

## Using Facebook for Political Action? Social Networking Sites and Political Participation of Young Adults

Anabel Ternes<sup>1\*</sup>, Alexandra Mittelstadt<sup>2</sup> and Ian Towers<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> International Institute for Sustainability Management (IISM), Professor and the Program Director, International Communication Management, SRH Berlin International Management University, Germany

<sup>2</sup>Phd Student, Bremen International Graduate School of Social Sciences, Jacobs University Bremen, Germany

<sup>3</sup> International Institute for Sustainability Management (IISM), Full Professor and Program Director Business Administration, SRH Hochschule Berlin International Management University

\*Corresponding author: Anabel Ternes, Professor and the Program Director, International Communication Management, SRH Berlin International Management University, Germany, Tel: 49 (0) 30 374 374 350 E-mail: [anabel.ternes@srh-hochschule-berlin.de](mailto:anabel.ternes@srh-hochschule-berlin.de)

Received date: February 26, 2014, Accepted date: April 26, 2014, Publication date: January 10, 2015

Copyright: © 2015 Anabel T, et al. This is an open-access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution License, which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original author and source are credited.

### Abstract

The survey results presented in this article show that political action via Facebook is still limited. The aim of this article is to examine the relationship between the use of social networking sites and political participation. In particular the focus lies on the use of Facebook among young adults from Germany and Egypt for forms of political action.

**Keywords:** Social networking sites; Facebook; political participation

### Introduction

"Whether or not communicating online disconnects you from people offline. [...]. I think that's overblown. There's this idea; technology is a tool. Glasses augment your vision, your reality. Steve Jobs said that computers augment your mind. With Facebook and other tools, you can stay connected and get more contexts from more people. People often think of staying connected as frivolous — it's not. It's powerful [1]"<sup>1</sup>.

Social networking sites (SNSs) like Facebook have transformed social relations and have the potential to be powerful political tools [2]<sup>2</sup> as they connect large numbers of people, regardless of space and time[3]<sup>3</sup>. SNSs offer new structures and possibilities for changing patterns of political participation and influencing political processes<sup>4</sup>. In particular in Western democracies, where scholars are concerned with a decline in political participation [4]<sup>5</sup>, the Internet seems to hold hopes for increasing political engagement and strengthening democracy [5]<sup>6</sup>. Nevertheless, it is yet unclear to what extent these new opportunities for political participation are realized and in how far those are affecting political processes in reality.

Existing literature and research have focused mostly on political participation that occurs in the so-called offline world, and some have

started to include online activities<sup>7</sup>. However, little attention has been paid to the relationship between SNSs and political participation, and the structures and opportunities they offer for new forms of political participation to develop online. In particular for the young generation, which is most active on SNSs, there seems to be "a gap between the opportunities to participate online and the degree to which young people take up these opportunities"<sup>8</sup>.

Based on this, questions arise as to how far Facebook is used for political activities and whether the use of Facebook is affecting behaviors of political participation. Facebook has played an increasingly significant role for political activities, for instance during the Arab Spring in 2011 [6]<sup>9</sup> or the U.S. Presidential Election in 2008<sup>10</sup>. Considering the international popularity it has gained over the last years, including for political matters, it seems reasonable to further investigate the Facebook phenomenon and its relevance for political participation.

Consequently, we carried out a survey about the use of Facebook and political participation of young adults. The empirical study is based on a questionnaire distributed among Bachelor and Masterstudents from Berlin and Cairo whose academic backgrounds lie in the field of communication, marketing and intercultural studies. These two cities were particularly selected because of their political relevance. Berlin is the German capital and the political Centre of Germany, while Cairo is Egypt's capital and was the focal point of the

<sup>1</sup> Kumparak (2013) quoting Mark Zuckerberg at the Facebook Phone Event in April 2013

<sup>2</sup> See Evans-Cowley & Hollander (2010), p. 397

<sup>3</sup> See Antoci, Sabatini, & Sodini (2011), p. 2 and see Jarret (2008), under section "Interaction, participation, agency"

<sup>4</sup> See Neuman (2008), p. 231

<sup>5</sup> See for example Putnam (2000): "Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community"

<sup>6</sup> See Boulianne (2009), p. 195

<sup>7</sup> See for instance: Boulianne (2009) "Does Internet Use Affect Engagement? A Meta-Analysis of Research"

<sup>8</sup> Vesnic-Alujevic (2012), p. 467

<sup>9</sup> See for instance Tufekci & Wilson (2012), p. 364

<sup>10</sup> See for instance Castells (2009), p. 408

2011 Egyptian Revolution, which was part of the Arab Spring. Social media such as Twitter and Facebook have played significant roles in the revolution in Egypt<sup>11</sup> and it is therefore interesting to examine the post-revolution use of SNSs for political participation of young adults from Cairo.

The emphasis in this paper is on empirical findings and theoretical explanations concerning the use of Facebook and political participation of young adults. It focuses on three central research questions:

RQ 1) Does the use of Facebook affect political participation behavior?

RQ 2) In what political activities are Facebook users involved in?

RQ 3) Does the use of Facebook foster new forms of political activities?

This study is significant in three ways. First, it helps to better understand the ways young adults engage politically, in particular with regard to the use of new media and the social networking site Facebook. Second, it indicates that patterns of political participation are changing as the media environment is changing, and that new forms of political activities should be considered when examining the level of political participation of a specific target group. Third, it points out that it is not the medium that determines (political) practice, but the user. The focus is not on Facebook as such, but on how users make use of Facebook's structures for political matters.

## Theoretical Background

The Internet and along with it social networking sites offer new spaces for political communication on a potentially broader scale. Habermas [7] developed the concept of the public sphere that he describes as "private people coming together as a public" and where "they soon claimed the public sphere regulated from above against the public authorities themselves, to engage them in a debate over the general rules governing relations in the basically privatized but publicly relevant sphere of commodity exchange and social labor"<sup>12</sup>.

The key characteristic of the Internet is that it has a society-wide reach, but is not limited to one-directional communication like traditional mass media. With the Internet a new form of interactive communication has developed<sup>13</sup> which is "characterized by the capacity of sending messages from many to many, in real time or chosen time, and with the possibility of using point-to-point

communication, narrowcasting or broadcasting, depending on the purpose and characteristics of the intended communication practice"<sup>14</sup>. Castells [8] calls this new form of interactive communication that the Internet allows 'mass self-communication'. Firstly, because the Internet has potentially a global reach that makes it mass communication. Secondly, because "the production of the message is self-generated, the definition of the potential receiver(s) is self-directed, and the retrieval of specific messages or content from the World Wide Web and electronic communication networks is self-selected"<sup>15</sup> which makes it self-communication.

Following from this, the Internet combines three forms of communication: interpersonal, mass communication, and self-mass communication. These aspects of the Internet that emphasize interactivity and enables mass participation are collected under the buzzword Web 2.0. Web 2.0 refers to technologies, which highlight "user-friendly interfaces" [9]<sup>16</sup> and "enable mass participation in social activities" [10]<sup>17</sup>. The criticism has been made that this term is more of a marketing strategy to create the illusion of a brand new innovation, when in fact its definition is blurry and the components are not so new at all<sup>18</sup>. Nevertheless, the term is widely used nowadays and is associated in particular with the feature of two-way communication. With Web 2.0 the role of the Internet user has further changed from only being a passive consumer to an active communicator [11]<sup>19</sup>. Users are now consuming, creating, sharing, and saving online content of various kinds and they are communicating directly to each other<sup>20</sup>.

These characteristics of the Internet make it a multi-functional communication tool that can be of great benefit for (civil) society. Optimists expect that new media like the Internet will serve to (1) inform, (2) engage and (3) empower the public<sup>21</sup>. First, the Internet allows the user to access various information sources at a relatively low cost [12]<sup>22</sup>. In the U.S., four in ten Americans reported getting "most of their national and international news from the Internet" [13]<sup>23</sup>. This development might mitigate the effect of socio-economic factors (e.g. education), leading possibly to a higher degree of engagement by those who were previously politically unengaged<sup>24</sup>.

Second, the Internet opens up new opportunities for political engagement. In particular, the aspect of interactivity that allows the user to produce, read or respond to content, may positively affect and change patterns of political participation and strengthen democracy<sup>25</sup>. Furthermore, the Internet offers a "lower threshold for citizens to engage politically" [14]<sup>26</sup>, as the effort is kept relatively small. And third, it empowers the masses through the 'bottom-up', self-organizing

<sup>11</sup> See Tufekci & Wilson (2012), p. 366

<sup>12</sup> Habermas (1991), p. 27

<sup>13</sup> See Castells (2009), pp. 54-55

<sup>14</sup> Castells (2009), p. 55

<sup>15</sup> Castells (2009), p. 55

<sup>16</sup> Scholz (2008), see under section "The New Newness of Technologies"

<sup>17</sup> Jarrett (2008), see under section "Introduction"

<sup>18</sup> See Scholz (2008), under section "The New Newness of Technologies"

<sup>19</sup> See Slot & Frissen (2007), p. 203

<sup>20</sup> See Slot & Frissen (2007), pp. 210-211

<sup>21</sup> See Neuman (2008), p. 231

<sup>22</sup> Xenos & Moy (2010), pp. 706-707

<sup>23</sup> Olmstead, Sasseen, Mitchell, & Rosenstiel (2012), under section "The Audiences for News"

<sup>24</sup> See Boulianne (2009), p. 195

<sup>25</sup> See Boulianne (2009), p. 195

<sup>26</sup> Chadwick (2009), p. 34

nature of social networking, which “challenges the power of elite hierarchies”<sup>27</sup>. The user can participate interactively online by producing, reading or responding to content, through which the authority of the user is raised and the authority of corporate owners is reduced.

