

Politics and Paradigms: Conservatism and Media Convergence

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A medium of communication has an important influence on the dissemination of knowledge over space and over time, and it becomes necessary to study its characteristics in order to appraise its influence in its cultural setting. [...] Immediately we venture on this inquiry we are compelled to recognize the bias of the period in which we work. An interest in the bias of other civilizations may in itself suggest a bias of our own. [...] We can do little more than urge that we must be continually alert to the implications of this bias and perhaps hope that consideration of other media to various civilizations may enable us to see more clearly the bias of our own.
(Innis, 1951, pp. 33-34)

Ever since the inception of the first American newspapers, politics and media have been inextricably wed in mutual influence. Political opinions, as divisive in colonial Boston as modern-day Washington D.C., played a central role in the newspapers of the day. Benjamin Franklin, who made his start as a printer at his brother's paper, the *New England Courant*, expressed this bond between printer and politics in his *Apology for Printers*: "Printers are educated in the Belief, that when Men differ in Opinion, both Sides ought equally to have the Advantage of being heard by the Publick" (cited in Kovarik, 2011, p. 25). While such a printer may have been Franklin's ideal colleague, the reality was that most colonial newspapers had a penchant for opinion-driven content. Like their London forerunners, many of the early colonial papers were little more than gossip rags. The *New England Courant*, however, stood apart from its peers with a diversity of content including "political essays, opinion, satire, and some word of goings-on" (Lepore, 2010, p. 31). Meanwhile, official papers like the *Boston News-Letter*, licensed by Britain, were comprised mainly of dry, practical information, careful to avoid censorship.

As the rift between American colonists and Britain grew, so did a mutual distrust between the crown and colonial printers. "Like most new media, printing was considered

dangerous by the political rulers of Europe, and four basic approaches to censorship were put into effect,” including requirements for licenses, pre-approval before publishing, taxes and the threat of prosecution for those not abiding by these laws (Kovarik, 2011, pp. 28-29). Most notable of these control measures was The Stamp Act of 1765. Predecessor of the Townshend Duties of 1767, which levied a whole new series of taxes, the Stamp Act served a dual purpose for the British Empire: paying for war debts and silencing rogue printers (“Stamp Act,” 2005).

The Stamp Act was the first direct tax placed on the American colonies by Britain. Requiring a stamp for every piece of printed paper, the tax hit the newspapers the hardest, pushing many independent publications to the brink of ruin. Printers, however, who were also editors and writers, resisted British censorship and influenced the start of a revolution. In response to the Stamp Act, a spontaneous mob calling themselves the “Sons of Liberty” caused the resignation of Andrew Oliver, stamp distributor, and intimidated any would-be replacements (“Stamp Act,” 1999). This same impromptu mob would go on to play a key role throughout the American Revolution.

In addition to newspapers, the American Revolution was fueled and informed by the mass distribution of pamphlets. Because they were cost-effective and accessible to the average person, pamphlets were widely circulated. These tracts, read aloud in public meeting places, were the catalyst for debate and discussion. The most notable of these tracts included Thomas Paine’s *Common Sense* and *The Crisis*. “Although newspapers were the forum for some of these debates—as was the case with the *Federalist Papers*—political opponents also used pamphlets to promote their points of view” (Hamilton, 2011, para. 3).

These foundations of media production and political protest in America foreshadowed the position Conservatism plays in the ongoing evolution of communication media. Where colonists

used newspapers, pamphlets and public debates, modern-day conservatives use blogs, e-mail lists and social media to rally support, utilizing multiple, converging streams of media to strengthen their position in the debate.

The fragmented media landscape has created a shift in traditional understandings of politics from a highly controlled and regulated institutional model to one in which citizens actively address and interact with candidates. This paper explores media convergence, its resulting contradictory forces, and the role that social media platforms like Twitter have played in its evolution. While most contemporary conversations about media focus on the latest technologies, this paper recognizes a need to consider social media's roles and functions in a broader historical context. In this paper, I situate the idea of media convergence in media history and examine the communicative roles and functions that convergence and social media play in politics, ranging from the Tea Party movement to the Occupy Wall Street movement. I contend that a comparative understanding of media convergence poses alternative questions and offers alternative answers which enable us to better address contemporary concerns about media and political change.

