Political Participation in Times of Bologna and Social Web – A Grounded Theory from a Students’ Point of View

Gerald Wolf

Faculty of Humanities, University of Cologne, Germany, gerald.wolf@uni-koeln.de

Abstract: Today’s students, as adolescents and young adults in general, are publicly perceived to be less engaged in conventional politics than previous student generations. This PhD dissertation deals with the question if the Social Web plays a role as a new medium of political participation. In other words, the aim of this thesis is to reveal more about students’ attitudes to and experience with political participation in times of Bologna and Social Web. Employing a qualitative-empirical research design to analyse empirical data gathered in guided interviews and a group discussion, I decided to use and work with the methodology of Grounded Theory by Strauss and Strauss and Corbin. The concept of mediatization is the theoretical frame of my doctoral thesis.

Keywords: political participation, Social Web, mediatization, life-world of students, Grounded Theory

1. Introduction and Background

In the last decade media underwent a remarkable change which can be described with concepts like digitalisation (transformation of analogue to digital technology) convergence (merging different media for example the convergence of TV and Internet, Internet and Smartphone) pluralisation (multiplication of media forced by the digitalisation, mp3-player, Smartphones, tablets, etc.) and diversification (highly visible web offers) (Hugger, 2014, p.7). This change affects almost everybody but especially young people.

1.1. Bologna

It is not only the media change that affects young people’s lives. The area of higher education in Europe is also passing through a far-reaching process of change initiated by the Bologna reform (Schmatz et al., 2015). Different studies (Bargel, 2008; Multrus et al., 2010; Ramm et al., 2014) assert that the mentality of the contemporary student generation has changed compared to the previous generations: They are labour oriented and look for practical experience to increase their employability which plays a central role. Nowadays the university is not the centre of a student’s life.

The multifaceted changes that are taking place in today’s student life have an age related component that is most obvious with the newest waves of technology. Prominent amongst these are the uses of e-Learning platforms (e.g. ILIAS) social networking sites (e.g. Facebook
(messenger) for communication, discussions and networking) and the use of Smartphones or tablets to access the mobile Internet (e.g. WhatsApp) (Jones & Shao, 2011, p.4).

1.2. Social Web

With the Internet, especially through Social Web, new forms and possibilities of political participation emerged. Via social networking sites like Facebook, etc., micro blogging platforms like Twitter, etc., open sourced encyclopaedias like Wikipedia, video sharing platforms like YouTube etc., almost everybody is able to create and spread self-produced contents and even get involved in different (political) discussions or discourses.

In this context Bruns (2009) coins the term ‘produser’. The infrastructure of Web 2.0 makes it easy to get engaged online for or against a political issue, for example the initiation of an online-petition (with change.org, avaaz.org, campact.de), organisation and mobilisation of demonstrations (e.g. the mobilisation via internet against the demo Hooligans against Salafists 2.0, on the 25th of October 2015 in Cologne), flash mobs or smart mobs via Facebook or Twitter and afterwards watching on YouTube. Social Web or the participatory Web refers to a new spirit of self-confidence among Internet users.

The “Digital Natives” (Prenski, 2001; Palfrey & Gasser, 2008), “Net Generation” (Tapscott, 1997) or “Millenials” (Howe & Strauss, 2000) have grown up with these new technologies. Smartphones, computers, the Internet, online resources and instantaneous access are simply a main part of their life-worlds respectively their lives. The way things are done is a digital (Oblinger & Oblinger, 2005, p.11).

Since they have grown up with new media, they can be characterised with special characteristics: visual orientation, multitasking, active learning, tolerance towards minorities, team orientation, quick change of attention, well informed and so on. Besides these positive descriptions, however, there are also critical voices. Schulmeister (2009) identified the “Net Generation” and the “Digital Natives” as a myth, Jones and Shao (2011) stated that these terms do not capture the processes of change that are taking place. Furthermore, empirical analyses (Schulmeister, 2009; Jureit, 2006; Busemann & Gscheidle, 2010) of media usage data disprove the thesis of the Digital Natives in general. One goal of this research is to work on this critical discourse.