Although the Internet offers useful structures for political participation, some scholars still doubt the use of these opportunities and the actual efficacy of political activities online. The aspects of the Internet and its potentially positive effects on political participation and civil society are only one side of the coin. It is true that the amount of available information has increased; nevertheless, this does not necessarily mean that overall (political) information consumption has increased. Graber [15] puts it as follows: “While available food for political thought has grown [...] the appetite for it and the capacity to consume remain limited.”<sup>28</sup> It is important to point out that “electronic connectedness cannot be equated with global interest, attention, and most important, understanding”<sup>29</sup>. On the Internet, information is mostly unfiltered, making it increasingly difficult for the user to select relevant and reliable information. Therefore, hopes that the Internet might mitigate effects of socio-economic factors such as education and income have so far not been confirmed by research. Education and income are still strong predictors for political engagement. The higher the level of education and income, the more likely is political participation, and more likely is political participation via the Internet [16]<sup>30</sup>. This phenomenon is often referred to as the ‘Matthew Effect’. The Matthew Effect is named “after the biblical observation that is so often the rich who gets richer”, and in this context it describes the phenomenon that the new media will be most likely used and taken advantage of by “those who are already interested and active in the public sphere”<sup>31</sup>. So the Internet may have the potential to inform, engage and empower the public, but it is up to the individual to make use of these opportunities.

Furthermore, Neuman [17] is concerned with two developments that the Internet might foster. Firstly, he points to the polarization effect. As the Internet allows users to search for the information they are interested in, this might lead to a polarization in that users will only turn to information sources that confirm their beliefs and opinions, resulting in an “electronically segregated world”<sup>32</sup> of political and cultural origin. However, research has shown that the Internet is usually not the only information source and users actually do frequently look for information that does not reflect their personal opinions and beliefs<sup>33</sup>. Secondly, Neumann (2008) calls attention to the danger of monopolization of the media. Most of the popular websites are under control of companies that belong to big media conglomerates, leading to an increasing monopolization and possibly threatening information diversity<sup>34</sup>. The power of media

conglomerates on the Internet is not threatening information diversity yet: there are numerous other websites that are not under the control of a big media company and provide independent information, such as Wikipedia, the non-profit encyclopaedia website. It remains to be seen how this will develop in the future.

In conclusion, the Internet holds the potential of greatly benefitting political participation, but there remains the possibility of negative outcomes. It is not the medium itself, but the use of the medium by society that determines the effects. As Uslaner [18] states:

“The World Wide Web is very much like the world. It makes things better in some ways and worse in others. But it is not transforming. [...] By itself, it is neither a threat to civil society and sociability nor a panacea”<sup>35</sup>.

The Internet can be a powerful tool for the user, but only with proper usage. Internet access is widely available in Western societies, across the different ethnic and socio-economic groups. The digital divide in terms of access has been bridged, but another divide has emerged. Research has found out that African-Americans and Hispanic Americans primarily access the Internet via mobile devices. This allows only a limited Internet use compared to access with a personal computer [19]<sup>36</sup>. Furthermore, the quality of content that users access varies tremendously. It makes a difference whether the Internet is used for news or for pure entertainment. The differences in Internet usage and content access are described as the participation divide<sup>37</sup>. In this context, media education and media literacy have grown in significance. Proper usage must be taught to narrow the growing participation divide and to avoid further socio-political exclusion.

Dalton [20] observes that “changes in political participation are analogous to changes in the contemporary media environment”<sup>38</sup>. With the proliferation of new media, such as the Internet and mobile services, the options for political participation have definitively changed. On the one hand, new media has brought new possibilities for participation. People have greater access to political information, networking between citizens and governments is enhanced, and new spaces for public discussions have come into existence. In addition, changing skills and habits have influenced the growing preference for more demanding and more direct or elite-challenging action<sup>39</sup>. New media have expanded the repertoire of possibilities for political participation, by developing new forms or re-inventing old forms of political action. For instance, political participation using new media can involve online versions of traditional participation forms, like signing a petition online or voting via an online service. Furthermore, new media can even enhance traditional forms of political participation by making certain activities more effective, such as

<sup>27</sup> See Jarrett (2008), under section “Interaction, participation, agency”

<sup>28</sup> Graber (1996), p. 34

<sup>29</sup> Neuman (2008), p. 239

<sup>30</sup> See Smith, Schlozman, Verba, & Brady (2009), p. 3

<sup>31</sup> Neuman (2008), p. 232

<sup>32</sup> Neuman (2008), p. 233

<sup>33</sup> See Neuman (2008), p. 233

<sup>34</sup> See Neuman (2008), p. 234

<sup>35</sup> Uslaner (2001), p. 8

<sup>36</sup> See Sanders (2012)

<sup>37</sup> See Sander (2012)

<sup>38</sup> Dalton (2008), p. 77

<sup>39</sup> See Dalton (2008), p. 57

information dissemination, event organization or coordination [21]<sup>40</sup>. Hence, “the Internet is becoming integrated with the established system of political communication, yet it is also being used to challenge established power structures” [22]<sup>41</sup>.

On the other hand, new forms of political activities enabled by new media have been seen rather critically. Terms such as ‘clicktivism’ or ‘slacktivism’ have been introduced to describe online activities that are easily performed, but do not actually aim at influencing real-life political processes. Instead, these activities are only performed to give the participants a good feeling about themselves<sup>42</sup>. For instance, joining a Facebook group is considered to fall under these activities. By simply “clicking” something online, users feel politically active, but it is difficult to determine the actual political efficacy of such activities. Nevertheless, not all online activities can be considered as ‘slacktivism’. Just as there are different forms of offline political participation with different levels of individual effort and political effectiveness, there must be a differentiation between the forms of online activities.

What can be said is that the “Internet is adding to the tools of political participation, especially among the young”<sup>43</sup>, and is lowering the threshold to engage. So far there is no evidence that the Internet has a negative effect on offline political participation or any evidence that online political activities are replacing traditional activities<sup>44</sup>. New media simply offer opportunity structures that have introduced a “qualitative shift in the potential for the democratic communication” [23]<sup>45</sup>. Social networking sites have contributed to this shift, and they are playing an increasingly political role; next, we consider the role of Facebook in the context of political participation.

## Facebook and Political Participation

Facebook started off as a small campus network and is nowadays the most popular SNS worldwide, with currently one billion registered users. Facebook’s role in politics and for political participation is growing, though the efficacy is still questionable. Politics in Facebook “aligns itself with broader repertoires of self-expression and lifestyle values”<sup>46</sup>. Among numerous applications concerning lifestyle consumerism, Facebook offers also more directly political applications. For instance, “Causes” [24] is an application introduced in 2007 to create groups for a social or political issue with the aim of raising awareness and money for a cause. Various tools are embedded

in Facebook, for instance the petition tool that allows direct online participation. Up to date, 153 million users have installed this application, making it the largest Facebook application<sup>47</sup>.

Furthermore, news is increasingly consumed via SNSs. In a recent study by the Pew Internet & American Life Project, 36% of SNSs’ American users say the sites are either very important or somewhat important to them in keeping up with political news [25]<sup>48</sup>. In addition, recent research shows that 8.6% of traffic to news sites now comes from Facebook and similar SNSs, which is an increase of 57% since 2009<sup>49</sup>. This development can be explained by the fact that Facebook has worked with news sites to develop features that allow users to directly connect a news article with their personal profiles and share it with their network. “News organizations are increasingly reliant on Facebook for distribution”<sup>50</sup> as readers rather read suggested stories within Facebook than on the news website itself. This gives Facebook power over much of the ad space of the revenue derived there<sup>51</sup>.

Facebook’s structure and embedded tools invite users to express political opinion or share political news. To name an example, the U.S. presidential election 2012 was heavily discussed on Facebook. On Election Day there were 71.7 million election-related mentions across Facebook posts and comments in the United States, and 88.7 million mentions across Facebook posts and comments globally [26]<sup>52</sup>. Its structure and applications allow users to move their offline interests and life to their online Facebook profile, resulting in Facebook profiles that “are now a mish-mash of content and genres, where music, film, and fashion sit alongside political campaigns, donation drives, sloganeering and so on”<sup>53</sup>. Facebook is, nevertheless, “a low-threshold deliberative environment, with features such as ‘The Wall’ and ‘Groups’ allowing users to comment on others’ profiles and to hold on-going conversations in semi-public spaces”<sup>54</sup>, and thus allowing different forms of political participation. The interactivity provided by Facebook and other SNSs, giving users the freedom to express and create content, stands in sharp contrast with low control over the data once posted on Facebook.

