

POLITICS BY TWITTER: POLITICAL COMMUNICATION, DIGITAL TECHNOLOGY AND THE PURSUIT OF COMMON INTERESTS

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Abstract: In his recent Farewell Address US President Barack Obama remarked that if we want to improve our political environment and accomplish significant political ends we need to stop attacking one another on Twitter and on-line, and converse with one another face-to-face. We here explore the implication of Obama's comment that technology is currently an obstacle in political communication. We further explore the position that the strongest ground for political activity, especially democratic political activity, is the identification and pursuit of common interests within one's community and across borders. In the end, there is no reason to think that digital technology is necessarily detrimental to useful political engagement and communication with one another. That we often use it detrimentally contributes to misunderstanding and social divisions. More genuine communication in the sense of engagement through shared meanings is critical and a necessary condition of experience and growth, both individual and social. Such communication, digital or otherwise, is enhanced through the pursuit of common interests.

Keywords: Political Communication, Twitter, Digital Technology, Common Interests, Politics

1. Introduction

First, I would like to thank the organizers for the invitation to speak today. It has been some time since I was in Timisoara, and it is a pleasure to return. It is also an honor to have the opportunity to deliver a Keynote Address at this conference on language and communication. I have to ask your forbearance because as you know, I am not a specialist in communication but rather in philosophy, and I have an irrepressible impulse to wax philosophical regardless of the topic I am addressing. I promise to try to keep the abstract philosophizing to a minimum, and to focus on the topic at hand, which is to say political communication and digital technology.

My topic today concerns not Twitter directly, but questions that have to do with contemporary, especially political, communication and the place within it of currently influential technologies. To refer to Twitter, then, is rather a stand-in for the broader topic. As I will say again below, the fact is that I know nearly nothing about Twitter, and I am perfectly happy to keep it that way, at least for now. The issue is, rather, how we may come to terms with certain questions related to political communication in a digital age; a related concern will be to articulate how we might understand the goals and purposes of political communication.

2. Political Communication and Its Tensions

Political communication is an increasingly interesting and extremely important field of focus. As the entire world knows, the new American president Donald Trump

likes Twitter, and he uses it as a tool that allows him to engage in political communication in ways that are quite new in American, and as far as I know in world politics. There has been a great deal of hand-wringing about this among some of the American political and journalistic set. Interestingly, those who raise objections to the way President Trump uses Twitter tend to be hostile to him on other grounds, while those who support him generally find his Twitter moments to be either unimportant or an admirable new form of political communication. The reaction to his use of the technology in his political communication turns out to be a stand-in for reaction to him in general, or so it seems. This means in turn that if President Trump is in fact engaging in a new form of political communication through his Twitter communiqués, as it would appear he is, then the jury is still out concerning its value and its virtues, or lack thereof. On this point, I do not want to fall into the trap of using talk about technology actually to be talk about Trump. I prefer to acknowledge that this form of political communication may indeed be something new and worth our attention, and leave it open for now as to whether it is something we should embrace or shun.

Surely, however, it has its limits. During the first week of his presidency Trump caused an international crisis by complaining on Twitter about Mexico and an upcoming visit of its president in relation to the border wall Trump wants to build. Mexican president Peña Nieto wrote back, also on Twitter, to the effect that President Trump is delusional if he thinks that Mexico will pay for his wall, and he abruptly cancelled his visit. Fortunately, both presidents quickly realized that they had better put down their Twitter accounts and get on the phone so they could work this out.

Along similar lines, and by way of introduction, I promise to avoid the clichéd criticisms that people “of a certain age” like me tend to make about current technological trends. I must confess that I do not have a Twitter account, I have never used Twitter, and in fact I only recently used the word ‘tweet’ for the first time. I confess that I find the idea of communicating a message in 140 characters to be perverse. It works for writers of haiku, but most of us do not possess that special talent. For the rest of us, I am afraid that the tendency to restrict our communication to 140 characters inclines us to truncate our thinking accordingly, and that strikes me as a bad idea, as the example of Trump and Peña Nieto suggests. That said, I do not think that such digital means of communication as Twitter indicate the end of civilization as we know it, even though I and others do not find it comfortable. One has to make an effort to avoid the unfortunate tendency among many philosophers to elevate personal preference to the level of high principle.

