Chapter 2
E-Democracy: Conceptual Foundations and Recent Trends

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Abstract Lindner and Aichholzer provide an introductory overview of the theoretical and conceptual foundations of electronic democracy, thereby providing analytical insights on the interplay between Internet-based communication and democratic processes. To this end, different normative views, aims and approaches of e-democracy are presented and systematically related to the central tenets of the main models of democracy. As e-participation plays an essential role in most conceptions of e-democracy, a typology of Internet-based citizen involvement is developed, thereby structuring the diversity of e-participation practices. Given the growing relevance of Web 2.0 and social media, the chapter discusses to which degree they are able to support core democratic functions of public communication—namely public critique, legitimation, and integration—by exploring the effects of social media usage on the quality of deliberation, political activism and political behaviour. In view of phenomena such as "personalised politics", echo chambers and deliberate misinformation, the authors call for effective political, educational and regulatory responses to the democratic challenges social media increasingly pose.

2.1 Organisation and Theoretical Framework

This chapter provides an introductory overview of the basic concepts, which will be applied in the ensuing chapters of this volume. This includes a brief introduction of the key characteristics of liberal, participatory and deliberative democracy, with the aim of providing conceptual orientation regarding the different concepts of e-democracy that will be dealt with in greater detail in this book. A comprehensive account and discussion of the rich political and theoretical debates on democracy is

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neither feasible in the context of this analysis, nor would such an exercise advance our understanding of potentially fruitful e-democratic practices in Europe. The chapter continues with a conceptual examination of the democracy-related potential of new information and communication technologies (ICT) and explicates the various dimensions of e-democracy, before it turns to the anchoring of participatory democracy in European Union (EU)-level legal frameworks. We continue with an assessment of social media, which are increasingly receiving political and scholarly attention (Sect. 2.2). As the role of social media for e-democracy is currently the focus of both research and political debate, the relevance of social media for political communication is also dealt with briefly in the chapter on the European public sphere (Chap. 3) and is presented with regard to its potential for e-participation in the chapter on "digital tools" (Chap. 4). Apart from touching on specific aspects of social media, we deem it to be necessary to enter into the more general discussion on the expectations and the (assumed or observable) potential of social media to induce fundamental changes to political communication, which can be regarded as introducing new modes of the political or the public sphere. The chapter on conceptual foundations is closed by summarising the most relevant findings and conclusions.

It was a challenge to present the results of the literature review, covering the broad scope of articles and books and at the same time delivering a concise and concentrated text. For this purpose, we aimed to avoid lengthy introductions of basic concepts (e.g., the public sphere) as far as possible, as this has already been dealt with in Lindner et al. (2016b). We also tried to avoid repetition of discussions or controversies already expanded upon in this previous publication.

2.1.1 Introduction of Basic Concepts

Since the early days of the World Wide Web, the idea of using new media for political participation and democratic practices has been framed as novel, modern and highly innovative. While these claims seem justified with regard to the information and communication technologies, which enable Internet-based democratic processes, it is important to keep in mind that the different proposals for electronic democracy draw on—explicitly or implicitly—well-established concepts of democratic theory. In this sense, the normative views, aims and approaches represented by the different conceptualisations of e-democracy are based on, and can thus be traced back to, the fundamental tenets of democratic theory. As is the case with any normative conception of democracy, each variant of Internet-based democracy is driven and inspired by a specific understanding of an ideal-typical view of the political community and the political decision-making process. What are the main objectives of democracy? Depending on the normative position, the answers to this question will be quite different. Some views of democracy put their main emphasis on a high degree of representativeness, others promote the protection of fundamental rights and freedoms, while others strive for inclusive and comprehensive involvement of citizens (Schmidt 2008: 236f.). With the aim of clarifying these conceptual

and normative relationships, the following will provide a brief overview of the main models of democracy.

If the discussion of procedural variants and details are set aside in favour of a higher-level of abstraction, the large number of different normative understandings of democracy can be related to the essence of three ideal-typical models of democracy: the liberal, the republican (or participatory) and the deliberative model (cf. Habermas 1992; Held 2006; Lembcke et al. 2012: 16–26; Schmidt 2008: 236–253; Schultze 2004: 125). These three models can be distinguished according to their diverging assumptions of human nature, the ascribed role of the individual in relation to society and citizenship, and the understanding of civil liberty. The following overview of the three main models is mainly based on Habermas (1992).

2.1.1.1 The Liberal Model of Democracy

Most democratic systems in the world are based on key elements of the liberal model. A chief characteristic of this model is its strong emphasis on procedures. Instead of attempting to realise a predefined form of society, this model concentrates on processes and institutions that ensure generally binding decision-making. By and large, the democratic process is conceptualised as a market-like competition between strategic actors, such as interest groups, political parties and elites. The citizen is conceptualised as a consumer whose political participation is more or less limited to the periodic expression of individual preferences. Processes of political will-formation, based on public debate and learning, do not receive heightened attention in this model. Thus, the political will of the democratic entity is understood as the result of the interplay of competing interests and the aggregation of individual voter preferences. In the liberal model, the status of the citizen and his/her private sphere are protected by a number of fundamental, defensive rights against arbitrary state intrusion.

2.1.1.2 The Republican or Participatory Model

Compared to the liberal model, the participatory model of democracy is highly demanding for its citizens. It requires a community which shares a broad set of common values and citizens who are able and willing to overcome the pursuit of individual interests in favour of an orientation towards the common good. The model's understanding of the political reaches far beyond mere procedures for collective decision-making. Instead, the political process is conceptualised as the central medium through which society is constituted and becomes aware of itself as a community. Here, the liberal model's scepticism towards political participation is replaced by the primacy of citizen involvement. Collective processes of will-formation between free and equal citizens are seen as a value in itself, and participation is understood as a holistic and integral feature of life. The state is assigned

primarily with the function of guaranteeing processes of inclusive involvement and not so much the protection of individual rights.

2.1.1.3 The Deliberative Model of Democracy

The deliberative model is closely related to the participatory model but incorporates important elements of the liberal model. A specific and demanding understanding of the communication conditions under which processes of public will-formation are performed lies at the centre of this third ideal-typical model. It is a result of a critical analysis of both the liberal and the participatory models: While the first privileges individual autonomy in order to prevent the "tyranny of the majority", the second puts popular sovereignty on centre stage. Instead of pitching individual rights and popular sovereignty against one another, both aims receive equal weight in the deliberative model. The decisive integrative step is the establishment of sophisticated conditions for rational and fair public deliberation. Ideally, these conditions should include openness to all potential participants and points of view, reasoning and equal and free speech. In contrast to the participatory model, this procedural orientation does not require a far-reaching ex ante agreement on a certain form of society or other substantive sources of legitimacy, such as the nation or a founding myth. The questions of which norms should be constitutive for the community are referred to the processes of public deliberation. At the same time, the deliberative model incorporates constitutionalism and the guarantee of individual rights and freedoms. Thus, in the deliberative model, political power remains tied to the institutions of the constitutional state and its established procedures for decision-making. The idea of popular sovereignty is realised through rational deliberations in the public sphere and in the networks of civil society organisations, which exercise their communicative power to influence the political decision-making system. In Chap. 3, the role of the public sphere for the democratic process is outlined in greater detail.

In comparative terms, both the participatory and the deliberative models see participation as a value in itself. Or put differently, they place the main focus on the input side of democratic decision-making, sharing the hope of changing the political process through more, inclusive and better participation and deliberation, ultimately aiming to "democratize democracy" (Schmidt 2008: 236ff.). In contrast, the liberal model is preoccupied with the output dimension, aiming to achieve stability and efficient decision-making.

The main differences of these and related models can be mapped in a two-dimensional space, depicting the chief aim of the democratic process (efficiency vs. inclusiveness) and the preferred mode of decision-making (indirect/representative vs. direct/plebiscitary) (Fig. 2.1). The three main models of democracy can be located in this two-dimensional space according to their basic normative orientations. Other sub-variants of democracy, such as competitive, participative or libertarian democracy, and so on, can be grouped around the three models accordingly (Lindner et al. 2010: 12).