Research results on the relation between Facebook use and political participation, however, are not so straightforward. Zhang et al. [27] found out that “reliance on social networking sites such as YouTube, Facebook, and MySpace was positively related to civic participation but not to political participation”<sup>55</sup>. The results by Vesnic-Alujevic

<sup>40</sup> See Christensen (2011), under section “Political Participation and the Internet”

<sup>41</sup> Dahlgren (2005), 151

<sup>42</sup> Christensen (2011), under section “The Internet and slacktivism”

<sup>43</sup> Dalton (2008), p. 66

<sup>44</sup> Christensen (2011), under section “The activities of Internet activists”

<sup>45</sup> Coleman (2007), p. 375, in: “E-Democracy: The history and future of an idea”. Quoted by Livingstone (2011) on p. 357.

<sup>46</sup> Chadwick (2009), p. 30

<sup>47</sup> See Causes (2012)

<sup>48</sup> See Rainie & Smith (2012), p. 7

<sup>49</sup> See Olmstead, Sasseen, Mitchell, & Rosenstiel (2012), under section “Social Media: A Growing Role in News Discovery and Distribution”

<sup>50</sup> See Olmstead, Sasseen, Mitchell, & Rosenstiel (2012), under section “Social Media: A Growing Role in News Discovery and Distribution”

<sup>51</sup> See Olmstead, Sasseen, Mitchell, & Rosenstiel (2012), under section “Social Media: A Growing Role in News Discovery and Distribution”

<sup>52</sup> See U.S. Politics on Facebook (2012)

<sup>53</sup> Chadwick (2009), p. 31

<sup>54</sup> Chadwick (2009), p. 31



[28], on the other hand, have shown “a positive relationship between online and “offline” political participation”<sup>56</sup>, which means that “the more respondents were involved in online political participation through their Facebook profile pages (such as posting or forwarding political information or participating in the discussion), the more they participated in politics ‘offline’”<sup>57</sup>. Vesnic-Alujevic (2012) concludes, “That Facebook seems to be a suitable Internet space for political engagement”<sup>58</sup>. To further analyses whether young adults are generally using Facebook for political activities and whether they consider Facebook a suitable platform for political engagement, we conducted our own survey.

## Methodological Approach

The focus of this empirical research is limited to Facebook users and forms of political action. Facebook is currently the social networking site with the highest number of active users, so the choice seems appropriate.

The central research question of the study is: What forms of political action do Facebook users engage in? With regard to this research question, three hypotheses were tested:

H1: The use of Facebook does not affect political participation behavior.

H2: Facebook users are mostly involved in online forms of political activities.

H3: Facebook users take advantage of the given structures on Facebook and develop new forms of political actions.

The data of this study was collected by distributing a paper-pencil-questionnaire which included 20 questions covering three dimensions: 1) socio-demographic variables; 2) general political interest and political participation; 3) general Facebook use and Facebook use for political activities<sup>59</sup>. The last question of the questionnaire is an open-ended question, which requires interpretation and therefore a qualitative data analysis method. To analyze this part adequately, a qualitative content analysis is applied. For this a coding frame has been developed that covers five main categories<sup>60</sup>:

### Main categories of the coding frame

#### Overall tone of response

Informational value of political content on Facebook

Effects of using Facebook for political participation

Concerns of misuse of Facebook

## Data protection

The units of analysis are individuals, namely active Facebook members. The target group was limited to 18 to 31 years old students from Berlin and Cairo with a study focus on communication, marketing and intercultural studies. One reason for this choice is that this age group constitutes a remarkable size on Facebook<sup>61</sup>. Another reason is that in most countries citizens gain their voting right at the age of 18. Both in Germany and Egypt the voting age is 18, so political relevance is important as well. Furthermore, the cities themselves where the students study are of political relevance. Berlin is the German capital and the political centre of Germany. Cairo is Egypt's capital and was the focal point of the 2011 Egyptian Revolution, which was part of the Arab Spring. Social media such as Twitter and Facebook have played significant roles in the revolution in Egypt<sup>62</sup> and therefore it is interesting to examine the post-revolution use of SNSs for political participation of young adults from Cairo. Concerning the academic background of the respondents, it is known from prior research that there is a strong positive correlation between education level and political participation<sup>63</sup>. Furthermore, the studies background of the target group is relevant as it is more likely that they deal with different forms of communication.

The sampling method used here was a combination of convenience sampling and purposive sampling. The questionnaire was given out during a two-week period during courses of Political Science and Social Media/Online Marketing in Bachelor and Master classes of Social Science, Political Science and General Management at universities in Berlin, attended by male and female students. Where Social Science was dominated by female students, Political Science was around both genders the half and in General Management was the majority male students between 17 and 35. This allowed for a relatively high response rate in a short time. In addition, a course has been selected, that was only attended by Bachelor and Master General Management guest students from the German University in Cairo, speaking German and English fluently. 503 questionnaires were given to the students in total. 67 questionnaires were completely filled and their results were included in the study.

## Results of the Survey

The great majority of the respondents, namely 72%, were female. Also another 72% of the respondents were between 18-24 years old. Around 54% of the respondents hold the German citizenship, 22% Egyptian citizenship, and 24% had a different citizenship<sup>64</sup> as shown in Figures 1-3.

<sup>55</sup> Zhang, Johnson, Seltzer, & Bichard (2010), p. 86-87

<sup>56</sup> Vesnic-Alujevic (2012), p. 469

<sup>57</sup> Vesnic-Alujevic (2012), p. 469

<sup>58</sup> Vesnic-Alujevic (2012), p. 469

<sup>59</sup> See Appendix for complete questionnaire and details on the methodology.

<sup>60</sup> See Appendix for complete coding frame.

<sup>61</sup> The median age of all Facebook users in September 2012 was about 22 years. See Facebook (2012 b)

<sup>62</sup> See Tufekci & Wilson (2012), p. 366

<sup>63</sup> See for instance Smith et al. (2009), p. 3

<sup>64</sup> See Fig. 3-5 in the Appendix.

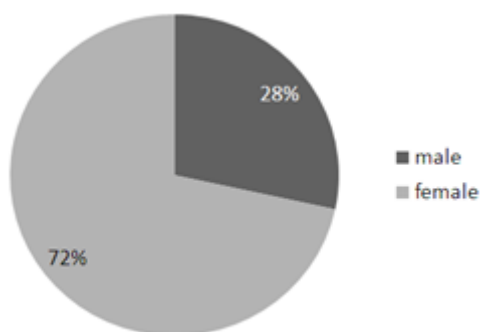


Figure 1: Sex distribution of respondents.

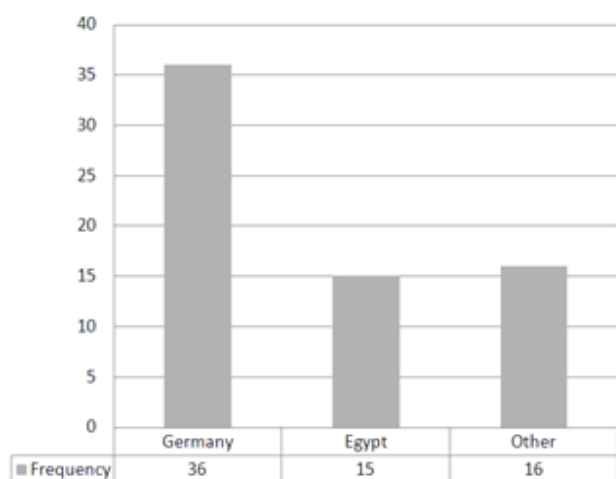


Figure 2: Citizenship of respondents. Other included: France=5; Poland=2; Spain=2; Bulgaria=1; Canada=1; Danmark=1; Mexico=1; Portugal=1; Russia=1; Turkey=1.

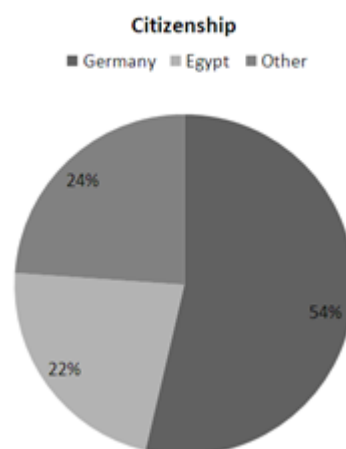


Figure 3: Citizenship of respondents. Other included: France=5; Poland=2; Spain=2; Bulgaria=1; Canada=1; Danmark=1; Mexico=1; Portugal=1; Russia=1; Turkey=1.

Concerning political interest, the survey results show that the great majority of respondents are somewhat (45%) or very interested in politics (13%), whereas only 6% stated they were not all interested<sup>65</sup> as shown in Figure 4.

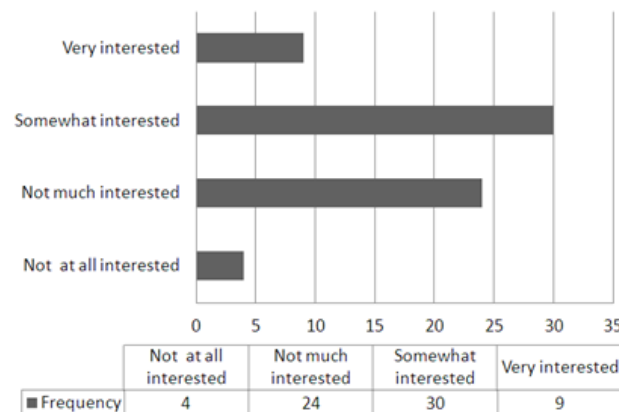


Figure 4: Level of interest in political matters.