Defining Media Convergence

The original discussions of media convergence focused merely on the technological: computers and digitization. Applying convergence to the news business, technological convergence involves the coming together of different equipment and tools for distributing news. The founder of MIT's Media Lab Nicholas Negroponte argued in the late 1970s that three industries that were separate at that time—publishing, broadcast/film, and computers—would overlap and merge by the beginning of the twenty-first century.

In 1983, the late MIT political scientist Ithiel de Sola Pool coined the term “convergence of modes” and offered the first and primary conceptualization of media convergence as a process “blurring the lines between media” (p. 24). In his view, the traditional separations between the media industries, such as the press, broadcasting, and telephone networks, were slowly collapsing due to the growing use and influence of digital electronics (see also Mueller, 1999). In recent years, some definitions of convergence have placed a greater emphasis on the technology itself. For instance, Pavlik (1996) defines convergence as the “coming together of all forms of mediated communications in an electronic, digital form, driven by computers” (p. 132). Vallath (2000) points out that “[t]echnological convergence is leading to a fully digital network, capable of carrying any type of information, be it text, data, voice or video” (p. 33; see also Blackman, 1998). Technological convergence is not without its critics, though. For instance, Noll (2003) argued that just because television sets increasingly incorporate digital components does not mean that television and computers are merging into a single home appliance. “Just because media are digital does not mean that media have converged” (p. 13). While some convergence applications, such as streaming media and Internet telephony, have aroused considerable consumer interest, others, such as WebTV, have been less successful.

If the phrase “media convergence” can be used to describe the kinds of technological and economic changes which are fostered by the flow of media content across multiple delivery technologies, cultural convergence describes the new ways that media audiences are engaging with and making sense of these new forms of media content. Henry Jenkins (2001) asserts that cultural convergence has preceded, in many ways, the full technological realization of the idea of media convergence, helping to create a market for these new cultural products: “Cultural Convergence is the explosion of new forms of creativity at the intersections of various media

technologies, industries, and consumers. Media convergence fosters a new participatory folk culture by giving average people the tools to archive, annotate, appropriate and recirculate content (p. 93).

By convergence, Jenkins means the flow of content across multiple media platforms, the cooperation between multiple media industries, and the migratory behavior of media audiences. Convergence is a concept that manages to describe technological, industrial, cultural, and social changes, depending on who is speaking and what they think they are talking about.

Convergence, therefore, is best understood from a historical and comparative approach. A comparative media approach illuminates that each era of communication has brought with it new advancements in media technology. Kovarik (2011) organizes these eras into four mass-media revolutions—printing, imaging, electronic and digital. Each of these technological revolutions, from their first use in America, was used to disseminate information for a unique purpose as well as reach a specific audience. Franklin’s printing was used to drive the American Revolution by uniting the colonies against Britain. Matthew Brady’s visual images of the Civil War “shocked New Yorkers in 1862,” who were otherwise detached from the conflict which was threatening to divide their country (p. 112). Samuel Morse, inventor of the code used by the telegraph, intended electronic communication to be an open resource used freely by the public (Kovarik, p. 193).

There is a temptation to claim each of these “revolutions” in communication happened independent of each other, due to technological advancement. Kovarik (2011), however, warns against such a hasty conclusion:

While the electronic revolution began with the telegraph and telephone, neither of these prototype electronic technologies can be historically isolated from radio, television and satellite broadcasting. Their scientific origins and business models

were intertwined. Industrial print and early radio and television grew up in an interdependent network, around the telegraph and telephone, from the beginning. To a large degree, the concept of media “convergence” is not just an artifact of the computer age, but rather, a constant condition in mass media history. (p. 193)

Throughout history, therefore, the lines of division between various forms of media have always been artificial. This circulation of media content—across different media systems, competing media economies, national borders, and historical periods—depends heavily on the active participation of the citizen. I will argue here against the idea that convergence can be understood primarily as a technological process, the bringing together of multiple media functions within the same gadgets and devices. Instead, I want to argue that convergence represents not an endpoint but an ever-evolving process, whereby we are encouraged to seek out new information and make connections between dispersed media content.