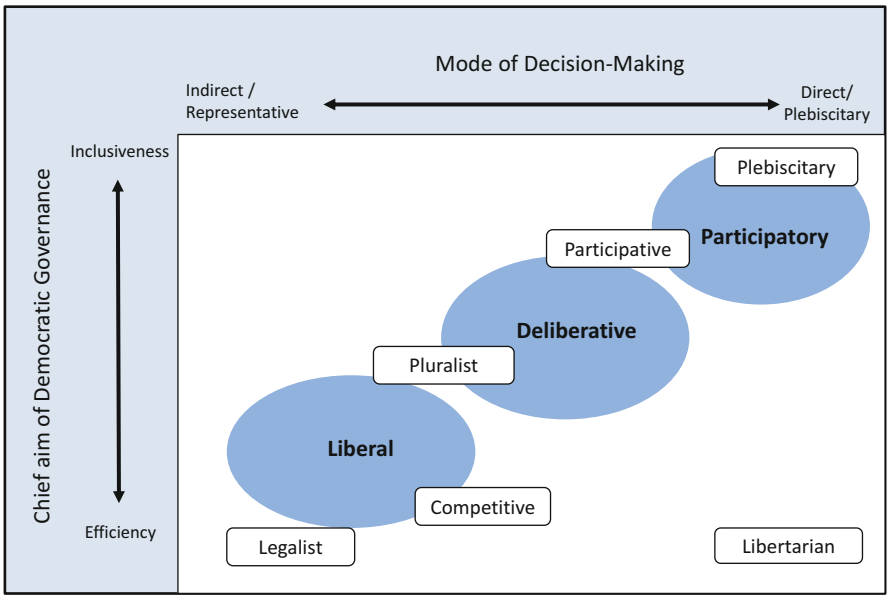

Fig. 2.1 Models of democracy: Aims and preferred mode of decision-making. Source: Based on Lindner (2007: 80) and van Dijk (2012: 51ff.)

The purpose of the two-dimensional space is to provide some basic orientation with regard to the different understandings of democracy in general and the Internet-based variants in particular:

> Arguably, preferences for a certain model of democracy will most likely determine the type of e-democracy a proponent seeks to establish. For instance, if a promoter of e-democracy belongs to the supporters of deliberative democracy, he or she will probably prefer a mix of representative and plebiscitary modes of online democratic decision-making and put special emphasis on Internet-based discussion fora, whereas members of the liberal camp are likely to favour forms of online participation that reflect the principles of representative democracy. Against this background, the disappointment about the e-democratic practices of governments which is frequently expressed by observers and promoters of e-democracy can be better understood and put into perspective. (Lindner et al. 2010: 14).

2.1.2 The Concept and Definition of e-Democracy

Since the early 1960s, futurists and scholars alike have heralded new ICT as carrying massive potential to transform existing practices of political communication and political systems (cf. McLuhan 1964). Over the years, reflections gave rise to a fast-extending interdisciplinary discourse and a continuously growing, meanwhile enormous body of literature dealing with a wide range of issues and implications of ICT for the political process in both theory and practice. Umbrella terms most often used

to signify the subject are "electronic or e-democracy" (cf. Schaal 2016) and "digital democracy" (cf. Hague and Loader 1999; Hacker and van Dijk 2000a), whereas the use of the terms "teledemocracy" (cf. Becker 1981), "virtual democracy" or "cyberdemocracy" was largely confined to earlier stages of the debate. Various attempts have been made to structure the historical evolution of this discourse and the different perspectives (cf. Hagen 1997; Vedel 2006; Lindner 2007; Oblak Črnič 2012; Santos and Tonelli 2014).

However, despite the long history of these concepts and the ideas behind them, no common nomenclature has been developed to date, and generally agreed upon definitions are lacking. Among the numerous more or less different conceptions, one can discern definitions with a normative flavour as well as more neutral ones. And each of these definitions can be associated with one of the basic models of democracy outlined above. In the following, we will briefly review some of these to establish the basic concepts and outline the conceptual framework for our analysis of digital tools and systems.

A collection of contributions, which focus both on theoretical and practical issues involved with the relationship between new media and democracy, offers an authoritative starting point (Hacker and van Dijk 2000a). The editors introduce "digital democracy" as the key concept, providing a definition with normative ingredients:

> Digital democracy is the use of information and communication technology (ICT) and computer-mediated communication (CMC) in all kinds of media (e.g. the internet, interactive broadcasting and digital telephony) for purposes of enhancing political democracy or the participation of citizens in democratic communication. (Hacker and van Dijk 2000b: 1)

Just a few lines later they rephrase this conceptualisation in more neutral terms: "We define digital democracy as a *collection of attempts to practise democracy without the limits of time, space and other physical conditions, using ICT or CMC instead, as an addition, not a replacement for traditional 'analogue' political practices*."

In a more recent contribution, van Dijk (2012: 51) provides a more concise version of the earlier definition: "Digital democracy can be defined as the *pursuit and the practice of democracy in whatever view using digital media in online and offline political communication*. The online–offline distinction should be added because political activities are not only happening on the internet . . ." (p. 51f.).

Both Hacker and van Dijk argue in favour of the term "digital democracy" as preferable to all other related concepts for various reasons. However, this does not mean that digital democracy will replace the use of traditional communication media and face-to-face communication. Empirically, various combinations of virtual and traditional media are currently the most commonly observed. Although they decline the term "electronic democracy" for being too general (since some old media of broadcasting or telephony were also electronic), other more recent conceptions suggest "electronic or e-democracy" as synonymous terms for "digital democracy". For example, Päivärinta and Øystein's (2006: 818) conception sounds very similar: "*E-democracy refers to the use of information and communication technology (ICT) in political debates and decision-making processes, complementing or contrasting*

traditional means of communications, such as face-to-face interaction or one-way mass media."

Coleman and Norris (2005) also confirm the preference for "e-democracy" as the key concept. Having presented a range of definitions of e-democracy, they point out an essential commonality and opt for a wide, again normative, understanding of the notion: "*A common thread . . . is the assumption that e-democracy has something to do with the use of information and communication technologies (ICT) to enhance democratic structures and processes*" (p. 6ff.) . . . "*E-democracy is both top-down and bottom-up; it is both about the institutional processes of hierarchies and the more fluid arrangements of networks*" (p. 32).

In view of the different definitions and terminologies presented in the literature, we will use the terms "e-democracy" and "digital democracy" interchangeably as key concepts in our analysis of digital tools and systems for strengthening participatory and direct democracy.

A milestone among political frameworks on e-democracy is the Council of Europe's Recommendation of the Committee of Ministers to Member States on electronic democracy (e-democracy). Its core consists of 12 recommendations, including the following two basic ones: "*The Committee of Ministers, in accordance with Article 15.b of the Statute of the Council of Europe [. . .]. Recommends that Member States: 1. consider making use of the opportunities afforded by e-democracy to strengthen democracy, democratic institutions and democratic processes; 2. consider and implement e-democracy as the support and enhancement of democracy, democratic institutions and democratic processes by means of ICT, and linked to the engagement and re-engagement of citizens in democracy; [. . .]*" (Council of Europe 2009: 5, 7). The Appendix to Recommendation CM/Rec (2009)1 includes a long list of 80 "Principles of e-democracy" and 102 "Guidelines". To mention two fundamental principles: *When introducing or taking steps to improve electronic democracy, stakeholders should take account of the following principles of e-democracy:*

- *E-democracy, as the support and enhancement of democracy, democratic institutions and democratic processes by means of ICT, is above all about democracy. Its main objective is the electronic support of democracy.*
- *E-democracy is one of several strategies for supporting democracy, democratic institutions and democratic processes and spreading democratic values. It is additional, complementary to, and interlinked with traditional processes of democracy. Each process has its merits: none is universally applicable. . . ." (Council of Europe 2009: 11).* Among the guidelines the document also points out different "sectors of e-democracy" (including further explications in later paragraphs): *"E-democracy encompasses, in particular, e-parliament, e-legislation, e-justice, e-mediation, e-environment, e-election, e-referendum, e-initiative, e-voting, e-consultation, e-petitioning, e-campaigning, e-polling and e-surveying; it makes use of e-participation, e-deliberation and e-forums* (Council of Europe 2009: 15).

Building on these contributions, we can briefly summarise our use of the two key concepts of e-democracy and e-participation as follows: We understand e-democracy as the practice of democracy with the support of digital media in political communication and participation. E-participation encompasses all forms of political participation, making use of digital media, including both formally institutionalised mechanisms and informal civic engagement.