When it comes to informing oneself about political issues, the Internet is the main source. About 57 % of the respondents use the Internet daily to inform themselves about political matters, 28% use it 2-3 times a week. No one answered they never use the Internet as a source for political information as shown in Table 1.

In comparison, only about 8% read the newspaper daily and only 2% read any other print medium daily for political information. But radio and television still seem to be an important source for political information. Almost 39% said they listen to the radio daily and 36% watch television daily for political information.

<sup>65</sup> Also see Fig. 6 in Appendix.

The results mirror the trend that young adults are increasingly using the Internet, also for political matters, and using traditional media less. In particular print media seem to have lost relevance as a source of political information for the respondents. The Internet has become an important information source, but it is never the only information source. Traditional media such as the television and radio are still relevant and have not been substituted, but are used less frequently than the Internet for political information.

#	Medium	Daily	2-3 Times a Week	Once a Week	2-3 Times a Month	Once a Month	Never	TOTAL Percentage Frequency	Missing
1	Newspaper	7.5% 5	26.9% 18	17.9% 12	11.9% 8	22.4% 15	6.0% 4	92.5% 62	7.5% 5
2	Magazine / other print medium	1.5% 1	3.0% 2	17.9% 12	22.4% 15	25.4% 17	19.4% 13	89.6% 60	10.4% 7
3	Radio	38.8% 26	17.9% 12	9.0% 6	7.5% 5	6.0% 4	13.4% 9	13.4% 9	7.5% 5
4	Television	35.8% 24	22.4% 15	14.9% 10	7.5% 5	4.5% 3	11.9% 8	97.0% 65	3.0% 2
5	Internet / online sources	56.7% 38	28.4% 19	6.0% 4	3.0% 2	4.5% 3	0.0% 0	98.5% 66	1.5% 1

Table 1: Sources for political information and their use. Source: Own calculations based on data derived from own survey.

Although the majority indicated they were politically interested and inform themselves daily on the Internet about political issues, the level of political engagement in a group or organization among the respondents is relatively very low. When asked about being currently active in a political group or organization, only 9% (6) responded positively to this question, whereas 91% (61) said they were not active in any political group or the like. This result is in line with the theory that changing socio-economic factors, such as more liberal and self-expression values, increasing time pressure and mobility, have led to more individualized and un-institutionalized participation [29]<sup>66</sup>.

When asked for political activities ever done online and offline, the answers illustrate an interesting pattern. The question allowed multiple answers, any applicable activity both online and offline could be ticked as shown in Table 2. The most frequently selected form of political activity was discussing a political issue in public space (offline) which 38.8% of the respondents did. So the traditional form of meeting and discussing in real life is still the most popular form of participating politically. The second most frequently named activity is attending a lawful demonstration offline, which 32.8% of respondents said they did. This is a so-called unconventional or elite-challenging form of political participation.

#	Political Activity	Offline	Online	TOTAL Percentage Frequency
1	Discussing a political issue in a public space	38.8% 26	10.4% 7	49.3% 33
2	Voting in the last election	?	?	?
3	Organizing meetings / discussions on political issues	28.4% 19	1.5% 1	29.9% 20
4	Contacting political or government officials	14.9% 10	10.4% 7	25.4% 17
5	Signing a petition	20.9% 14	17.9% 12	38.8% 26
6	Attending a lawful demonstration	32.8% 22	11.9% 8	44.8% 30
7	Joining a boycott / strike	28.4% 19	11.9% 8	40.3% 27
8	Occupying a building or other spaces	20.9% 14	4.5% 3	25.4% 17
9	Involvement in political campaigns	?	?	?
10	Joining and working for a political organization	?	?	?
11	Giving money to a political organization	?	?	?

Table 2: Political activities ever engaged in. Source: Own calculations based on data derived from own survey.

When asked for the last or most recent done political activity, the responses show a similar pattern. Overall, 67 respondents answered this question. The most frequently named activity was signing a petition (9), of which 5 respondents specifically indicated to have signed a petition online, like “Signing a petition for green energy in Berlin” or “online petition for Amnesty International via Facebook for the rights for Egyptian women” or “signing a petition on Facebook against the current Egyptian president” Another 4 respondents named demonstrations as their last political activity: “at university demonstrating against Bologna by not attending the class” and “it was a demonstration in 2009 against the study fees of the university Saarbrücken” or two mentioned demonstrations at the Tahir Square in Cairo like “joining a strike in Tahir Square during the Egyptian revolution. It was very dangerous.”

The so-called unconventional or elite-challenging forms, such as signing a petition or attending a demonstration, have become a common form of political participation. The digitalization and technological advances seem not to have changed this yet. Online activities are not substituting offline activities. What can be rather observed is a supplement of offline forms of political participation with new forms online. Young adults make use of the political repertoire offered both offline and online.

Of particular interest here is in how far young adults are engaged in online political activities via Facebook. The most used language on Facebook is English. The majority of the respondents, which is 38.8%, spend between 6 and 15 hours per week on Facebook<sup>67</sup>. An independent samples t-test was conducted to compare the time spent on Facebook of German and Egyptian respondents. There was a significant difference in the time spent on Facebook for Germans (M=0.80, SD=0.81) and Egyptians (M=1.8, SD=0.97);  $t(40)=-3.26$ ,  $p=0.002$ <sup>68</sup>.

The survey results concerning the form and intensity of political activity on Facebook show a clear trend. As Figure 5 show, many respondents, namely 37.3%, never share or post links or articles with political content on Facebook. Another 13.6% stated they do this less than once a month. In contrast, 10.4% indicated they post political

<sup>66</sup> See Inglehart & Welzel (2005), p. 43

<sup>67</sup>

<sup>68</sup> See Tab. 4 in the Appendix

content on Facebook 2-3 times a week. Only 3% post some political content on a daily basis.

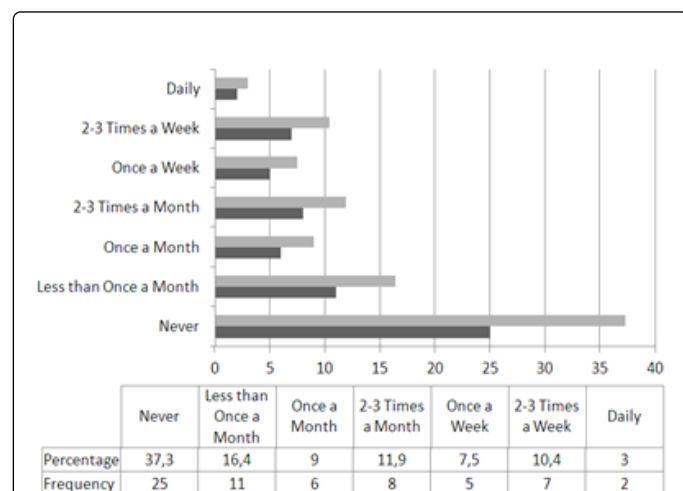


Figure 5: Frequency of sharing and/or posting links and/or articles with political content on Facebook. \*Missing: 3 respondents, 4.5%. Source: Own calculations based on data derived from own survey.

When checking for any significant differences between the German and Egyptian respondents concerning their Facebook use, the only significant difference occurred in the activity of posting political content on Facebook. The independent samples t-test showed that there was a significant difference in the frequency of posting political content on Facebook for Germans ( $M=4.50$ ,  $SD=1.95$ ) and Egyptians ( $M=3.00$ ,  $SD=1.76$ );  $t(46)=2.36$ ,  $p=0.02^{69}$ . From the results it can be concluded that the Egyptians respondents were prone to post or share political content via Facebook than the German respondents. But due to the high number of German and the relatively low number of Egyptian respondents, it is difficult to draw conclusions based on this result.

The response pattern from the previous question is mirrored in the responses to the next question regarding political discussions on Facebook. 47.8% never and 23.9% rarely engage in a political discussion on Facebook. Only 1.5% indicated to discuss a political issue on Facebook daily as shown in Figure 6.

When asked for their personal experiences made with Facebook and political participation, only 10 out of 32 respondents who answered this question indicated to have been personally mobilized to engage in some form of political action. Nevertheless, almost 75% would agree with the statements that Facebook is a useful tool to distribute political information and over 86% agree that is a useful platform to mobilize a large number of people for a political issue. Furthermore, 70% would agree that the politically unengaged can be reached and mobilized over Facebook as shown in Table 3.

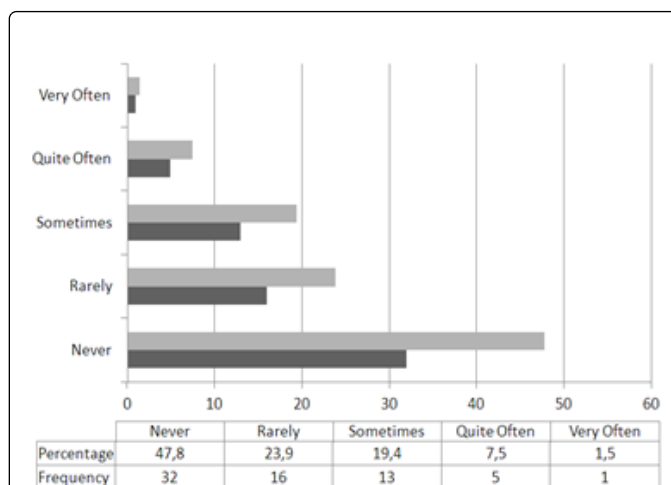


Figure 6: Engagement in political discussions on Facebook. Source: Own calculations based on data derived from own survey.