Contradictory Forces

The contemporary American media environment is shaped by two seemingly contradictory trends: On the one hand, new media technologies have lowered production and distribution costs, expanded the range of available delivery channels, and enabled consumers to archive, annotate, appropriate and re-circulate media content in powerful new ways; on the other hand, there has been an alarming concentration of the ownership of mainstream commercial media, with a small handful of multinational media conglomerates dominating all sectors of the entertainment industry. As Henry Jenkins (2001) states, “Today, media convergence is sparking a range of social, political, economic and legal disputes because of the conflicting goals of consumers, producers and gatekeepers. These contradictory forces are pushing both toward

cultural diversity and toward homogenization, toward commercialization and toward grassroots cultural production” (p. 93).

For over a decade, Mark Crispin Miller has charted the U.S. “media cartel” and its cultural effects. In his 2002 article in *The Nation*, Miller opined that this conglomeration of the news media “represents the grand convergence of the previously disparate U.S. culture industries—many of them vertically monopolized already—into one global super-industry providing most of our imaginary ‘content.’” Far from being a new problem, Miller claimed that this drive toward a “monoculture” was a “disastrous upshot of an evolutionary process.” Several years later in a follow-up article, Miller found that the movement toward “media concentration” had only progressed further in this direction with a series of media buyouts of CNN by Time Warner and Viacom by CBS (Miller, 2006). In both articles, Miller’s primary concern is the “corrosive influence [of corporations] on journalism.” Such influence, in Miller’s view, creates a danger of making truly independent voices a scarcity.

Coinciding with this movement toward a monoculture is the increase in grassroots, bottom-up movements through the use of social media tools. In a recent *Forbes* article, David Kirkpatrick explored the effects of social media on modern business. Two themes emerged in his article: consumer empowerment and an increased demand for businesses to become more transparent. While Kirkpatrick’s insights are geared toward the business world, many of the lessons he mentioned can be applied to politics as well. According to Kirkpatrick (2011), “We have entered the age of empowered individuals, who use potent new technologies and harness social media to organize themselves” (p. 74). The article supports this claim with both positive and negative examples of companies gaining and losing trust with the consumer. In each case, individuals drove the issue by doing independent research and demanding transparency from the

company. The conclusion: “Ordinary people often seem better at managing and accessing information than the giant corporations they work for or buy from” (p. 78).

These themes of empowerment and transparency are echoed in a Pew Research study entitled *How the Public Perceives Community Information Systems*:

[G]overnment transparency is associated with residents’ feelings of efficacy and empowerment: Those who think their government shares information well are more likely to say that people like them can have an impact on government. It might be the case that signals from government that “we want to be open about what we do,” make people think they can take advantage of that openness, and influence the way the government operates. (Rainie & Purcell, 2011, p. 4)

Due to this empowerment of the individual, politicians, more accustomed to steering the ship, are facing a surge of influence brought on by social media. Three years ago, the House and Senate Rules Committees authorized the posting of videos to YouTube, and even more recently, representatives sanctioned official Facebook and Twitter accounts. Certainly, most elected officials now employ social media, but few use it for anything besides a vehicle for pushing talking points and campaign announcements. The successful use of social media in the U.S. presidential campaign of Barack Obama established Twitter, Facebook, MySpace, and other social media as integral parts of the political campaign toolbox. Some analysts attribute Obama's victory, to a large extent, to his online strategy. Obama's social-networking website mybarackobama.com, known as MyBO, helped him set records in terms of donations and grassroots mobilization (Williams and Gulati, 2008). Shortly after his victory, Obama used Twitter to let the web community know how he felt: “This is history.” As this example demonstrates, after the rise of candidate websites in 1996, e-mail in 1998 (the Jesse Ventura

campaign), online fund-raising in 2000 (the John McCain campaign), and blogs in 2004 (the Howard Dean campaign) (Gueorguieva, 2007), Twitter has become a legitimate communication channel in the political arena as a result of the 2008 campaign.