2.1.3 Democracy-Related Potential of Information and Communication Technologies

Debates on e-democracy have essentially been nourished by various expectations about the potential of new ICT to substantially change the conditions of political communication and democratic practices. The numerous claims that have been made about effects of new ICT on democracy have been concisely summarised by Hacker and van Dijk (2000b: 4) as follows:

1. *ICT increases the scale and speed of providing information. This helps create more informed citizens;*
2. *Political participation is made easier and certain obstacles like apathy, shyness, disabilities, time, etc., can be lessened;*
3. *CMC creates new ways of organizing with subject-specific groups for discussion, cheap distribution costs, etc.;*
4. *The Net allows new political communities to arise free from state intervention;*
5. *A hierarchical political system becomes more horizontal by increasing political CMC;*
6. *Citizens will have more voice in creating agendas for government;*
7. *CMC will help remove distorting mediators like journalists, representatives and parties;*
8. *Politics will be able to respond more directly to citizen concerns as ICT and CMC enable a kind of political marketing research; and*
9. *ICT and CMC will help resolve problems of representative democracy such as territorial bases of constituencies, etc.*

However, the relationship between the use of new technologies and democratic politics is more complex and contested, since assessments of effects on democracy depend on the model of democracy they relate to. From early on, a polarity of perspectives can be observed in different shapes: Van Dijk (1999: 44ff.) contrasts views, which expect a strengthening of direct democracy and a rebirth of the Athenian agora with the views of defenders of representative democracy who fear the turn to a *push-button-democracy*. Others point to the dichotomy between expected improvements in the responsiveness of political institutions and the enhancement of direct citizen participation in public affairs versus fears of

diminishing deliberation and an impoverishment of the political debate (Dutton 1999: 222). Van Dijk (2012: 50ff.) observes four waves of utopian visions:

1. The "teledemocracy" perspective in the 1980s, for example, Barber (1984), expecting increased equality in access to information, more active public participation and debate and stimulating electronic polling and voting.
2. "Virtual community" perspectives in the early 1990s, for example, Rheingold (1993) with hopes of regaining community experience lost in modernisation processes.
3. Visions of a "new democracy" around the turn of the century, expecting a broadening of participation in democratic processes through Internet-supported means.
4. Currently popular "Web 2.0" or social media perspectives, heralding an increase of citizen engagement in policymaking and democratic life in a great variety of new formats.

In contrast to these highly optimistic visions of new media effects, various dystopian perspectives, which depict potential risks to democracy, have been articulated (cf. van Dijk 2012: 50ff.): For example, rather pessimistic expectations with regard to direct democracy in view of the complexity of modern societies; digital tools would speed up deliberation to a superficial level; they would support populism, increase information inequality, and be incapable of countering a basic lack of political motivation among the citizenry; the Internet would even be more concentrated than traditional media and the ease of placing messages on the Internet would not be matched by similar options of being heard. Finally, a serious threat that has been gaining special attention in connection with dramatic events of political extremism in the recent past is the increased radicalisation and mobilisation potential of the Internet (von Behr et al. 2013). In addition to social media's role in generating "echo-chambers", hypothesised causal mechanisms for such effects include the lowering of transaction costs and promoting homophilous sorting, that is, allowing birds of a feather to flock together (cf. Farrell 2014). Such outcomes can be strengthened by a so-called "filter bubble" (Pariser 2011), created by search algorithms, which select results on the basis of information on prior search behaviour and exclude results which disagree with the user's preferences and viewpoints.

The various conceptions of democracy introduced above (Fig. 2.1) are further differentiated into six ideal-typical sub-models or variants with different views of the roles and implications of new media by van Dijk (2012: 51ff.):

1. *Legalist Democracy*: The classical Western-type procedural view of democracy as defined by the constitution and other basic laws. The role of new media is mainly to enhance information provision by appropriate measures and information retrieval by citizens.
2. *Competitive Democracy*: Parties and leaders competing for the electorate, focused on representation and efficient decision-making. The primary use of ICT is for information and election campaigns.

3. *Plebiscitary Democracy*: Puts forms of direct-democratic decision-making such as plebiscites and referenda centre stage. Here, ICT is pivotal for holding online polls, referenda and discussions.
4. *Pluralist Democracy*: Pluralism in political processes and discussion is seen as most important, combining practices of direct and representative democracy. There are plenty of options for support by ICT, especially for discussions and debates. *Deliberative democracy* shares much with the pluralist model and focuses still more on open and free exchange on political issues. The importance of digital media is especially seen in their functions for online discussions.
5. *Participative Democracy*: The focus is on promoting active citizenship, political opinion formation on a broad scale, based on the principle of combining direct and representative democracy. ICT is important for many functions, from public debates and education to all kinds of participation, access for all being a value.
6. *Libertarian Democracy*: Shares some views with the pluralist and plebiscitarian visions and focuses *on autonomous politics by citizens in their own associations* (p. 53). Digital media are especially relevant in their networking functions, among others even bypassing institutional politics with Web 2.0 applications and content generated and shared by citizens.

These models are mapped on the two-dimensional space of democratic processes and modes of decision-making provided in Fig. 2.1.

Today, the concept of e-democracy, at least in terms of online engagement of the public in political decision-making, draws mainly on the concepts of participatory democracy and deliberative democracy. Advocates of participatory democracy emphasise the intrinsic value of political participation and its contribution to the social integration of liberal societies. In contemporary liberal democracies, however, political participation is primarily realised in the form of parliamentary and representative democratic systems, in which formal participation of the demos is largely concentrated on casting votes in elections. As outlined above, from the perspective of liberal democratic theory, the instrumental functions of political participation—legitimate selection of representatives, legitimate distribution and limitation of political power, and efficient decision-making—are in the foreground. The relation between citizen participation and democratic legitimacy must also be seen in the light of Scharpf's (1999) distinction between input and output legitimacy: the former depends on mechanisms linking decisions in the political system to the citizens' will, the latter on policy outcomes, which effectively achieve the goals of a common concern.

Since the mid-1990s, and reinforced with the advent of Web 2.0, libertarianism and a normative individualism, based on the ideal of voluntaristic individual action, have become more and more influential. In the current debate on e-democracy, two concepts have gained increasing importance: "*wikidemocracy*" and "*liquid democracy*" (cf. Schaal 2016). Noveck (2009), who has elaborated on wikidemocracy in depth, uses the terms "collaborative democracy" and "wikigovernment" largely synonymously to refer to this concept. Digital media play a crucial role in these models, since they stand for new, highly decentralised modes and procedures of

decision-making, which have only become possible on a large scale through the Internet. Wikidemocracy as well as liquid democracy are normatively based on the vision of a voluntarist, network-type collaboration of peers, in which the co-creation of ideas and content is a guiding ideal. The idea of decentralised "peer networks" as the cornerstone of a new political worldview, named "peer progressivism", has been elaborated and propagated to become a new social movement by Steven Johnson (2012).

Views of *wikidemocracy* imagine citizens as individuals engaged in multiple networks, either from a communitarian perspective as new forms of community-building, or in a liberal-libertarian version with a focus on decentralised organisation mediated by ever increasing capacities of information processing. In the latter view, participation is primarily seen as being of instrumental value, autonomy-enhancing and bringing about better collective decisions. According to Schaal (2016: 287), the innovative contribution of *wikigovernment,* as coined by Noveck (2009), is to democratise the throughput sphere of policymaking in liberal-representative democracies, for example, in the specification of laws and decrees, supported by the Internet and "civic software", such as wikis. The idea is to raise the epistemic quality of decisions by using the "wisdom of crowds". However, two critical points include the violation of the principle of political equality because of the involved issue-dependent restriction of participants, and unresolved issues of privacy and data protection (Schaal 2016: 294 f.).

Liquid democracy has received some public attention, especially in Germany (Adler 2018), propagated as a software-based model of internal opinion formation by the Pirate Party (see Chap. 9). The concept of liquid democracy, however, has potential beyond party politics as an innovative model of democratic decision-making, which bridges direct and representative democracy by rendering the boundary between representation and direct democratic input more "liquid". Rooted in the theory of delegated voting, this model only became realisable with the emergence of Web 2.0 technologies and is based on the principle of delegating one's voice to other people of trust. In contrast to classical representation, this form is conditional, plural, limited by issue or time and reversible. In all political decisions, every citizen can decide between direct use of his/her voice or delegation (Schaal 2016: 292). Proponents of this model regard it as an adequate response to two problems: to use competent delegates to improve decision quality, and to counter political alienation by a relationship of trust. Criticisms brought forward against the liquid democracy model include insufficient theoretical elaboration, the tension between demands of aggregative and deliberative democracy, and the lack of viable suggestions for its institutionalisation.