My interest today is, rather, to think about the role of digital technology in political communication, and specifically in relation to the importance of the pursuit of common interests in political activity. This theme is prompted by two factors. The first is that I have for some years now been arguing in print that the strongest ground for political activity, especially democratic political activity, is the identification and pursuit of common interests within one’s community and across borders. I will return to develop this theme in a moment. The other factor that prompted this topic is a remark that former US President Barack Obama made in his Farewell Address last January, namely that if we want to improve our political environment and accomplish significant political ends we need to stop attacking one another on Twitter and on-line, and converse with one another face-to-face. His precise words were “If you’re tired of arguing with strangers on the internet, try to talk with one in real life.” (Obama 2017) This is a catchy phrase, and when Obama delivered it there was considerable

applause from the audience. It is, however, more than catchy in that it pulls on several thematic strings at once. One of them is the importance of efforts to communicate with and to understand one another, and a second is the idea that communication through technology is inferior to communication face-to-face. Let's begin by considering both points in some detail.

Note first that the phrase refers to "arguing with strangers". This is not the ordinary, daily communication with our Facebook and Twitter friends and followers, but a form of engagement with those we do not know, and who because of the technology may be anywhere in the world. In academia, we can look at the discussion thread that accumulates in a couple days over a given on-line article, for example, to see what Obama meant. Many people seem predisposed to use such an occasion not just to argue with strangers but to attack, dismiss, demean, and generally belittle and run roughshod over those with whom we disagree. To offer a personal illustration, soon after I arrived in Malta several months ago to assume my current position I gave an interview that appeared in a prominent local newspaper. For various reasons the creation of the American University of Malta has been, as we may say in American English, a political football, so my interview attracted politically charged comments online. Among them included the accusations that I must be CIA, that I am a fraud, and that I look like Colonel Sanders. I took the latter observation to explain my taste for fried chicken.

We often, even when we are not being nasty, tend automatically to place others, especially strangers, into categories that we have come to assume define our analytic options. In American politics those categories tend to be "conservative" and "liberal", or "right" and "left". None of this is helpful for communication, if we mean by communication the engagement with one another through shared meanings. For one thing, such categories as these are not fixed, and their meanings change over time and from case to case. Traditionally, to use a first-person illustration, I have always considered myself a person of the left. In contemporary American contexts, though, the meaning of the left has shifted considerably, and I now find myself, without having changed my own views, agreeing more frequently than previously with those who would consider themselves to be people of the "right". The only thing this can possibly mean is that the categories themselves have altered their meaning and they are no longer the reliable guides in communication that we once thought they were. Such categorial flexibility means that thinking in terms of categories like these turns out to be an impediment to communication in political contexts. Moreover, to the extent that Twitter and others forms of digital communication facilitate the ease with which we can employ such categories to "argue with strangers", as Obama put it, the technology is also an impediment to communication.

So, our tendency too breezily to categorize one another is a problem for communication, and so is the nastiness with which we increasingly do it. Obama suggests that digital technology facilitates ways of treating one another that would be less likely if we engage face-to-face. I suspect he is right about this, though it would not be a universal rule. We all know people, some of them public figures, who are as abrasive in person as they are in any other context. In fact, some political commentators make a living this way. Someone like Ann Coulter, or Rush Limbaugh, or recently Milo Yiannopoulos in the US are examples; in the UK Nigel Farage appears to be in this company; and in Russia Vladimir Zhirinovskiy comes to mind immediately. For most of us, though, it is harder to dismiss and demean those who are standing, or

sitting, in front of us. If this is right, and if serious and valuable political communication requires that we not simply “argue with strangers”, either on-line or in any other way, then Obama had a point that political communication is enabled more by talking with one another in more direct physical proximity than by allowing the technology to push us in other directions.

We do have to be a bit careful here. There is no reason to think that digital technology is necessarily detrimental to useful political engagement and communication with one another. On the contrary, because we are not able to be in physical proximity with one another, the technology can provide occasions for serious and valuable communication. And, as has often been pointed out, communication through such technologies as Twitter has a certain democratic character by allowing direct and mass communication, thus avoiding the interpretive filter of the press. Still, though, there does seem to be something about the technology, which I assume has to do with the anonymity of it, which brings out the demons in us. If that is right, then we would do well to be wary of relying too heavily, or rather too unreflectively, on the technology if we are genuinely interested in meaningful political communication. If we are only interested in doing battle and scoring points, then the technology may be a most useful weapon, but if we have higher aims than that, then we would do well either to engage face-to-face, or to try to the extent possible to recreate the conditions of face-to-face engagement even when we are in occasions to make use of the technology. The medium, we may say, is only part of the message. It may make it easier for us to avoid valuable communication, but it does not have to do so. Avoiding that outcome, though, does require some degree of vigilance.