Re-inventing Conservatism—One Tweet at a Time

While the Democratic party was praised for its deft use of social media to secure Obama's political victory in 2008, the very next year, however, the conservative Tea Party movement adopted an even more thorough and innovative use of social media to mobilize support. Starting with the first Tea Party rally, led by math teacher Keli Carender in Seattle, multiple forms of media have been employed to gather numbers and momentum. Harkening back to the early colonial protestors of the Stamp Act, Carender dubbed her group "Seattle Sons and Daughters of Liberty." The group used a database of email addresses to generate support among like-minded conservatives in the area (Zernike, 2010, p. 19). Another Tea Party leader, Ana Puig employed both a website and a Facebook fan page to gain support for her Pennsylvania Kitchen Table Patriots group. Under the heading "Think Local; Organize National," Corbin Hiar (2010) demonstrates how the Tea Party movement employs both the top-down and bottom-up forces simultaneously. With the help of national organizations like FreedomWorks and American Majority, grassroots Tea Party groups like Puig's and Carender's can receive training on how best to use digital media tools (Hiar, 2010).

Jesse Comart (2011), a communications and public affairs consultant, traces the origins of the Tea Party movement and its strategic use of social media:

The modern-day Tea Party gained traction in January 2009 (right around the time President Obama took the oath of office) with support from conservative bloggers and radio hosts. Almost immediately, long-time Republican politicians, fundraisers and third-party groups recognized the opportunity. Just two months after its inception, Tea Party organizers used Facebook pages to help coordinate the first wave of national protests which called for lower taxes. They amassed

between 250,000 and 500,000 people across 200 cities. The Tea Party used digital media again in the summer of 2009, when activists stormed town halls across the country to protest President Obama's health care reform. They strategized by narrowly focusing each digital media campaign around a specific issue.

[In 2010] the Tea Party endorsed then-Republican candidate for Senate, Scott Brown—and claimed its first victory. The Massachusetts Senate race was more than just a validation for the Tea Party; it was a blueprint for how to transform a grassroots campaign into a national presence.

A January 2011 Pew Internet Project report echoes this shift. The study showed that Republicans, including members of the Tea Party movement, have caught up with Democrats in their usage of social media for getting out political information about candidates and connecting with campaigns. Based on a national survey of 2,257 adults, “six in ten online adults use social networking sites such as Facebook or Myspace, and one third (35%) of these social networking site-users took to these sites during election season to get political information or to get involved in the campaign” (Smith, 2011). This activity included active engagement in political discourse as well as passive information-gathering. With one viral video or comment, the frontrunner in a race can be toppled. Some of the major findings include:

- The “political-social media user” group represented by 22% of internet users voted for Republican congressional candidates over Democratic candidates by a 45%-41% margin;
- Among social networking site-users, 40% of Republican voters and 38% of Democratic voters used these sites to get involved politically; and
- Tea Party supporters were especially likely to friend a candidate or political group on a social networking site during the 2010 election—22% of such users did this, significantly higher than all other groups. (Smith, 2011, p. 2)

Moreover, the study found that the main reason Americans follow political groups on social networking sites or Twitter is that doing so helps them feel more personally connected to the

candidates or groups they follow—36% say that this is a “major” reason they follow these groups or candidates, and an additional 35% say it is a “minor” reason. Two-thirds (67%) of those who follow politicians or other political groups on social networking sites or Twitter say that the information posted by those they follow is interesting and relevant, and a similar number say that they pay attention to most (26%) or some (40%) of the material posted by the politicians or groups they follow (p. 2).

Gary Kreps, chair of the department of communications at George Mason University, offered this optimistic projection about the future impact of social media in another Pew Internet report:

Online communication is already increasing public participation in political, educational, and social activities and will continue to connect people in the future as more people go online. Active participation in political, health, and educational affairs will enable people to access relevant information to make informed choices and better decisions. Access to new media will give greater voice and empower increased public participation and representation in the future. (Anderson, 2010, p. 8)

New media not only provide new outlets for the exploration of politics, but complicate the dynamics between politicians, their audiences, and those who occupy spaces in-between.

Interactions between politicians are typically brokered through public affairs or kept from public view; social media platforms allow politicians to make their conversations publicly visible. This requires politicians to skillfully navigate supporters, feuds, and negotiations with others, all in front of their citizens and the mainstream media. As Wilson (2011) notes, “Mobile and social media are intertwined with emerging, fan-like forms of engagement with mediatized politics. In ‘post-broadcast democracies,’ citizens draw upon the texts and personae of mediatized politics as

raw material for their own creativity, using social and mobile media and online self-publishing platforms” (p. 445). Especially in the weeks leading up to elections, political issues are clearly on the minds of many users. In addition, politicians are communicating with the electorate and trying to mobilize supporters. While some political analysts are already turning to the "Twittersphere" as an indicator of political opinion (e.g., Skemp, 2009), others have suggested that the majority of the messages are “pointless babble” (Pearanalytics, 2009).