2.1.4 Dimensions of e-Democracy

E-democracy, as defined above, represents a wide variety of uses of ICT in support of democratic communication, and includes all levels and modes of involvement of

the public (individual citizens, informal groups and civil society organisations). The scope reaches from more passive modes of involvement, such as social media or online monitoring for purposes of informing oneself about developments in society, making processes of decision-making and underlying documents accessible and transparent, to more active and cooperative modes, such as involving citizens in decision-making by providing for online voting procedures as well as online spaces for public consultation, debate on salient political issues and co-writing of political documents.

Various attempts have been made to bring some structure into the diverse forms and functions of ICT use in democratic practice.

For example, van Dijk (2012: 54 f.) provides a table listing 13 categories of *eParticipation* across five stages of the policy cycle (however, this includes two categories of *eGovernment services* because his concept of *eParticipation* goes beyond e-democracy and extends to the relationship of citizens with public administrations). Santos and Tonelli (2014: 6) suggested another set of concepts for describing e-democracy, adding a number of *sectors*, such as *e-legislation*, *e-parliament* or *e-polling*, which can be regarded as subcategories. Hoff and Scheele (2014) provide a theoretical framework that can be used to analyse all types of political and administrative web applications and demonstrate its potential with an analysis of e-democracy at the local level in Denmark.

Speaking of electronic or in short "e-participation", we prefer an understanding of Internet-based political participation in the wider sense, including both formally institutionalised mechanisms and informal civic engagement. An elaborate conceptual and empirical analysis by Gibson and Cantijoch underlines the multidimensional nature of e-participation. *(O)ffline types of political engagement are re-emerging online* (Gibson and Cantijoch 2013: 714), which tend to include more and more social-media based political activities (e.g. posting to political blogs), and also lead to novel forms of engagement such as combined offline and online participation.

Lindner et al. (2016a) distinguished three overarching dimensions of e-democracy by separating issues of the electronic public sphere (in brief: e-public) from issues of electronic participation (e-participation) in its manifold forms, and electronic voting (e-voting) as a category sui generis. The e-participation landscape was structured by level of participation (information, communication and collaboration), relevance across the policy cycle (problem definition, agenda setting, decision-making and policy formulation, policy implementation, policy evaluation), and top-down organisation (government-centric) versus bottom-up (citizen-centric). Top-down forms are initiated, organised, implemented or sponsored by governments, whereas bottom-up types of e-participation are activities initiated or carried out by citizens and civil society actors (Aichholzer and Strauß 2016: 59–62). Related concepts in use are the distinction between *invited* versus *uninvited* participation (cf. Wehling 2012). Kersting uses two similar concepts, "invented" and "invited space", and offers a useful model integrating a variety of online and offline participation formats divided into four different political spheres: participation in representative democracy,

Table 2.1 Functions, types and tools of e-participation

Function of Citizen Involvement	Type of E-participation	Tools
Monitoring	• E-information • E-deliberation • E-complaints	• Tools for monitoring, questioning and advising political representatives
Agenda setting	• E-petitions • E-initiatives • E-campaigning	• Citizen initiatives • E-petition
Decision-making	• E-consultations • E-participatory budgeting • E-voting	• Crowdsourcing for law proposals • Crowdsourcing for policymaking • Internet consultation, collaborative decision-making within political parties • Consultative participatory budgeting • Participatory budgeting • E-voting

participation in direct democracy, deliberative participation and demonstrative participation (Kersting 2013: 272 f.).

For the purposes of structuring the diversity of e-participation practices, we suggest a simple threefold structure of major digital tools used in different types of participation, serving different functions of citizen involvement, as displayed in Table 2.1.

This conceptualisation of the dimensions of e-democracy was applied to guide the literature review as well as the selection of good practice cases for the case studies. The different types of e-participation have been categorised according to their most typical function in citizen involvement but can also play a role for a different function.

2.1.5 Participatory Democracy in European Union Legal Frameworks

Long-term trends of a transformation of political participation, together with a persistent distance and mistrust of EU citizens towards EU institutions, have called for suitable counterstrategies. Starting more than a decade ago, important steps have been taken in order to better connect European institutions and representatives with the European citizenry and civil society (Lindner et al. 2016b: 7–9). Various reforms claiming to open European governance to civil society and improve opportunities for participation at EU level have since been initiated. An early document of this strategic turn, the White Paper on European Governance, succinctly summarises the goal:

> Democratic institutions and the representatives of the people, at both national and European levels, can and must try to connect Europe with its citizens. This is the starting condition for more effective and relevant policies. (...) The White Paper proposes opening up the policy-

> making process to get more people and organisations involved in shaping and delivering EU policy. It promotes greater openness, accountability and responsibility for all those involved. (EC 2001: 3).

The Treaty of Lisbon has put special emphasis on strengthening democratic elements in the EU. It has, among other things, introduced the European Citizens' Initiative (ECI) as an EU-wide instrument of participatory democracy with the potential to stimulate public debate on European issues and to involve European citizens and organised civil society in policymaking at the EU level. As a key element within the architecture of participatory democracy, it complements the general commitment to representative democracy in the institutions of the EU. Table 2.2 presents a summary of the Treaty's formal provisions for direct participation in the democratic life of the EU.

In addition to the ECI, which occupies a central position, the main features of the EU's provisions for participatory democracy are enshrined in explicit citizens' rights for direct participation, in petition rights for every citizen, as well as in the obligations of EU institutions to provide for horizontal and vertical civil dialogues and consultation procedures.

Table 2.2 A holistic view of participatory democracy elements enshrined in EU norms

Art 10.3 TEU/Art 15 TFEU "Citizen Centered Democracy" Every citizen shall have the right to participate in the democratic life of the Union. Decisions shall be taken as openly and as closely as possible to the citizens.	Art 11.1 TEU "Horizontal Civil Dialogue" The institutions shall, by appropriate means, give citizens and representative associations the opportunity to make known and publicly exchange their views in all areas of Union action.	Art 11.2 TEU/Art 16 TFEU "Vertical Civil Dialogue" The institutions shall maintain an open, transparent and regular dialogue with representative associations and civil society.
Art 11.3 TEU "Consultation Procedure" The European Commission shall carry out broad consultations with parties concerned in order to ensure that the Union's actions are coherent and transparent.	Art 11.4 TEU "European Citizens' Initiative" (. . .) one million (. . .) of (7) Member States may take the initiative of inviting the EC, within the framework of its powers, to submit (. . .) where citizens consider (. . .) to implement treaties.	Art 17.1 TFEU "Spiritual Dialogue Partners" The Union respects and does not prejudice the status (. . .) of churches and religious associations or communities in the Member States.
Art. 17.2 TFEU "Secular Dialogue Partners" The Union equally respects the status under national law of philosophical and non-confessional organisations.	Art. 17.3 TFEU "Dialogue of Values" Recognising their identity and (. . .) contribution, the Union shall maintain an open, transparent and regular dialogue with these churches and organisations.	Art 24 TFEU/Art. 44 ChFR "Petition Right" Every citizen shall have the right to petition the European Parliament (. . .). Every Citizen shall have the right to apply to the Ombudsman (. . .).

TEU consolidated version of the Treaty on European Union, *TFEU* consolidated version of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union, *ChFR* EU Charter of Fundamental Rights
Source: Pichler (2011: 22)

The role of public participation and citizen engagement in EU governance has clearly grown in importance over the past decade. Major steps were the introduction of participatory democracy as a principle into the Constitutional Treaty, signed in Rome in December 2004, and of the relevant Article on the European Citizens' Initiative—although without its original heading of "Participatory Democracy"—into the Lisbon Treaty; an upswing of "civil society" consultations, increasingly via the Internet, through a so-called *transparent consultation mechanism* by European institutions; the EC's launch of a "Plan D for democracy, dialogue and debate" in 2005 aiming to *go local, listen to and engage with citizens*; a White Paper on the European Communication Policy with a similar mission; two large-scale meetings for exchange between civil society organisations and MEPs in the European Parliament in 2007 and 2009 ("European Agora"); the launch of a Green Paper on the European Transparency Initiative; and a proposal for a Directive on the European Citizens' Initiative (cf. Saurugger 2010; EC 2010). In 2011, the European Parliament held Citizens' Agora processes on "The Economic and Financial Crisis and New Forms of Poverty" and, in November 2013, a "Citizens' Agora on Youth Unemployment". This noteworthy upgrade of participatory elements represents a major shift in the governance regime of the European Union.