#		Agree	Disagree	Missing	Total Percentage Frequency
1	Facebook is a useful platform to distribute political information.	74.6% 50	20.9% 14	4.5% 3	100% 67
2	Facebook is a useful platform to mobilize a large number of people for a political issue.	86.6% 58	9.0% 6	4.5% 3	100% 67
3	Facebook should not be used as a platform for political issues.	26.9% 18	62.7% 42	10.4% 7	100% 67
4	Political groups or events created in Facebook do not get much attention and are ineffective.	14.9% 10	79.1% 53	6.0% 4	100% 67
5	Over Facebook, politically unengaged can be reached and mobilized.	70.1% 47	20.9% 14	9.0% 6	100% 67
6	Activities on Facebook do not contribute to political participation.	28.4% 19	59.7% 40	11.9% 8	100% 67

Table 3: Level of agreement and disagreement with statements. Source: Own calculations based on data derived from own survey.

Furthermore, 62.7% respondents disagree with the statement that Facebook should not be used as a platform for political issues. When it comes to the effectiveness of groups or events created on Facebook, 79% disagree with the statement that groups or events on Facebook are ineffective.

So far, the results show that the majority of respondents are not actively engaging in political activities on Facebook, although they acknowledge Facebook's potential to disseminate political information and reaching people on a large scale. The agree-disagree statements have already given a rough impression of the attitudes the respondents hold towards Facebook as a political platform. To get a clearer picture, the last question, which was an open-ended question, directly asked for a personal opinion on Facebook as a political platform.

Overall, 66 out of 67 answered this question. The length of texts varied from one-word responses to several sentences with a high

<sup>69</sup> See Tab. 6 in the Appendix



involvement. The answers were coded using the coding frame described in the previous section. At the beginning, all the responses were coded using the first dimension, which was to capture the overall tone or attitude the respondents express in their answer. This is possibly the most interpretational code from the coding frame. The results from the coding show that about 59% (39 out of 66) of the responses contain predominantly positive aspects or opinions on using Facebook as a political platform. Among the frequently mentioned positive aspects was the network structure that facilitates the fast and efficient spread of information, which makes it relevant for political action.

"Facebook is a rather useful platform to distribute political information."

"During the Arabian Spring, Facebook played a major role as a political, activist platform"

These responses were coded as predominantly positive, as they point out to ways Facebook can be used as a platform for political content and political action, by describing it with the word "useful" or "major role". Therefore, this can be interpreted as predominantly positive. Another response coded predominantly positive is the following:

"It is a really effective tool, it started the Egyptian Revolution."

The key word here is "effective" that sets a positive tone from which the example of the revolution in Egypt is named.

Many of the responses contained either both positive and negative aspects or no clear tendency. About 11% consider both positive and negative aspects and carefully balance the advantages and disadvantages that evolve from those. One respondent considers Facebook an efficient platform to motivate people, but also balances the statement by limiting this to the right use.

"If used right, it can be an efficient way to mobilize and motivate people."

"I think that Facebook can be used as a platform. It can mobilize people and reach people that way to get them more involved into political issues"

Roughly 40% of the responses were predominantly negative. One respondent wrote:

"Dangerous to post your political statement"

Another mentioned:

"It is difficult and can be dangerous to communicate political statements on Facebook as you can't delete a post afterwards"

These examples contain the key word "dangerous" that sets the negative tone.

The second step of the qualitative content analysis was then to use the other four dimensions of the coding frame and apply it to the answers to the last question. The most frequently mentioned topic in the responses was the sub code 2.1 Sharing, spreading, posting political content via Facebook. For example:

"It is a great tool as it reaches many people from different areas around the world."

Also a frequently mentioned topic was 2.3 Political content reaching (unengaged) people on a large scale:

"I'm conflicted, because Facebook can and does get politically unengaged people and mobilize them, however it does not last."

Already in this statement a more critical voice appears concerning Facebook and using it for political content. This statement touches upon the topic of subcode 3.1 Political impact or relevance for political reality. Another example for this would be the following statement:

"It is useful to spread information there, mobilize people for petitions etc., but this often means just an easy way to 'feel engaged' without really moving or becoming really active"

Other critical opinions were concerned with topics collected under the main code 4. Concerns of misuse of Facebook, for instance:

"Political information on Facebook can be easily misused or wrongly understood"

"Good way to mobilize many people but easy to manipulate them as well"

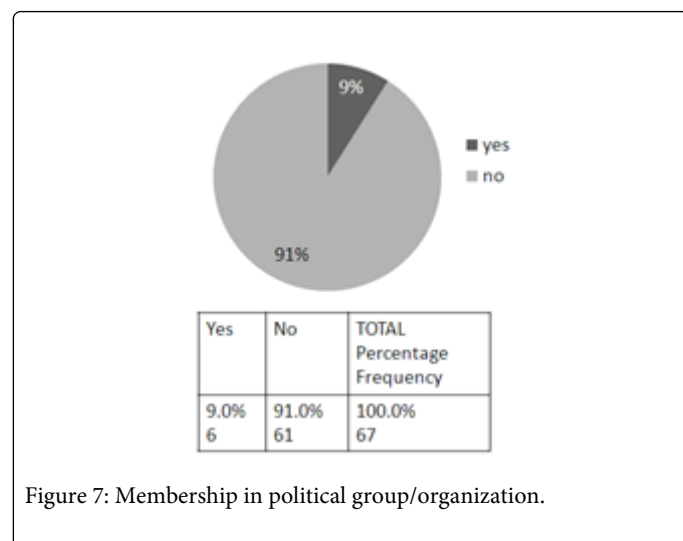
Overall, the text responses showed that Facebook, given its network structure and international reach, is considered to hold some potential for being used as a political platform. From the results, it can be said that political content is carefully shared and discussed on Facebook. With regard to active political participation and the actual impact of political activities on Facebook, the opinions were rather critical. Also because respondents raised concerns about data protection and the possible misuse of Facebook for violating views. Facebook is, after all, a corporation providing a service that sets the terms to which all Facebook members agree. Facebook members see the potentials of the given structure, which facilitates communication and organization, also for political matters. But as an open network structure run by a corporation, the control of data is difficult to keep track of, also of our own private data. Users are aware of the problem of data protection and very cautious with their personal data.

## Summary of Results & Conclusion

The evaluation of the survey responses showed that a thin majority of the respondents has a relatively high level of political interest (58% say they are somewhat or very interested in politics). When it comes to membership in a political group or organization as shown in Figure 7, only 9% indicated to be active in such a group. Putnam [30] considers membership in associations as a key indicator for civil society because "members of associations are much more likely than non-members to participate in politics [...]"<sup>70</sup>. But it seems that memberships play no longer an important role for political participation of citizens. In post-industrial countries, self-expressionist values are increasing, leading to more individualized and less group-bound participation<sup>71</sup>.

<sup>70</sup> See Putnam (1995), p. 75

<sup>71</sup> See Inglehart & Welzel (2005), p. 43 and Dalton (2008), p. 65



With the Internet political participation has moved more to online forms of participation. The survey results showed that the Internet is the primarily, though not the only, source for political information and increasingly more forms of political activities are engaged in online. Nevertheless, 'offline' political activities are not substituted; rather 'online' forms are an addition to 'offline' activities. So hypothesis H2, stating that Facebook users are mostly involved in online forms of political activities, cannot be fully supported. Facebook users are involved in online forms of political activities, but not mostly and definitely not solely. Attending a demonstration or signing a petition (either online or offline), are still a common and popular practice.

Considering political activities on Facebook, the results showed that political content is not very popular among the respondents. The survey found out that about 37% never post or share links or articles with political content on Facebook, and only roughly 10% do so 2-3 times a week. Here, a significant difference between German and Egyptian respondents were detected, where Egyptian respondents indicated to post or share political content on Facebook more often than German respondents. Almost half of the respondents, namely about 48% never engage in political discussions on Facebook, and another 24% say they do so rarely. Furthermore, only 10 out of 32

respondents who answered this, mentioned to have been actually mobilized via Facebook to engage in some form of political activity. Although there is high agreement that Facebook can be a useful tool to distribute political information, it is neither practiced nor was it experienced by most respondents.

From the content analysis applied on the last open question, the data from the quantitative part on Facebook can be interpreted in more accurately. The majority of respondents hold a rather ambivalent attitude towards Facebook as a political platform. The respondents consider its network structure and international reach as useful and effective for sharing political information. This is in line with the quantitative results of this survey. Nevertheless, several of the respondents are concerned with the misuse of this structure for violating views and the not guaranteed data protection. These concerns lead many of the Facebook members to use Facebook with caution, especially when it comes to voicing political opinions. This fact might also explain the low level of involvement on Facebook concerning the frequency of political activities asked in the questions 16 and 17. The engagement in political activities on Facebook might be impeded by concerns about data protection and private policy. Therefore, hypothesis H1 claiming the use of Facebook does not affect political participation is supported, as it does not play a significant role for the respondents and their personal level of political participation.

