the globalized polity have long been the focus of more conventionally organized challengers, from unions to social movements, with no better results’ (Bennett 38).

**Occupy in a Personalised Hybrid Media Environment**

The way social movements mobilise has changed, and the logic on which political action is organised is evolving. There is no doubt that social media make up a significant part of the contemporary media landscape, and have played a formative role in the personalisation of political action. But technology has always been part of social movements, and historically:

> [t]he point was not that everyone used new media or that digital technologies completely transformed how social movements operate but that, as new media were incorporated into the ongoing practices of core groups of activists, they helped diffuse new dynamics of activism (Juris 260).

This is what the Occupy movement has demonstrated. Social media played a defining role in the Occupy protests, helping coordinate action and disseminate information about protest
activity quickly and efficiently, and creating a sense of attraction to and ongoing connection with the occupations once they were happening and after they had been disbanded. However, though they make up part of an alternative structure for mobilisation and organising, they are not the embodiment of an entirely new effective form of political participation. As Loader and Mercea note: ‘we should be cautious in proclaiming the democratic potential of social media for significantly challenging the existing commercial and political dominance of many social groups’ (760).
Conclusion

The contemporary political landscape is characterised by a decline in group loyalties and the rise of personal politics, where individuals are coding their politics based on personal experiences and lifestyle choices. Political participation is increasingly defined by decisions and actions that have a political or ethical frame of reference, challenging traditional conceptions of participation that are based on ideas of civic duty and sacrifice and referenced to a state or institutional-centric understanding of participation.

While still demonstrative of democratic practice to some degree, traditional measures of political participation no longer tell the whole story. If personal politics are to be understood, the private sphere is a site of political activity that needs to be examined more closely.

The rise of personal politics as a predominant paradigm has been accompanied by the rapid growth of social media use, particularly among younger generations. This has had a profound impact on the construction of political identities as well as the way people communicate and mobilise politically. Individuals now ‘produce, stage and cobble together their biographies themselves’ (Giddens in Bakardjieva 95), and are mobilising in relation to individual preferences rather than collective agendas.
Social media has had a profound impact on the way modern social movements organise, mobilise, and communicate. Occupy is a good example of the expression of the emerging paradigm of personal politics, and symbolic of the overlap of offline and online participation that characterises contemporary political participation. Bennett and Segerberg’s ‘connective action’ logic, Juris’ ‘logics of aggregation’, and Chadwick’s ‘hybrid media theory’ provide a valuable framework for analysing the place of social media in modern protest movements like Occupy.

Though significant, the transformative role of social media technologies and communication on social media channels must be approached critically. Existing state and institutional structures have not been displaced altogether, and are still the centres of power. It is important to acknowledge the disruptive and connective power of social media in order to harness their capacity for change, but they and political communication within them must be understood as a complementary rather than superseding force.