According to Saurugger (2010), a *participatory turn* emerged in the official discourse at EU level during the 1990s and was gradually transformed into a norm in basic documents and into governance reform programmes. However, the actual quality and scope of the postulated *participatory turn* is still contested and is ambiguous in its implementation. It is questionable whether the turn has effectively taken place to the same extent in practice as in rhetoric (Kohler-Koch and Quittkat 2013; Lindner et al. 2016b). Nevertheless, the participative democracy discourse has also found some manifestations in the Member States, as traditional governance regimes have been questioned and participatory elements have received more attention there. The upgrading of participation at both EU and national levels has not only been a reaction to perceived "democratic deficits" and a widening cleavage between citizens and EU institutions. There is also a growing demand for the knowledge and expertise required to cope with increasing problem complexity in the multilevel governance of advanced societies. This change encourages citizen participation because of the benefits of inputs, which are functional for enhanced problem-solving and the quality of decisions. Some commentators argue that participation has even become both a moralising discourse, expecting responsible citizens to actively contribute to problem-solving, and a normative discourse, treating participation as a means to cure the alienation between governments and the governed (Smith and Dalakiouridou 2009: 3; Jessop 2003). The thriving availability of new electronic means is certainly reinforcing the upswing of the participation discourse and to some extent also participation practice at the EU level.

2.2 Web 2.0 and Social Media: Threats and Promises for Democratic Discourse

2.2.1 Introduction

The debate about the democratic or political effects of new Internet-based modes of communication has always been characterised by a polarisation between far-reaching positive and optimistic expectations on the one side, and pessimistic expectations of detrimental effects on democratic structures and processes on the other. This discursive feature also applies to discussions around the most recent format of Internet communication, which is the use of social media by all kinds of political actors. Particularly in view of the campaign dynamics in a number of recent elections and referenda, most notably the 2016 referendum on UK's membership of the European Union and the US presidential elections of 2016 (Schill and Hendricks 2018), social media are currently receiving additional political and scholarly attention.

The focus of this section is the relationship between the use of social media, political communication and democratic politics in general. In accordance with the identified literature, special emphasis will be directed towards citizen participation, the role of interest groups, social movements, politicians/parliamentarians and potentially damaging effects for discourse and democratic institutions. The relevance of social media will also be briefly touched upon from a specific perspective in the following chapter on the European public sphere (Chap. 3) and in the chapter dedicated to a differentiated exploration of the scope of "tools" available for e-participation activities (Chap. 4).

The question of social media's impact on and relevance for political communication and democracy is triggered by a number of phenomena: Firstly, social media are the newest wave of socio-technical innovation in the field of Internet-based communication, making available new and different kinds of opportunities for users to interact online (Boulianne 2015: 524). Secondly, social media and social networking sites attract extremely high user numbers. The social networking site Facebook has over 1 billion users worldwide. Youtube, Facebook, Wikipedia, Twitter and Instagram are among the most popular platforms in the world (Alexa 2019). And thirdly, numerous political events involving social media have heightened interest in the interplay of politics and the use of social media for political purposes (Gibson 2014: 2; Sandoval-Almazan and Gil-Garcia 2014: 365). With regard to political upheavals, protest movements and campaigns, such as the anti-government Zapatistas in Mexico, the anti-capitalist "Battle in Seattle", the "outraged" protests in Spain, or the Arab Spring, many observers have concluded that social media were an important, if not even decisive, factor for the political efficacy of these movements (della Porta et al. 2006; Khamis 2011; Khondker 2011; González-Bailón et al. 2013; Herrera 2014). On the other side of the coin, the same social media increasingly seem to be gateways for and platforms of authoritarian, anti-democratic tendencies, manipulation and surveillance (Fuchs 2018;

Schill and Hendricks 2018; Carty 2015; Bradshaw and Howard 2017; Postill 2018; Wardle and Derakhsan 2017).

As with previous media innovations, the rise of social media quickly spurred hopes for democratic renewal. Particularly, the open and collaborative features of many Web 2.0 applications prompted debates about the new media's transformative and democratic potential (Loader and Mercea 2011: 757). As would be expected, the initial discussions about social media's impact on democratic politics fell into opposing camps of enthusiasts and pessimists (Price 2013; Margetts 2019), echoing the basic patterns of utopian and dystopian expectations about the role of the Internet in the 1990s and early 2000s (Lindner 2007; Lindner et al. 2016a). At this point however, there seems to be considerably more disagreement about the role of social media in the political sphere than in most areas in the field of Internet research. Both theoretical and conceptual contributions, as well as empirical investigations, often deliver contradictory claims and lines of reasoning, making it particularly difficult to identify a common ground of understanding in the field. Both pessimistic and optimistic accounts find support (Skoric et al. 2016: 1818). One reason for this deep disagreement within the academic literature might be that the discussions about the role of social media in democratic politics are facing higher levels of complexity compared to the debates of the 1990s. Since then, the media landscapes have become far more developed, and the new media today are both highly entangled with traditional mass media, and deeply embedded in daily practices, increasing the difficulties for analysts to capture their impact (Dahlgren 2013: 1).

In fact, social media have strongly transformed the way people use the Internet, taking advantage of new possibilities to connect, interact and exchange information (Price 2013: 520). In comparison, social media allow for the undemanding, fast establishment and maintenance of online social networks and personal ties. The structural characteristics of the new Internet ecology (Skoric et al. 2016: 1818) enable forms of decentralised production and co-creation of content, ideas, discussions and novel forms of online network organisations (Bennett 2008; Reichert 2013). From the perspective of information exchange and political discourse, the importance of quasi-personal ties between peers, which are a key characteristic of social media, have important implications for the acceptance of information exchanges: Information and news received from someone a user knows is more likely to be accepted, believed and trusted than information from other sources (Carty 2015). While the removal of traditional gatekeepers can have empowering effects for citizens, especially for underrepresented groups, information and discursive contributions from social media peers can also be manipulated. Bradshaw and Howard (2017) show how governments and government-sponsored groups worldwide are engaged in actively influencing information exchange and debates in social media by applying a broad range of methods, ranging from content generation, establishment of fake user accounts to forms of computational propaganda. In the following, the key debates on the role of social media in political communication and democratic politics, as represented in the relevant academic literature, will be summarised. After providing an overview of the main theoretical and conceptual

lines of reasoning, the research findings related to social media's impact on political engagement will be presented.

2.2.2 *Key Tenets of the Debate About Social Media's Role in Political Communication*

To a large extent, the interest in social media and their potential impact on political communication and democracy has to be understood in the context of the broader discussions about liberal democracy and what many would label as a crisis. The challenges faced by contemporary democracies include declining civic and political engagement, declining party loyalty and low turnout rates, growing cynicism, a sense of decreasing political efficacy, and a seemingly rising attractiveness of anti-liberal and anti-democratic tendencies. At the same time, new, alternative forms of political engagement outside the formal representative institutions—sometimes labelled as *counter publics* or *alternative politics*—seem to be thriving (Carty 2015; Herrera 2014; Margetts et al. 2015; Imhof et al. 2015; Lindner et al. 2016b; Voss 2014; Grofman et al. 2014; Macková 2014).

Against this background, many argue that social media have the potential to cure democratic ills, revive citizens' involvement in politics or even contribute to new forms of democratic organisation. These accounts are primarily based on specific features and characteristics of social media. Most importantly, social media are credited with the ability to foster horizontal communication, making it easier to connect individuals and groups online, support diversity and provide spaces for opinion formation beyond and independent from established institutions (Dahlgren 2013; Imhof 2015). Loader and Mercea (2011: 762) identified further impacts of social media on political communication and democratic politics. These include the power of collaboration and sharing, as demonstrated, for instance, by Wikileaks, or the increasingly blurred divisions between mainstream news media and social media as the large media corporations rely more and more on political blogs and other forms of user-generated content (also Imhof 2015: 16; Jenkins 2006).