There is a burgeoning area of research within communication that has begun to examine the political use of Twitter and whether microblogging messages can actually inform us about the political landscape in the offline world. The microblogging site Twitter lets people post quick 140-character updates, or “tweets,” to a network of followers. Twitter asks participants, “What are you doing?” resulting in a constantly-updated stream of short messages ranging from the mundane to breaking news, shared links, and thoughts on life. In Twitter’s directed model of friendship, users choose others to “follow” in their stream, and each user has his or her own group of “followers.” There is neither a technical requirement nor social expectation of reciprocity (particularly with famous people, although this differs by user group). Tweets can be posted and read from the web, SMS, or third-party clients on desktop computers, smartphones, and other devices. This integration allows for instant postings of photos, on-the-ground reports, and quick replies to other users. The site launched in 2006 and broke into the mainstream in 2008-2009 when user accounts and media attention exponentially increased. Twitter had approximately 18.2 million users in May 2009 (Nielsen, 2009), increasing to 27.2 million by January 2010 (Quantcast, 2010). As of 2010, the most-followed Twitter users are well known organizations like CNN and Whole Foods, famous people and public figures, from President Barack Obama to actor Ashton Kutcher and pop star Britney Spears. While Twitter can be used

as a broadcast medium, the dialogic nature of Twitter and its ability to facilitate conversation has contributed substantially to its popularity.

In studies of the political use of Twitter, in particular, initial findings have offered some fascinating results. The work of Michael Conover has been widely cited for its exploration into the role of technologically-mediated political interaction in deliberative democracy. The findings of his landmark study of political polarization on Twitter were two-fold: First, conservatives, those identifying themselves as “far right,” have made better use of hashtags in order to provide dialogue and debate, as opposed to one-way broadcasts. (The # symbol, called a hashtag, was created by Twitter to categorize messages; it is used to mark keywords or topics in a Tweet.) Second, the “retweet” function has been found to polarize users by political persuasion, where the “mention” does not (Conover et al., 2011, p. 95). Studies like Conover et al.’s illuminate how social media shape the public sphere and facilitate communication between communities with polarizing political orientations.

Other studies, however, have arrived at far more ambiguous conclusions on the nature of the political influence of Twitter. One study found that “Twitter was hardly used by voters in the sample” (LaMarre, 2011). Using a multi-method approach, an online survey of non-student, registered voters and interviews with congressional campaign managers, LaMarre in his study sought to understand how and why voters and campaign strategists use social media to follow politics and reach voters. Additionally, LaMarre found that there was a stark difference between campaign managers’ expected usage goals and engagement patterns, and voter-reported usage goals and engagement patterns. Very few voters reported donating money to political candidates through social media, while campaign experts had this as their primary expectation of social-media voter engagement.

This view of Twitter as a weak political force seems supported by another study, claiming “[participants’] prior attitude toward the [politician] will exert stronger influence on the general evaluation of the [politician] and his policies, leading to opinion polarization in the direction of the initial predisposition” (Shin, Lee, & Oh, 2011, p. 1). A third study concludes that, “although it is clear that Twitter plays an active role in influencing modern political campaigns, questions regarding how and when Twitter matters to political campaigns remains unanswered” (Suzuki, 2011, p. 1).

Tea Party vs. Occupy Wall Street

Amidst these contradictions and tensions, social media appears to be an emerging tool in the democratic process, and individuals and grassroots movements alike are in the process of refining the ways in which these online sites are utilized for the purpose of impacting the political process. While it is clear that social networking sites, such as Facebook and Twitter, are effectively used in the organizational stage of a social movement, it remains to be seen whether these same sites offer a means of unifying a social movement around a common goal. In other words, why is it that social networking sites are effective in organization, but do not seem to be as effective in generating a cohesive message or purpose behind a social movement? Or is this not the case?