Hypothesis H3 stating that Facebook users make use of the given structure on Facebook and develop new forms of political participation is rejected. The Facebook members asked in this survey are not very active in online forms of political action or in using Facebook for political matters. This might be explained by the fact that the majority, as mentioned above, is rather cautious about actively engaging in political matters via Facebook as shown in Table 4 and limits their political activities to information sharing. Therefore, hypothesis H3 cannot be confirmed.

The results support prior assumptions that Facebook is seen as a useful tool for spreading and sharing political content but for political participation and real world politics not yet relevant, because online activities must be transferred to the offline world to have a political impact<sup>72</sup>. The technology and tools are given, but both citizens and political institutions must yet learn the effective use for political participation<sup>73</sup>.

<sup>72</sup> See Smith et al. (2009), p. 14

<sup>73</sup> See Dahlgren (2005), p. 151

T-TEST GROUPS=Citizenship (00 01)  
/MISSING=ANALYSIS  
/VARIABLES=Share Engage  
/CRITERIA=CI (.95).

[DatenSet1] S:\Projekte mit Prof. Ternes\SPSS Evaluation.sav

**Group Statistics**

		N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
How often do you share and/or post links and/or articles with political content on Facebook?	German	36	4.5000	1.94936	.32489
	Egyptian	12	3.0800	1.75810	.50752
How often do you engage in political discussions on Facebook?	German	36	3.2500	.99642	.16607
	Egyptian	12	2.7333	1.16282	.30026

**Levene's Test for Equality of Variances**

		F	Sig.
How often do you share and/or post links and/or articles with political content on Facebook?	Equal variances assumed	.789	.379
	Equal variances not assumed	2.489	.127
How often do you engage in political discussions on Facebook?	Equal variances assumed	2.348	.132
	Equal variances not assumed	1.506	.231

**t-test for Equality of Means**

		t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference
How often do you share and/or post links and/or articles with political content on Facebook?	Equal variances assumed	2.362	46	.022	1.50000	.83512	.22158 2.77844
	Equal variances not assumed	2.489	20.767	.021	1.50000	.60260	.24596 2.75404
How often do you engage in political discussions on Facebook?	Equal variances assumed	.51667	49	.615	.32167	.32167	-.12975 1.16309
	Equal variances not assumed	.51667	23.014	.615	.34313	.34313	-.19313 1.26946

Table 4: Independent samples T-test for “sharing and engaging on Facebook” between Germans and Egyptian respondents.

## Discussion

The digitization of society has opened new opportunities for political participation. In particular the Internet and SNSs offer new structures that are extending the political repertoire of participation, and are therefore “becoming integrated with the established system of political communication”<sup>74</sup>.

The study presented in this paper gave a first impression of the potential of SNSs for political activities. Despite the relatively small sample size and the high number of German participants included, the survey still provides valid results, as it does not claim representativeness. Furthermore, the participants of this survey are educated on an international level, which somewhat mitigates the relevance of citizenship, especially in the online world where geographical distance play less of a role. The main research aim was to provide a snap shot of a small, selected group of young adults and their political behavior, in order to encourage further research in this field.

The results from this survey showed that the users do see the potential of Facebook to spread political content and to reach and inform politically unengaged. The informational use of SNSs, as prior research suggested, “Has a significant and positive impact on individual's activities aimed at engaging in civic and political action” [31]<sup>75</sup>. The high degree of interactivity and the simplicity of organizing information on SNSs provide an additional way to get political

information and facilitate political involvement. Consequently, “SNSs also seem to provide adequate and relevant information to reinvigorate the democratic process”<sup>76</sup>.

Increasingly, Facebook and other SNSs are used to organize and mobilize people for political causes. But it seems that this is still an exception rather than the rule. For instance, when it comes to discussing a political issue, 49% of American SNSs users do not consider SNSs important, and another 51% say these sites are not important for them for recruiting people to get involved with political issues<sup>77</sup>. Thus, among American SNSs users, SNSs are not overwhelmingly important to their political activity. Even considering the fact that “young adults are much more likely than their elders to be comfortable with electronic technologies and to use the Internet, but among Internet users, the young are not especially politically active” [32]<sup>78</sup>. It seems that the potential for SNSs to “increase youth political engagement has not been realized” [33]<sup>79</sup>. Being politically active via Facebook is rather rare. As Boyd [34] observes, “the passion and interest for sharing political and policy information far and wide through SNSs—particularly by and for young people—doesn't match the capability of the SNSs”<sup>80</sup>. It is the lack of motivation to participate that must be tackled to improve democracy. Therefore, the “Internet offers very viable possibilities for civic interaction but clearly cannot promise a quick fix for democracy”<sup>81</sup>. To be effective and influential, a way must be found to transfer or connect online activism with real

<sup>74</sup> Dahlgren (2005), p. 151

<sup>75</sup> Gil de Zúñiga, Jung, & Valenzuela (2012), p. 329

<sup>76</sup> Gil de Zúñiga, Jung, & Valenzuela (2012), p. 329

<sup>77</sup> See Rainie & Smith (2012), p. 7

<sup>78</sup> Schlozman, Verba, & Brady (2010), p. 487

<sup>79</sup> Baumgartner & Morris (2010), p. 38

<sup>80</sup> Boyd (2008), p. 112

world politics. Nevertheless, it is also crucial that “political institutions are able and willing to enter into a dialogical relationship with the public” [35]<sup>82</sup> through new media.

Still, it is naïve to consider SNSs a democratic sphere, when most websites, including users’ personal data, are controlled by corporations [36]<sup>83</sup>. Most of the popular platforms of the social web are under the control of companies and corporations. Although users can join most SNSs for free, the “socializing comes at a cost” [37]<sup>84</sup>. The platforms are driven by advertisements that are based on personal data users enter in their profile. It is questionable how democratic political participation can be possible in “an increasing privatization of the public sphere”<sup>85</sup>, where the social and political is becoming part of the economy. The degree to which this development affects new forms of social organization and political participation is still unclear<sup>86</sup>.

Overall, it must be understood that SNSs are only providing the technology and structures. Structure does not determine (political) practice. As Boyd (2008) points out: “Technology’s majestic lust makes it easy to fool people into believing that its structure determines practice. [...] Technologies are shaped by society and reflect society’s values back at us, albeit a bit refracted”<sup>87</sup>. The infrastructure is available to engage, but it depends on the choice and motivation of the user to utilize these structures for political purposes. Therefore, the argument that SNSs can spur a “democratic revolution”<sup>88</sup> may be overstated. To grasp the complex relations to the full extent, use and behaviors on SNSs and political participation of young adults are in constant flux and need regular updates and research.

## Appendix

### Structure of the questionnaire

The survey included 20 questions in total, covering three dimensions:

#### Dimension 1: Socio-demographic variables (Q1-Q7)

age  
gender  
education level  
current employment status  
citizenship  
native language(s)  
country of main residency

#### Dimension 2: General political interest and political participation (Q8-Q13)

interest in politics

media use for political information

active engagement in political group / organization

political activity online / offline

Dimension 3: General Facebook use and its use for political activities (Q14-Q20)

languages used on Facebook as shown in Table 5

time spent on Facebook

sharing and discussing political content on Facebook

personal opinion on Facebook as political platform

English	German	Arabic	Other	TOTAL Frequency
50	37	10	18	115

Table 5: Languages used on Facebook.

Socio-demographic variables included age, gender, education level, current employment status, citizenship, native language(s) and country of main residency. These are control variables to see whether they play a significant role for of political interest and political participation.

The general political interest was measured with a 4-point scale starting from 1) Not interested to 4) Very much interested. Furthermore, it was asked for the sources used to get political information. Overall five media sources were listed and had to be rated on a 6-point scale according to using time which varied from 1) Daily to 6) Never. Additionally, respondents had the option to write down another medium not listed that they used. Here, the scales were deliberately chosen have no middle point to avoid the tendency of choosing the middle point that might be falsifying the results<sup>89</sup>.

Political participation or engagement was measured by two items. One asked directly for active engagement in any kind of political group or organization and the time spent actively engaging in that group as shown in Figure 8. This was a Yes-No answer, where Yes included the option to write down the exact political group or organization and their activity. The follow-up question then asked for the time spent in that group, giving the options on a 6-point scale that started from 1) Daily to 6) less than once a month. The second item listed eleven political activities that could be ticked both as online or offline activities. The respondents were asked to tick any political activity that they have ever done, online and/or offline. The listed

<sup>81</sup> Dahlgren (2005), p. 151

<sup>82</sup> See Livingstone (2011), p. 359

<sup>83</sup> See Caesar (2012), p. 34

<sup>84</sup> See Mejias (2010), p. 604

<sup>85</sup> Mejias (2010), p. 607

<sup>86</sup> See Mejias (2010), p. 606

<sup>87</sup> Boyd (2008), p. 113

<sup>88</sup> Baumgartner & Morris (2010), p. 38

<sup>89</sup> See Möhring & Schlütz (2003), p. 99

political activities were chosen on the basis of previous research studies on political participation<sup>90</sup>. Overall, eleven different types of political activities were listed, of which seven are so-called conventional forms and four unconventional or elite-challenging forms of political activity.