Inspired by the technical opportunities offered by social media, some authors view the new virtual spaces as media for creative, playful identity constructions and self-constitution. With regard to the political sphere, these accounts are closely related to characterisations of social media as spaces which facilitate dialogue and democratic participation (e.g. Benkler 2006; Bruns 2008). Imhof (2015: 16) diagnosed a broadly accepted expectation among many authors that social media will realise a global democratic participatory culture. Others, however, counter that the availability of these communicative capacities will not automatically change patterns of political engagement. Political participation is the result of the complex interplay of different factors, of which access to digital media may be only one (Dahlgren 2013; Vowe 2014). What is more, empirically, activities related to politics are extremely rare compared to dominant activities aimed at sociality, entertainment

and consumption. In addition, more and more empirical evidence is emerging to show the detrimental effects of social media use on democratic processes. These include charges of social media's role in increasingly polluting the information ecosystem with fake news, hate speech and aggressive propaganda, and accusations of creating filter bubbles (Pariser 2011) and echo chambers that threaten constructive public deliberation (Margetts 2019) and facilitate forms of anti-democratic populism and authoritarianism (Postill 2018; Fuchs 2018).

This brief overview touched upon different contentious areas of debate in the literature. In the following, two of these themes will be presented in greater detail.

2.2.3 Redefining the Political Towards Personalised Politics?

While few dispute that the characteristics of online communities and discursive spaces facilitated by social media differ significantly from the types of communicative exchanges constituting the public sphere (at least in its ideal-typical, theoretical guises, see Chap. 3), the literature debates the question of established understandings of what constitutes "the political", and the public sphere needs to be redefined in view of the phenomena to be observed in social media contexts.

A number of researchers argue that the traditional definition of the political needs to be broadened to include more than rational debate (understood as the contrary to affect and sentiment) (Caldon 2016: 2133). In view of the new forms of mediatised discourses and emergent types of affiliation in social media, some propose integrating non-rational dimensions in contemporary understandings of the political. In her book *Affective Publics*, Papacharissi (2015) argues that the dominating conception of the political is outdated. It should be developed further with the aim of taking into account affective dimensions, such as personal emotions, feelings, storytelling and the like, which are increasingly becoming relevant in political discourse. Beyer (2014) shares this basic view and argues that our understanding of the political in virtual spaces is being transformed due to the ubiquity of digital media in daily life. As the boundaries between online and offline, public and private, become progressively blurred, she argues that anonymous, fragmented and often unfocused online associations in social media can potentially influence the political sphere. Banaji and Buckingham (2013) also attempt to contribute to a redefinition of the political and the concept of citizenship. Similarly to Papacharissi, they view features of popular culture, which are currently not part of traditional political discourse, such as emotions and pleasure, as possible elements of new forms of *cultural citizenship* (Banaji and Buckingham 2013: 5). In this regard, Dahlgren (2013: 2) is more prosaic, but follows similar lines of reasoning when he states that the constituency of politics has become more complex given the many new representations it can take, including personal, single issue, lifestyle, cultural, identity politics and so on.

Taken together, this discussion suggests a critical revision or even replacement of the established model of the public sphere (Loader and Mercea 2011: 758). Instead, conceptions of a networked citizen-centred model, which provides the opportunity to

connect private spheres of autonomous identity to a multitude of deliberately chosen political spaces are receiving some attention (Papacharissi 2010; Loader and Mercea 2011: 758). This would entail a departure from ideas of rational deliberation and its understanding of the republican citizen, refocusing on the "*[...] citizen-user as the driver of democratic innovation through the self-actualized networking of citizens engaged in lifestyle and identity politics*" (Loader and Mercea 2011: 758).

Of course, these predominantly theoretical reflections cannot yet deliver answers to the question if and to what extent the claims about the emergence of this type of "personalised politics" is becoming manifest. But the discussion does prompt research to be analytically open to the emerging models of political communication that reach beyond rational deliberative exchanges. These new playful repertoires of using social media could in some ways be regarded as facets of the political. Regardless of its viability, the dangers associated with this deterioration of rational debate, ranging from eroding the capabilities of users to scrutinise the validity of information, solipsistic echo chambers, negative campaigning, populist and authoritarian rhetoric, to extremism and celebrity politics (Loader and Mercea 2011: 761; Gil de Zúñiga et al. 2009), are increasingly becoming manifest in contemporary politics.

2.2.4 Social Media and Their Potential Impacts on Political Participation

In the following, the qualitative effects of the broadened repertoire of communicative actions made available through social media will be discussed with regard to different aspects of political participation. As is well known, a fundamental prerequisite for any form of active political involvement is the access to and reception of politically relevant information. Social media are said to have a high potential to change both the traditional patterns of information flows as well as their production. The current research landscape in this field is highly specialised and, on the whole, tends to be rather inconclusive at this point.

With the advent of social media, the number of discursive online spaces has expanded significantly. While this observation is not disputed in the literature reviewed, the characteristics, meaning and effects of these ever-expanding virtual spaces on political communication are highly controversial (Caldon 2016: 2133). Do these discursive spaces, often labelled as micro- or counter publics, spill over into the real world of politics? While some studies show the emergence of counter publics under certain conditions (e.g. Leung and Lee 2014), the effects for the public sphere are increasingly being discussed (Tripodi 2018; Momeni 2017). Some authors question the political relevance of the communities occupying the social networking sites. Imhof (2015: 18f.) differentiates between predominantly group-oriented, self-referential communication in social media contexts and the principally impersonal communication, which constitutes the public sphere. The online communities are

constituted by the reproduction of emotional ties, in-group and out-group differentiation and shared norms (Gebhardt 2010: 327ff.). As the communication patterns observed are predisposed towards the reproduction of shared life-views and moral beliefs, online communities tend to become homogenous. These processes of social closure can be reinforced by the effects of search engines and the like-algorithms of Facebook, which are based on previous online activities, offering users systematically more of the same (Andrejevic 2011; Gerlitz 2011; Hong and Nadler 2015: 104). From this perspective, communication patterns in social media are currently far from establishing a worldwide participatory culture (Imhof 2015: 18).

2.2.4.1 Social Media and Political Communication

Price (2013: 522) notes that, at least in theory, social media provide many additional opportunities to contribute to a better-informed public, thereby increasing the diversity of sources and views. However, Chen (2013) observes that relevant information, which actually triggers political activity is most often provided by existing, well-established groups and organisations. Some literature suggests that through social media sites such as Facebook, users are exposed incidentally to news that they are not actively seeking out. This might have mobilising effects, also because this type of news has been filtered through the users' personal online community networks (Bode 2012; deSilver 2014). Other strands of literature focus on social media's effects on social networks and how this might impact the news exposure of the users (Gil de Zúñiga et al. 2012; Tang and Lee 2013). Some findings in this literature suggest that social media enlarges the social networks of individuals, and this might increase the likelihood of exposure to politically relevant, mobilising information (Boulianne 2015: 525). Others view the role of ties to political or activist organisations as decisive. Findings suggest that people who belong to more organisations are also more likely to engage in political or civic activities (Bode et al. 2014; Tang and Lee 2013). And yet another strand of research emphasises the influential role of peer views within the online network on one's own activities (Vitak et al. 2011).

2.2.4.2 Social Media and the Quality of Deliberation

In addition to the—currently unresolved—question of if and how social media impact mobilisation and participation in terms of quantity, the literature also reflects on the quality of the communicative exchanges in these online environments. On the whole, the literature reviewed tends to share critical perspectives.

Primarily drawing on the work of Gil de Zúñiga et al. (2012), Thimm and Berlinke (2007), Zimmermann (2006), Gerhards and Schäfer (2007) and Imhof (2015: 17) critically question many of the high expectations associated with deliberation in social media contexts. Kies (2010) analyses a large variety of online political forums applying a discourse quality index with a number of deliberative criteria and draws more differentiated conclusions. However, using an adapted

version of this index (Kersting 2005) for a comparison of deliberation quality in web forums in 2003 and 2012, Kersting (2017) underlined existing problems with deliberation: the majority being characterised by monologues instead of dialogues, lacking reflexive deliberation and mutual respect of discussion partners, and even showing a decrease of discourse quality over time. Empirical research has shown that political blogs tend to be strongly opinion-based, are weak with regard to the representation of facts and often offer radical positions. This is supported, for instance, by Chen's empirical research (2013: 113ff.), which observes forms of anti-social communication and points to examples of racist, sexist, hate-filled and uncivil communication. With a focus on the quality of dialogue on Twitter, Jericho (2012: 234) drew rather sceptical conclusions about this microblogging platform as a forum of debate. He observes that political tweets are dominated by *twitspits* where political opponents engage in political confrontation but not in real dialogue. Similar findings are reported in Loader and Mercea (2012: 125).

