

# Social Media and Everyday Politics

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Tim Highfield

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The notion that the online and the offline are deeply interlinked is so widespread nowadays that very few people ever give it a second thought, even though this entanglement has happened in many spheres of the social and the political. Living one's life in an online environment has become the new normal. Posting everyday personal experiences in visual form on Instagram, maintaining social connections through Facebook, and commenting and obtaining information on Twitter are integral to everyday life. In such a mediascape, Tim Highfield ventured to explore the practices of the political in social media in an everyday context.

Highfield makes a strong point at the very beginning of the book. On the second page he puts the selfie that he took as he cast his vote in the Australian election in 2015. The simple fact that one clicked photos and posted on social media while performing one's civic duty is highly illustrative of combining the personal and political, Highfield argues. This is one of many examples that familiarizes the reader and draws her/him to this book. It is quite easy and enjoyable to go through the seven chapters that constitute *Social Media and Everyday Politics*. The opening chapter 'Personal/Political' explores just that: the relationship between the personal and political, connections between different issues such as race and Twitter, LGBTQ expressions on visual media, callout culture and the practices of doxxing and shaming. When it comes to callout culture and the male gaze, in 2017 we saw the rise of the Instagram account @dearcattallers, as 20-year old Noa Jansma, a student from Amsterdam, began taking selfies with men who whistled and commented after her in the streets. The month-long project had Jansma documenting her own harassment, and it quickly spread globally. Thus, a single, personal act of online activism resonated on social media. As Jansma noted, 'this Instagram has the aim to create awareness about the objectification of

women in daily life', and she has since passed the account to other women around the planet, letting them share their own stories. This anecdote, although it happened after the book was published, serves to anchor the book's importance as it illustrates the entanglement between personal and political, which Highfield often mentions.

Perhaps the key notion in this book is the fact that the author does not claim a single narrative when it comes to dealing with the political in the online sphere. Tim Highfield emphasises and allows multiple, parallel narratives early on in the book, writing of political rituals on social media in the second chapter, entitled 'Political Rituals of Social Media', and 'Media Politics' in the third chapter, focusing on the impact the mainstream media produce on social media, particularly in politically related content. Another distinction that makes this book stand out is a clear and witty writing style that is laced with references to popular culture and participatory online engagement. For instance, the second chapter on political rituals of social media explores memes as participatory politics. For instance, the author has decided to use the subtitle *Can haz politiks? LOLCat framings*, which references a popular internet phenomenon that he investigates. In addition, he has cleverly incorporated the popular 'doge' meme vernacular into his own writing style (cf. p45), which often makes the book relatable and easier to understand.

This intertextuality is exactly what makes the book appealing not only to social scientists and media studies students, but also to anyone and everyone who cares to comment on politics in the online environment. The third chapter entitled 'Media Politics', deals with the different ways media politics is presented and shaped in/through the online environment. The author draws heavily on examples from popular culture - mainly series and sitcoms. Highfield mentions HBO's political satire *Veep*, in which comedian Julia Louis-Dreyfus portrays fictional Vice President of the United States Selina Meyer and the blunders that she is constantly getting into. Meyer is photoshopped into various memes while looking at her phone, obviously referencing the popular Hillary Clinton memes involving her BlackBerry ('Texts from Hillary') that arose during her e-mail scandal. When elaborating on the power of media and politics and social media users, first and foremost, the author employs useful and innovative, newer concepts such as Benkler's networked public sphere (Benkler 2006) and boyd's networked publics (boyd, 2011) in order to give

a wider academic perspective on users and content creators that have risen from traditional audiences. He emphasizes the social media user's potential for reshaping/steering agendas, both at the individual and group level.

Chapter four, entitled 'Breaking News, Scandals and Crises', tackles crisis communication. Here, Highfield focuses on hashtags, which he describes as 'unstructured and automated aggregator(s) of information' (p.91). In such contexts, social media can bring forward content that is not featured in the mainstream media. An obvious example is the 2013 Boston Marathon bombing and forum users' crowdsourcing information, which the author describes in detail. It serves as a good bridge to the next chapter 'Collective and Connective Action'. In that chapter, Highfield describes various collective actions on social media, such as Kony2012 and the hashtag activism, such as tweeting during the Arab Spring. The author here shows the example of the uprisings in Egypt where people tweeted 'personal takes on the revolution, mixing information with individual experiences and sentiments...' (p.110-11). Highfield again emphasises that online connective actions are not insular, but rather part of a more complex media and political system.

The final two chapters of the book, 'Partisan Politics and Politicians on Social Media' and 'The Everyday of Elections', although intriguing, are not as exciting as the previous chapters. Politicians on social media and partisan politics are the central topic of the sixth chapter, which includes a brief but interesting section on the extreme politics that find its users/supporters online. Such extreme discourses and policy initiatives are normally shunned by the traditional media. The closing chapter deals with elections and social media practices. Elections are understood within the 'permanent campaign' setting, and Highfield describes political marketing and campaign practices, mostly referring to the case of Australian elections.

Even though many scholars' works are lauded by their reviewers as a 'good', 'interesting', or an 'easy' read, not only for experts in the given field but also for the general public, such claims are often exaggerated. In *Social Media and Everyday Life*, this is not the case at all. Highfield's intelligent writing style, rich with puns and laced with pop culture references, makes this an enjoyable read while still maintaining a strong scientific standard. Perhaps this book's best quality is that it does not attempt to encapsulate and explain everything related

to politics online. Instead, it allows multiple narratives and counter-narratives around a given topic, while maintaining the awareness that these narratives take place across platforms, media formats, forums, cafes, dinners and other places. 'A single tweet might not change policy', writes Highfield in the book's conclusion, 'but combined with other factors, it might bring about change'. Through *Social Media and Everyday Politics*, his first book, Tim Highfield has shown himself to be an interesting, promising author with a distinctive writing style.

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### References:

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