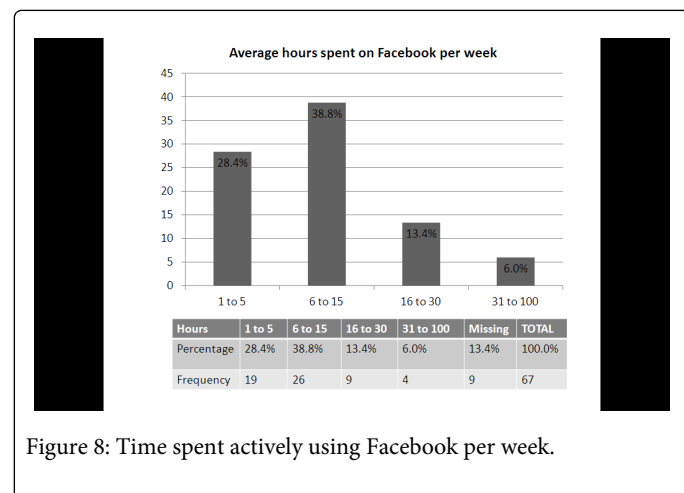


Figure 8: Time spent actively using Facebook per week.

The third dimension of the survey dealt with the general Facebook use and Facebook use for political activities in particular. The questions concerning the general Facebook use included two aspects. First, it was asked which main language(s) the respondents use for communication on Facebook. Second, it was asked for the time spent per week on Facebook as shown in Table 6. Here, no options were given to allow the respondents an unbiased estimation of their Facebook use. Then it was directly asked for political content shared or posted on Facebook. A 7-point scale was used, ranging from 1) Daily to 7) Never. Although, this scale offers a middle point, the last option “never” can be considered as an additional or alternative option<sup>91</sup>. Furthermore, the falsification by offering a middle point here is considered relatively low as it is about a self-estimation of the frequency of an activity.

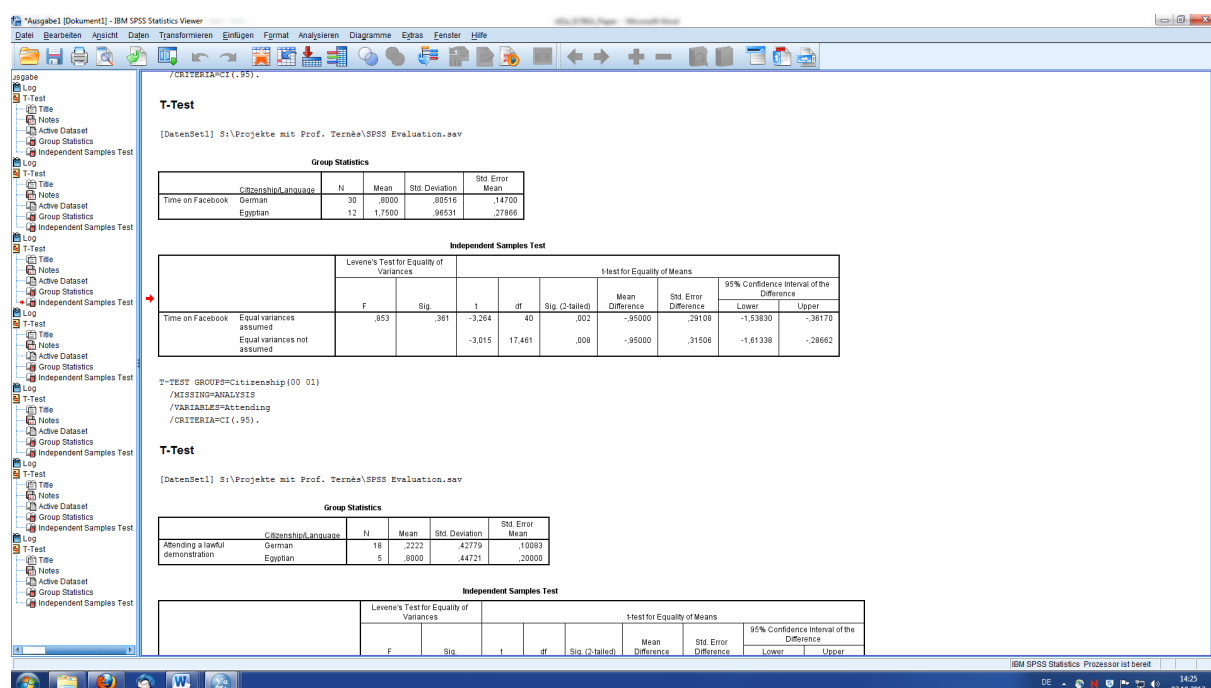


Table 6: Independent samples T-test for “Time spent actively using Facebook per week” between Germans and Egyptian respondents.

The last three questions of the survey were directed at getting personal opinions on Facebook for political content and activities. First, it was asked for experiences made with Facebook in a political context. Then six statements, three positive and three negative in random order, were given and the respondents were asked whether they agree or disagree with the statements. The statements included

positive and negative aspects concerning using Facebook as a political platform. The final question was an open-ended question where the respondents had the option to state their personal opinion on the subject. The previous question was deliberately a statement-based agree-disagree question to give the respondents some incentives to write down their opinion in the final question. The advantage of this

<sup>90</sup> See Newton & Giebler (2008), Tab.2 & Tab.3 on p. 9-10 and see also Smith et al. (2009), p. 34

<sup>91</sup> See Möhring & Schlütz (2003), p. 99



open-ended question is that it produces a variety of different answers, as the respondents can respond spontaneously and with no limitation. The disadvantage is the rather complex evaluation of such answers, which will be discussed in the following section<sup>92</sup>.

Overall, the survey was structured in a way to keep it simple and interesting for the respondents. The mixture and change between different types of questions had the purpose to keep the effort and time expense at an acceptable level for the respondents, but at the same time to get as much useful data as possible.

### Complete Questionnaire

What is your age?

What is your sex? (male – female)

What is the highest degree or level of education you have completed? (8-point scale)

What is your current employment status? (8-point scale)

What is your citizenship?

What is (are) your native language(s)?

In which country do you currently have your main residency?

How would you rate your general interest in political matters? (4-point scale)

How often do you use the following sources to get political information? (6-point scale)

Are you actively engaged in some political group or organization? (yes – no)

How much time do you spend actively engaging in that group / organization? (6-point scale)

Have you done any of these political activities? Please tick all options applicable. (11 options)

What was the last political activity you were engaged in (online and/or offline)? Please name and describe where and in what way you were actively engaged.

What language(s) do you mainly use on Facebook for communication? Please indicate max. 2.

How much time (in hours) do you spend actively using Facebook per week (on average)?

How often do you share and/or post links and/or articles with political content on Facebook? (7-point scale)

How often do you engage in political discussions (e.g. commenting on a political issue in a Facebook group or on Facebook walls) on Facebook? (5-point scale)

What experiences have you made with political engagement on and over Facebook? Were you ever mobilized over Facebook to engage in some form of political action?

Would you agree or disagree with the following statements? (3 positive / 3 negative)

What is your personal opinion on Facebook as platform for political content and political action?

### Complete Coding Frame

The analysis of the last question of the questionnaire required a content analysis using a coding frame. As it is highly interpretative, the danger of misinterpretation when using content analysis is given. Analyzing a survey response by its written content only is difficult because follow-up questions to clarify a response or to get a more in-depth answer are not possible. Nevertheless, by using qualitative content analysis only selected aspects of the data are focused on, often set by the research question. This has the advantage that the rich data is narrowed down to the aspects relevant to the research question [38]<sup>93</sup>.

This was here achieved by developing a coding frame. A coding frame “is a way of structuring your material”<sup>94</sup>, which includes so-called main categories and subcategories. It acts like a filter that emphasizes the data covered by the categories, ignoring the irrelevant parts. First, the main categories of the coding frame were developed which will determine the focus of the analysis<sup>95</sup>. Here, the main goal was to get a picture of the personal opinions on using Facebook as a political platform and what the respondents think about the relation between using Facebook and political participation. Based on the research focus and a first review of the responses, the relevant topics mentioned in the responses were noted down and clustered. This is a combination of concept-driven (deductive) and data-driven (inductive) determination of codes. First of all, a pilot phase was conducted where different main categories were determined and tried out to see whether all relevant aspects of the material would be captured. After this pilot phase the main categories were adjusted, changed or removed until considered suitable for the coding frame.

The first main category, or dimension, is supposed to capture the overall tone or attitude of a response, not the content. It is useful to get an overview of the general opinion on using Facebook as a political platform. The second category is used when the respondent refers to the informational value of Facebook, which is expressed in sharing or reading information with political content via Facebook. The next category is applied to aspects referring to any negative or positive effects of using Facebook for political participation. Category four is used when the respondent is concerned about a possible misuse of the platform, such as spreading violating views or manipulating content. The last category is used when the respondent voices concerns dealing with the protection and security of personal data on Facebook.

Once the main categories are specified, the subcategories are determined. Subcategories specify the aspects that are captured by the main category. To define the subcategories, responses of the last survey questions are closely reviewed for aspects that might fall into any of the 5 main categories. The selection of the subcategories is data-driven, meaning they are based only on aspects mentioned in the responses. When defining subcategories for a main category, it is important that they are mutually exclusive. One unit of coding should only be assigned to one subcategory of the respective main category;

<sup>92</sup> See Möhring & Schlütz (2003), p. 78

<sup>93</sup> See Schreier (2012), p. 4

<sup>94</sup> Schreier (2012), p. 61

<sup>95</sup> See Schreier (2012), p. 59

otherwise the subcategories will not capture a concrete aspect and will not be useful for the coding frame as shown in Table 7<sup>96</sup>.