Contrary to many expectations about the potential to infuse more diversity into public debates, political blogs tend to overwhelmingly respond to topics and stories presented by mainstream news media. Along this line of reasoning, some authors also observe the shrinking of the blogosphere, thereby further reducing the potential for more diversity of views, perspectives and opinions. This process is said to be caused by two developments. Since the early 2000s, blogs have been progressively sucked into the so-called "Walled Gardens" (e.g. Paterson 2012) such as Facebook. And particularly political blogs run by ambitious lay journalists are increasingly being linked to and cooperate with large media corporations as part of their social media strategies, creating structures of co-dependency (Davis 2012: 77; Imhof 2015: 16f.). Other authors (Fox and Ramos 2012: 39; Wardle and Derakhsan 2017) contend that the broad range of opportunities to retrieve information through the Internet, and particularly social media, has encouraged content providers to increasingly target information to different, politically narrow audiences, thereby increasing the likelihood of spreading misinformation. However, Redden (2011: 70) argues that the new news sources do counter and challenge much of mainstream media coverage.

2.2.4.3 Political Activism and Social Media

Given the decline in traditional political participation in political parties and established interest groups such as labour unions, social media have often been seen to have the potential to facilitate alternative routes for participation due to their specific characteristics, such as low entry barriers and low costs. In fact, Chen (2013: 137ff.) observes that online-based social movements present online activism to their potential members as an alternative to traditional party membership and forms of political participation. However, these online-based forms of political participation are being debated with regard to their political impact. The literature is sceptical about forms of online activism that do not reach beyond the comfortable media-centred mode of political engagement where political commitment remains largely

effortless (Dahlgren 2013: 4). Others also question the depth of "*slacktivism*" or "*clicktivism*", defined as a "*disconnect between social media's expressive politics and . . . the shallowness of these users' political interests and commitments*" (Chen 2013: 77).

2.2.4.4 Political Consumerism

A variant of political participation, which has received increasing attention, is political consumerism (e.g. Baringhorst et al. 2007; Stolle and Micheletti 2013). Gil de Zúñiga et al. (2013) attempt to address the question whether people using social media are more likely to engage in political consumerism compared to those who are not active on social networking sites. While this expectation is by and large supported by the data analysed, the authors raise the interesting question of whether political consumerism is actually political. Given the characteristics of political consumerism as a form of lifestyle politics, Gil de Zúñiga et al. propose to label this type of civic engagement *civic consumerism* (2013: 13). In this view, the characteristics of political consumerism as a lifestyle choice and a form of civic action, which is subject to sharing and peer commentary, might explain the positive relationship between social media use and conscious, ethically motivated consumption.

2.2.4.5 Social Media and Elected Representatives

Social media provide the opportunity for individual politicians and parliamentarians to engage in exchange and dialogue directly with citizens. Being independent from the gate-keeping powers of traditional media, politicians can send their views to anyone who is interested in receiving the messages, and recipients have the choice to respond and comment (Ross and Bürger 2014: 46). A number of studies have examined the social media use of parliamentarians and political parties, leading to rather sobering findings. Jackson and Lilleker (2009) show that most political parties refrain from taking advantage of the interactive features of social media, primarily initiating unidirectional information flows. Other research identifies a tendency on the side of party organisations to keep communication activity under control (Pedersen 2005). With regard to parliamentarians, the analyses of Ross and Bürger (2014) and Williamson (2009) show that most politicians use digital media as a means for information distribution rather than an opportunity to genuinely engage with constituents.

2.2.4.6 Effects on Political Opinion and Behaviour: Inconclusive Results

Much research is conducted on the impact of social media on political opinions and behaviours of citizens. Dahlgren (2013) attempts to understand the role of social

media within social contexts, in order to identify what true democratic potential they hold. He warns that weaknesses in democratic systems cannot be solved through social media or media technologies alone, but that this is a job which must lie with citizens. Dahlgren summarises the often-mentioned positive aspects and the hopes for social media as follows: an increase of communication between citizens, cost-effectiveness, room for creative participation, opinion formation, mobilisation and the potential to place a spotlight on political issues, for example, through "going viral", and personal gains such as empowerment. A special emphasis is placed on the value of social media for alternative politics. On the other hand, there are concerns such as the digital divide, the fact that political engagement does not follow purely from Internet and social media access, cyberbullying and harassment, and of course the fear of social media being abused for political surveillance and control, and for deliberate attempts to spread misinformation (Bradshaw and Howard 2017). Dahlgren goes on to remind us that "*political participation is more than merely media access or communicative interaction; these are often necessary, but never sufficient for genuine politics. Politics always involves some degree of contestation—struggle—in the societal world*" (Dahlgren 2013: 3).

Burnett and Bloice (2016) examined Twitter posts during three televised debates about Scottish Independence leading up to the 2014 Scottish Referendum, concluding that posts linking to a variety of resources did have positive effects on unifying perspectives and supporter activism, but did not change political opinions. This makes the impact of social media on the outcome of the 2014 Scottish Referendum questionable. Riezebos et al. (2011) detected no impact of social media on voting behaviour, but changes in political party perception were present, according to their analysis of an online questionnaire during the Dutch national elections in 2010. Hong and Nadler (2015) support findings from Hindmann (2009) that the rate of political mobilisation is not increased through the use of the Internet, stating that online political voices are mostly made up of a small number of large organisations and networks (see also van der Graaf et al. 2016). In the course of a literature review, Dini and Sæbø (2016) make the observation that social media does not take the role of mobilising and creating participation if there is no active community already in place and that challenges such as exclusion, information misuse, deliberate misinformation, security threats, data leaks and privacy issues must be considered when social media is employed.

The question of whether social media leads to online or offline participation has frequently been posed, results being inconclusive and even contradictory. Vissers et al. (2012) point to medium-specific mobilisation effects in the course of an experimental study, meaning that online mobilisation leads to online participation, and offline mobilisation to offline participation, with there being no spillover effects. This result was supported by Vissers and Stolle's (2014) work based on a two-wave panel survey of undergraduate students in Canada in 2014, which claimed that political Facebook participation does promote online participation, but has no effects on offline participation, with the exception of engagement in offline protests. Nam (2012) determines, based on the Citizenship Involvement Democracy survey in the USA, that "*[while] the degree of internet use positively affects the level of activeness*

in online political activity, internet use intensity has a negative impact on offline activity" (Nam 2012: 94). Contradicting these results is the conclusion of Theocharis and Lowe (2016) based on their experimental study involving young Greek participants, that the use of Facebook has clear negative impacts on all forms of participation. Gibson and Cantijoch (2013) were interested in the question of whether "[. . .] *online and offline activities are merging and being performed interchangeably* [. . .] *or does the medium matter and the two activities constitute separate and nonrelated spheres of action* [. . .]" (Gibson and Cantijoch 2013: 714). They conclude with mixed findings regarding this question, with online and offline versions of participatory activities such as petitioning or contacting politicians being interchangeable. Other activities, such as news consumption, appear to be medium-dependent. In addition to this finding, Gibson and Cantijoch (2013: 714) caution that they find there to be an "*underlying multidimensional structure to online participation*", which they deem responsible for the various differing findings in the area of political mobilisation through the Internet, given that the measurement of e-participation requires a higher level of discrimination. Gibson and McAllister (2013) claim that political participation is positively affected by social interactions in the offline world, and that it is therefore of interest to closer examine the effects of different online networks. They used the Australian Election Study, a national self-completed survey conducted after federal elections, from 2007, in order to examine the effects of interactions with *bonding* and *bridging* networks. According to Gibson and McAllister, bonding networks consist of individuals with whom one has an already established relationship in the offline world, while bridging networks are new networks consisting of people who may have little in common in terms of background or culture. Gibson and McAllister could show that there is in fact a difference between these two network types regarding mobilisation of offline participation: "*The findings show that bonding, and not bridging, online social contact predicts offline participation, suggesting that online interactions that do not build on existing offline networks are not as effective in mobilizing 'real world' participation*" (Gibson and McAllister 2013: 21).