Having this in mind, I ask the following question: The students in times of Bologna – a Net Generation?
The following mind map (see Figure 1) presents a short overview of my ambitious dissertation project:

Theoretical framework

2. Theoretical framework

The concept of mediatization is the theoretical frame of my doctoral thesis. Study, work, free time, politics, economy and other parts of society and culture rely more and more on media communication. In order to grasp these media change and the developments that depend to that I refer in particular to the concept developed by Friedrich Krotz. Krotz understands mediatization as a meta process, as a long term development that includes media change and the respective change in culture and society (Krotz, 2007). For that reason, Friedrich Krotz defines the term meta process as follows:

"By using the term meta process we want to point out that these are long-term and culture-crossing changes, processes of processes in a certain sense, which influence the social and cultural development of humankind in the long run. More in detail, they are conceptual constructs, by which science as well as persons in their everyday life sum up certain developments, their causes, forms of expression and consequences and therewith make the world manageable". (Krotz, 2007, p.27)

Having this in mind, mediatization is comparable to individualisation, globalisation and commercialisation. Mediatization proceeds on different levels:

- the macro-theoretical level as the transformation of culture and society,
- the meso-theoretical level as the transformation of institutions and finally
- the micro-theoretical level as the change of social and communicative action.
There are two traditions within the mediatization research: the “institutionalist tradition” and the “social constructivist tradition” (Hepp, 2013). It is not possible here to describe and discuss the traditions in detail but for my thesis I set the focus on the “social constructivist tradition”. While in the “institutional tradition” media are understood as independent social institutions with their own sets of rules (Hepp & Krotz, 2014), from the social constructivist point of view the role of various media (especially digital media) moves into the foreground as part of the process of the construction of social and cultural reality. In this sense, mediatization refers to the process of construction of socio-cultural reality by communication (Schütz & Luckmann, [1979] 2003, Krotz, 2001). Within this tradition I move the individual (the students of the University of Cologne) and its social and communicative action in the centre of analysis.

In a further step, I want to link the concept of mediatization with the social life world perspective, because the “mediatized worlds” are life-worlds that rely on communication media (Lundby, 2014, p.5).

3. Research issues

In this paper, I set the focus on political participation in the Internet. The main research question reads as follows: "Does political participation in the Web play a significant role in students’ lives?"

This question can be specified with these four more precise questions:
- Students in times of Bologna – a Net-Generation?
- Do students use possibilities of political online participation and how?
- What are the motives and expectations when participating politically in the Internet especially in the Social Web?
- What changes the political participation of students in the context of digital media?

4. Research design and methodology

This project employs a qualitative-empirical research design. I started with explorative expert interviews with students working in student’s union executive committee (AStA, ÖH), Senat and student associations (Fachschaft) to get in the field of higher education participation. Additionally, I talked with social media experts about the relevance and role of political participation in the Internet. The results and awareness of these exploraarive expert interviews have been integrated into the development of the guided questionnaire.

Currently I generate data (in the sense of theoretical sampling) with guideline oriented interviews with engaged students of the University of Cologne. The data collection and analysis are interrelated processes. One of the main characteristics of the Grounded Theory is that the analysis begins as soon as the first bit of data is collected (Corbin & Strauss, 1990). At the end of data collection I plan a group discussion.

The guided questionnaire contains questions about students’ course of study, attitude to the Bologna-reform, significance of Internet use in everyday life and in the university context (e.g. e-learning), usage of (different) Social Web applications, political participation in the internet and University, politics and political interest, effects from online participation to offline participation and vice versa, flash mob as a new form of political participation.
5. Outlook

The aim of my PhD thesis is a contribution to the current mediatization discourse on the basis of empirical data. My methodological approach offers the possibility to develop a system of categories by comparing various parts of my (field) interview data. In other words, the special emphasis is to develop a theory through qualitative analysis (open, axial and selective coding according to Strauss, 1998 and Strauss & Corbin, 1996).

References


About the Author

Gerald Wolf

Gerald Wolf is currently studying a PhD in Media Science: Media Psychology and Media Education at the Faculty of Humanities at the University of Cologne, Germany. At the moment Gerald Wolf works as a research associate at the Evaluation of Studies and Teaching | Higher Education Research institute of the Vice-Rectorate for Studies and Teaching at the University of Cologne. He studied Sociology at the University Vienna, Austria and holds a Magister degree.