Many media critics have compared the Occupy Wall Street (OWS) and Tea Party movements. While both share many similarities, there remains a major distinction: OWS is a social media experiment that leverages grassroots support, but the Tea Party forged a grassroots movement that *then* leveraged social media. While this may seem like a banal distinction, it is a decisive one. The Tea Party proved it could exist beyond online forums and localized protests from the start, while Occupy Wall Street has yet to clear that hurdle. Participants of the Occupy

Wall Street movement, for instance, have coalesced in large numbers in a myriad of cities around the globe, clearly demonstrating the ability to use social networks for the purpose of organizing a protest; however, the ability of the group to establish a unified goal has not been so clearly demonstrated. Occupy Wall Street began as a Twitter experiment by Canadian-based magazine *Adbusters*, and yet critics note that its organizers still fail to form a coherent message, to accept large donations, to hold formal talks with political leaders, to fundraise for current progressive candidates, or to endorse their own political challengers. Generic statements protesting greed and enormous wealth have dominated the discourse, yet the overall goal of the protest remains somewhat muddled. As Comart (2011) opines,

Policy decisions are not made via social media—not yet, anyway. Leaders of the Tea Party understood the current disconnect between social media and policy, and devised different ways to ensure that its message would be seen by decision makers.

Critics may question the real influence of the 60-plus members in the Tea Party Caucus, citing that they have done little to change the broader course of the 112th Congress. Regardless of how many bills Tea Party representatives author or coalitions they build, the point is that the Tea Party organizers understood the American political system—specifically, when to use social media and when to move beyond it. The Occupy Wall Street movement, on the other hand, has a long way to go before having any hope of transforming its broad principles into actionable policies.

Comart’s editorial offers us a vantage point to probe deeper into the potential and limitations of social media tools and what role they can and cannot play in the political process. Myriad opportunities have been made available through social networking; however, it is not yet clear that these tools have been implemented in a way that is advantageous to developing and focusing a main agenda. What is it about social networking that creates constraints when it comes to furthering a discourse beyond setting a time and a place to meet? Are these constraints capable of being targeted, isolated, and overcome? What should social media tools be used for and why? What should social media tools not be used for and why?

The Future of Convergence: Living in a Media Ecosystem

Responding to the contradictory nature of our current moment of media change, this paper has sketched a theory of media convergence that allows us to identify major sites of tension and transition shaping the media environment. Media convergence is more than simply a technological shift. Convergence alters the relationship between existing technologies, industries, markets, genres, and audiences. Understanding the contemporary media landscape demands knowledge and expertise across a diverse range of media technologies and systems. This spread of media content is fueled top-down by the consolidation of the media industry and bottom-up by popular access to new tools of grassroots media production and distribution.

As media become increasingly integrated into all aspects of modern experience, it is impossible to fully understand our political institutions and practices without understanding media. Yet, while we ponder the future impact of social media platforms like Twitter on the political process, it is important to remember that there is no moment in human history when a single medium operated in isolation. Each medium has its own strengths and limitations. Yet, these different media interact with each other to constitute the communication environment. As Henry Jenkins (2001) states, “A medium’s content may shift, its audience may change, and its social status may rise or fall, but once a medium establishes itself, it continues to be part of the media ecosystem” (p. 93).

We live at a moment when changes in communications, storytelling and information technologies are reshaping almost every aspect of contemporary life, including how we create, consume, learn, and interact with each other. A whole range of new technologies enable consumers to archive, annotate, appropriate, and recirculate media content and in the process, these technologies have altered the ways that consumers interact with core institutions of

government, education, and commerce. Media convergence is more than simply a technological shift. Convergence is an ever-evolving process that illuminates the contradictory and tension-filled relationship between media technologies, industries, historical periods, and audiences. The most urgent questions confronting us are social and cultural, not purely technological. They require us to reconsider the interrelationship of our tools and to probe the power and peril of these tools in their larger media ecosystem. Following media ecologist Marshall McLuhan, I argue that it is more fruitful for us to reflect on the nature of our social media tools: What do social media platforms like Twitter enhance? What do they erode or obsolesce? What do they retrieve that had been earlier obsolesced? What do they reverse or flip into when pushed to the limits of its potential? A medium does not exist in a vacuum, and we must understand each medium in its larger media ecological context. Only then can we fully understand the relationship between media and politics.

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