Nam (2012) also voices the limited potential of the Internet to increase inclusiveness and, therefore, equality of civic participation in political matters. This is enforced by Cho and Keum (2016), who demonstrate that socio-economic factors play a smaller role for political expression on social networking sites than in political discussions held in the offline realm. Strauß and Nentwich (2013: 5) summarise the main potentials of social network sites as lying in the following areas: "[. . .] *social learning; new options for participation; strengthening community building; developing social capital; and enhancing political empowerment*." A further positive effect is documented by Warren et al. (2014) in the course of a survey analysis, concerning trust towards institutions, which increases through the use of social media in the context of civic engagement.

Bicking et al. (2011) present the results of a comparative analysis of MOMENTUM, a support action with the purpose of coordinating e-participation pilot project activity, initiated by the European Commission. They note the lack of a social media strategy in most observed cases, leaving untapped potential in the areas of opinion-

mining and bidirectional thought exchange, as well as raising the number of participants and gathering support. It could generally be observed that most of the cases did not successfully achieve any direct policy changes, though policy contributions were made (Bicking et al. 2011).

Local government websites in the USA seem not to have any influence on the participation of citizens in the policymaking process (Garrett and Jensen 2011). However, the design of the website can be an important factor in mobilising citizens (Zheng and Schachter 2016), design of online spaces having an impact on the political participation and deliberation of citizens (Steibel and Estevez 2015). According to Følstad and Lüders (2013), a survey among 90 participants in Norway resulted in 64% stating an online environment for political purposes would result in higher political engagement on their part, fostered by a feeling of having influence, having access to political debate, being regularly updated on events, raising awareness and motivating engagement in the local political sphere. In order for citizens to engage in political debate online, there must be an engaging topic, a certain will to contribute, frustration with a situation and reciprocal learning (Følstad and Lüders 2013). Party websites must offer high-quality information and a space for user interactions in which differing views are tolerated (Følstad et al. 2014). Følstad et al. prioritised informational content above website engagement features for regular users of the website, advising that the information should be complementary to other online content, locally specified and possessing marked perspectives or opinions.

It is not only of interest how the public engages with social media; the social media use of politicians can also provide helpful insights into how the dialogue between citizens and government officials is changing and whether this is leading towards higher levels of e-participation. Stieglitz and Brockmann (2013) examined the smartphone-use of German politicians who they categorised as "heavy smartphone users" through means of a survey and concluded that there is an increasing intensity to be found in the dialogue between politicians and citizens, enabled by social media. Here they recognise potential for increased e-participation. Zheng et al. (2014) also emphasised the role of elected government agents in producing opportunities for e-participation, naming the willingness of government as the key factor. Reddick and Norris (2013) used a national survey of e-participation among US local governments to determine demand to be the driving factor behind political support, with the success of e-participation efforts relying on top-level support, citizen demand and formal planning.

Before concluding this chapter, the contribution of social media to new social and political movements should be acknowledged, such as in the cases of the London and South African demonstrations in 2011 and 2008, the protests in Stuttgart and Istanbul in 2010 and 2013, the 2012 Occupy movements, and the Arab Spring (Norris 2012; Abbott 2012; Herrera 2014). And of course, anti-liberal, non-emancipatory and right-wing populist movements are also successfully taking advantage of the new media's opportunities to influence discourse, organise and mobilise (Dietrich et al. 2017; Müller and Schwarz 2018). Furthermore, social media can be utilised for information dissemination and organisation outside of traditional

media, which can be under government control (Wilson and Corey 2012 as quoted in Dunne 2015). Conversely, social media platforms are increasingly being targeted by governments to influence and manipulate public opinion online, in some cases using covert, non-transparent and illegitimate methods (Bradshaw and Howard 2017; Fuchs 2018). Dunne (2015) points to regional differences concerning mobilisation through social media, claiming that certain Western citizens simply do not harbour a strong enough will to increase online or offline direct democracy, due to lack of time or interest, arguing that we would otherwise see more protests of individuals trying to effect change.

2.2.5 Summarising the Perspectives

The discussions and findings in the academic literature dealing with the role social media play in political communication and democratic politics presented in this review by and large reflect a field of academic inquiry, which is still in full motion. Key questions are currently far from being settled—an assessment that comes as no surprise given the relatively recent advent of social media about 10 years ago.

Nonetheless, at a general level, some very tentative conclusions might be drawn from the literature review on the political dimensions of social media. Research tends to agree that social media are playing an increasingly important role in civic and political lives, as these communication opportunities are taken up by social movements, activists, political parties and governments. However, while numerous studies have attempted to provide evidence for tangible political effects of social media use on the levels and quality of political engagement, by and large the transformative power often associated with social media still remains more a potential possibility than a reality confirmed by sound empirical evidence (Williamson et al. 2010; Loader and Mercea 2012; Ross and Bürger 2014: 50; Hong and Nadler 2015; Margetts 2019). Even if finding evidence for these far-reaching expectations about the impact of social media on democracy remain a pressing topic for research, academics and experts in the field should also address the issue of to what extent social media are able to fulfil core functions of public communication such as critique, legitimation and integration (Imhof 2011). In this regard, social media seem not only to challenge established understandings and models of the public sphere, but phenomena such as solipsistic echo chambers, deliberate infusion of misinformation, manipulation and surveillance also seem to threaten the integrity of the public sphere's core functions for democracy. Making sense of malicious distortions of information exchange and debate, as well as of the allegedly increasing role of the private, the personal affective and emotional perspectives in politics, and thinking ahead about ways for democratic institutions to respond to this possible transformation seems expedient.

Finally, in order to avoid the reproduction of old myths about the transformative potential of social media, future research in this dynamic field should also take the broader media ecology into consideration. More careful contextualisations, which

reflect the dynamic interrelationships between traditional news media, digital media, and the publics and their undercurrents, will help to avoid the traps of technological determinism.

2.3 Conclusions

E-democracy is now a widely applied term, which describes a broad scope of practices of online engagement of the public in political decision-making and opinion-forming. With regard to theoretical concepts of democracy, e-democracy is usually based on models of participatory and deliberative democracy. Far-reaching, overly enthusiastic expectations of a fundamental transformation of modern democracy through the application of online tools for political participation and public discourse are fading after two decades of experiences with e-democracy, opening space for accounts that are more conceptually and analytically robust and less techno-determinist. There is, however, little doubt that e-democracy will add new modes of communication among citizens and between actors of representative democracy and their constituencies. These changes not only add to the online political processes, but also affect the modes and conditions of offline political processes in many ways. They are dependent on the great variety of e-democracy tools applied, the nature of the political process these are embedded in, and the skills, demands and expectations of those involved in their application.

Research into the impact of social media on democracy remains inconclusive and only allows us to draw some very tentative conclusions on the political dimensions of social media. The literature tends to agree that social media play an increasingly important role in civic and political lives, as these communication opportunities are not only taken up by social movements and activists, but also by governments and government-sponsored groups. However, while numerous studies have attempted to provide evidence for tangible political effects from social media use, by and large the transformative power often associated with social media still remains more a potential possibility than a firmly established reality, particularly with regard to established patterns of political participation. Based on the currently available findings, it can be concluded that social media have ambivalent effects for democratic politics, enabling more inclusive involvement and allowing for the articulation of un(der)represented perspectives, while at the same time providing powerful opportunities for malicious distortions of discourse, misinformation and communicative closure.

While finding coherent empirical evidence for the impact of social media on democracy remains a pressing topic for research, academics and experts in the field should also address the more fundamental issue of the extent to which social media is able to fulfil core functions of public communication, particularly public critique, legitimation and integration. In this regard, social media and the idea of "personalised politics" seem to challenge some of the established understandings and models of the public sphere. Making sense of the allegedly increasing role of

personal and emotional perspectives in politics and thinking ahead about ways for democratic institutions to respond to this possible transformation seems more pressing than ever. What is more, phenomena such as solipsistic closure and echo chambers, deliberate misinformation and computational propaganda are threatening the fundamental workings of the public sphere in democratic contexts, increasing the need for effective educational, regulatory and technological responses.

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