After having noted down all relevant topics mentioned in the responses, subcategories were created to capture these topics. Again, a pilot phase trying out the subcategories was conducted. The first main category is only to give an overview of the general attitudes expressed in the responses towards using Facebook as a political platform. This category also highly overlaps with the other four main categories, as it capture a tone or attitude, not the content or a certain aspect. This is

important to keep in mind for the first category. Some of the other categories might also overlap with each other, because the content and aspects they capture are also interlinked. For example, when speaking of sharing political information via Facebook is useful and efficient, but this structure can also be misused for spreading violating views, this response is coded both with code 2.1 and 4.2. But as long as the subcategories within one main category are clearly defined and mutually exclusive, this will not be problematic for the content analysis<sup>97</sup>.

Main Category	Description	Subcategories	Examples
1. Overall tone of response	This code captures the overall tone or attitude of a response.	1.1 Statements mentioning predominately positive aspects and opinions about using Facebook as a political platform 1.2 Statements balancing both positive and negative aspects and opinions about using Facebook as a political platform 1.3 Statements mentioning predominately negative aspects and opinions about using Facebook as a political platform	- "Facebook is a rather useful platform to distribute political information" (1.1) - "It is a good tool to achieve more discussion, attention and empathy" (1.1) - "It is a really effective tool, it started the Egyptian revolution"(1.1)
2. Information values of political content on Facebook	This code is used when the respondent refers to the informational value of Facebook which is expressed in sharing or reading information with political content via Facebook.	2.1 Sharing, spreading, posting political content via FB 2.2 Reading political content on FB 2.3 Political content reaching people on a large scale	- "saw a post of friends to join a demonstration against Nazis in our city" (2.2) - "you can reach a wide audience; Kony 2012" (2.3) - "They should not bother the ones, who dont want to be in touch with politics" (2.2) - "I just share political posts, that i agree with" (2.1) - "good to reach the youth" (2.3)
3. Effects of using Facebook on political participation	The category is used when the respondent refers to any positive or negative effects that the use of FB has on political participation and consequently on political processes.	3.1 (Mass) mobilization 3.2 No effect on political participation 3.3 Political impact / relevance for political reality 3.4 Discussing of political topics 3.5 Organizing political events / meetings	- "If people really want to get mobilized, they have to search the internet themselves" (3.2) - "getting in touch with news, but not getting involved" (3.2) - "Facebook wasn't meant for this use" (3.2) - "people can discuss about political issues, as long as they care about others" (3.4) "If used right it can be an efficient way to mobilize and motivate people" (3.1)
4. Concerns of misuse of Facebook	The category is used when the respondent is concerned about the possible misuse of the platform for spreading violating views or manipulating opinions.	4.1 Manipulation of opinions 4.2 Misusing for spreading violating views 4.3 Controlling/filtering violating content	- "critical medium...sometimes radicals, who try to recruit participants" (4.2) - "It allows to spread false and many rumors" - "information can be misused and misunderstood" (4.2)
5. Data protection	The category is used when the respondent voices concerns that deal with the protection and security of their own data on FB.	5.1 Selling data/information to third parties 5.2 Hacking data	- "Politics is personal and Facebook isn't anymore"(5.3) - " dangerous to post your political statement" (5.3)

<sup>96</sup> See Schreier (2012), p. 75

<sup>97</sup> See Schreier (2012), p. 102

		5.3 Privacy issues and protection of personal data	
--	--	--	--

Table 7: Complete Coding Frame with Examples.

## References

- Kumarak G (2013) Live Blog: Live from the Facebook Phone Event. Retrieved April 20, 2013, from TechCrunch.
- Evans-Cowley J, Hollander J (2010) The New Generation of Public Participation: Internet-based Participation Tools. Plan Pract Res, 25: 397-408.
- Antoci A, Sabatini F, Sodini M (2011) Bowling Alone but Tweeting Together: The Evolution of Human Interaction in the Social Networking Era. Retrieved September 2, 2012, from Social Capital Gateway.
- Putnam RD (2000) Bowling Alone - The Collapse and Revival of American Community. New York: SIMON & SCHUSTER. USA.
- Boulianne S (2009) Does Internet Use Affect Engagement? A Meta-Analysis of Research. Pol Commun, 26: 193-211.
- Tufekci Z, Wilson C (2012) Social Media and the Decision to Participate in Political Protest: Observations From Tahrir Square. J Commun, 62: 363-379.
- Habermas J (1991) The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere. An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society. Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press. UK.
- Castells M (2009) Communication Power. New York: Oxford University Press. Oxford, New York. USA.
- Scholz T (2008) Market Ideology and the Myth of Web 2.0. First Monday, 13: 3-7.
- Jarrett K (2008) Interactivity is Evil! A critical investigation of Web 2.0. First Mon, 13: 3-7.
- Slot M, Frissen V (2007) Users in the 'Golden' Ages of the Information Society. Observatorio (OBS\*) J, 3: 201-224.
- Xenos M, Moy P (2007) Direct and Differential Effects of the Internet on Political and Civic Engagement. J Commun, 57: 707-718.
- Olmstead K, Sasseen J, Mitchell A, Rosenstiel T (2012) Digital: News Gains Audience but Loses More Ground in Chase for Revenue. Retrieved November 26, 2012, from The State of the News Media 2012 - An Annual Report on American Journalism.
- Chadwick A (2009) Web 2.0: New Challenges for the Study of E-Democracy in an Era of Informational Exuberance. I/S: A J Law and Pol for the Information Soc, 5: 9-42.
- Graber D (1996) The New Media and Politics: What does the Future Hold? PS: Pol Sci Polit, 29: 33-36.
- Smith A, Schlozman KL, Verba S, Brady H (2009) The Internet and Civic Engagement. Retrieved June 5, 2012, from Pew Internet & American Life Project.
- Neuman WR (2008) Globalization and the New Media. In W. L. Bennett, D. A. Graber, D. McQuail, & P. Norris, The Politics of News. The News of Politics. Washington: CQ Press. USA.
- Uslaner EM (2001) The Internet and Social Capital. Retrieved September 21, 2012, from College of Behavioral and Social Sciences. University of Maryland. USA.
- Sanders JV (2012) The Participation Divide: Separate and Unequal in Digital Media? Retrieved November 28, 2012, from The Texas Observer.
- Dalton RJ (2008) The Good Citizen. How a Younger Generation is reshaping American Politics. Washington, D.C.: CQ Press. USA.
- Christensen HS (2011) Political activities on the Internet: Slacktivism or political participation by other means? First Mon, 16: 2-7.
- Dahlgren P (2005) The Internet, Public Sphere, and Political Communication: Dispersion and Deliberation. Pol Commun, 22, 147-162.
- Coleman J (1990) Chapter 12: Social Capital. In J. Coleman, The Foundations of Social Theory. Cambridge: Harvard University Press. UK.
- Causes (2012) Abgerufen am 19. November 2012 von Causes.
- Rainie L, Smith A (2012) Politics on Social Networking Sites. Retrieved November 16, 2012, from Pew Internet & American Life Project.
- U.S. Politics on Facebook. (2012, November 8). Post on "U.S. Politics on Facebook" Wall. Retrieved November 8, 2012, from U.S. Politics on Facebook.
- Zhang W, Johnson TJ, Seltzer T, Bichard SL (2010) The Revolution Will be Networked : The Influence of Social Networking Sites on Political Attitudes and Behavior. Soc Sci Comp Rev, 28: 75-92.
- Vesnic-Alujevic L (2012) Political participation and web 2.0 in Europe: A case study of Facebook. Pub Rel Rev 38: 466-470.
- Inglehart R, Welzel C (2005) A Revised Theory of Modernization. In R. Inglehart, & C. Welzel, Modernization, Cultural Change, and Democracy. The Human Development Sequence. New York: Cambridge University Press. UK.
- Putnam RD (1995) Bowling Alone: America's Declining Social Capital. J Dem 6: 65-78.
- Gil de Zúñiga H, Jung N, Valenzuela S (2012) Social Media Use for News and Individuals' Social Capital, Civic Engagement and Political Participation. J Comp-Med Commun 17: 319-336.
- Schlozman, K. L., Verba, S., & Brady, H. (2010). Weapons of the Strong? Participatory Inequality and the Internet. Persp Pol, 8: 487-509.
- Baumgartner JC, Morris JS (2010) My Face Tube Politics: Social Networking Web Sites and Political Engagement of Young Adults. Soc Sci Comp Rev, 28: 24-44.
- Boyd D (2008) Can Social Network Sites Enable Political Action? In A. Fine, M. Sifry, & A. R. Levy (Eds.), Rebooting America. Creative Commons.
- Livingstone S (2011) Internet, Children and Youth. In M. Consalvo, & C. Ess (Eds.), The Handbook of Internet Studies. West Sussex: Wiley-Blackwell. UK.
- Caesar I (2012) Social Web - politische und gesellschaftliche Partizipation im Netz. Beobachtungen und Prognosen. Berlin: Simon Verlag für Bibliothekswissen.
- Mejias UA (2010) The limits of networks as models for organizing the social. New Med Soc, 12: 603-617.
- Schreier M (2012) Qualitative Content Analysis in Practice. London: SAGE Publications. UK.