It is worth pausing for a moment to consider why Obama felt compelled to make his point in the first place. The reason, I think, is that common wisdom these days holds that there is a vast and growing divide among Americans along cultural and political lines. Actually, this theme is itself extremely complex because in the end it involves cultural, class, political, national, geographic, and other factors. Recognizing the complexity and the fact that just now we are not able to engage that complexity, I think it is fair to say that in very general terms the divide can be understood as consisting of those with populist or nationalist predispositions on one side, and those with more internationalist or cosmopolitan inclinations on the other. In the recent US presidential election, presumably the populist/nationalist side was represented by Mr. Trump, and the other by Ms. Clinton.

If this description of a political division in the society is more or less right, then one may quickly notice that it is not confined to the American context. The Brexit vote in the UK fell along similar lines, as have the political lives of people across Europe, from Finland, Poland and Hungary to France and Austria, not to mention Italy, Germany, and elsewhere. Nationalist versus more cosmopolitan inclinations have, as I understand it, long engendered political issues in the Romanian context as well, so there is really nothing very new here. Much of the cultural and political hand-wringing and lamenting going on now in the US is over the presumption, probably correct, that the people on both sides of this divide not only do not understand one another, they do not even speak with one another. Each has its own sources of news, its own forms of entertainment, its own forms of cultural engagement and expression, and its own forms of communication. This, presumably, is the reason we continually surprise one another, for example in the Brexit vote and in the recent US presidential election. We are

strangers to one another, and Obama suspects that to a considerable degree the only communication we have is by arguing with one another as strangers.

Except for those who have nothing but bald partisan aspirations, most of us would agree, I expect, that this is not a healthy situation, and that societies cannot prosper, or perhaps even survive, in such conditions. Thus, we have Obama's point, which is the assumption that it is important in a healthy society for its members to communicate with and to understand one another. I recognize that this has a rather trite sound to it, rather like instructing a child to play nicely with others. It appears, though, that many of us did not learn this lesson from the school playground. I have always disliked partisan politics, and we have put our finger here on one of the reasons why. When political partisans are doing battle with one another, there is a very good chance that the public good, a term I use reluctantly, recedes into the background before long. It turns out that advancing party interests, at least in US contexts, is more important than meeting one's governing responsibilities, not to mention the good of the republic. People in this situation will usually justify their behavior by insisting that their party's interests embody the public good, so that when their party triumphs, the good triumphs as well. That particular evasion has always seemed to me a bit too neat and easy. The fact is, I would argue, that at least as often as not, partisan politics has little to do with the public good and everything to do with individuals or a party's advancement, with little attention to the public good either directly or indirectly. This is not a comment on anything having to do with Romanian politics, with the details of which I am not in any case familiar. I am not, as I have said, attracted to party politics, but I must add that I do not have a better idea, either.

One may wonder, though, whether this really matters much. Maybe a partisan antagonistic battling is the best we can expect in political contexts, and maybe we should be willing to accept what occurs in such cases to be the most we can hope for with respect to political communication. As we have noted, though, Obama's comment suggests otherwise. He thinks that we do need something that constitutes communication in the sense of the engendering of shared meanings and purposes, and I would argue that he is right about that. My point about partisan politics should be taken as a cautionary note that even, or especially, within the heat of partisan battle, it would be wise for all of us to remember that it is always possible that the public good, assuming that there is such a thing, may transcend immediate partisan interests. For this reason, partisan opponents in fact often have far more in common than may appear to be the case. This is not, in the end, a question of partisan politics, but of the strength and health of a society.

3. Democracy and Common Interests

The reason we want to say that genuine communication is important, or anyway one of the reasons, is that it is, it turns out, a necessary condition of experience and growth, both individual and social. That is a mouthful, and I would like to unpack the claim a bit. I have found it helpful when thinking about social cohesion and communication to turn to the American philosopher John Dewey's understanding of the same, and his understanding of democracy as a form of social and political life. Dewey spoke about this in many places, one of which is in his famous book *Democracy and Education*, published in 1916. (Dewey 1985, 92-93) There he made the argument that democracy has its roots in two aspects of all successful communities. The first is that

members of a community have some interests in common, and the second is that to avoid the distortions of isolation, successful communities also identify and even pursue shared interests with those beyond the community's borders. In the sense in which Dewey uses the term here, 'borders' should be taken to mean those features that differentiate one community from another, whether gender, racial, social, ethnic, national, linguistic, or any other sort.

Democracy in this sense, which Dewey took to be synonymous with healthy communities and societies, is characterized by the recognition of common interests among members of a community, and by the cultivation of common interests with those beyond one's community. This is, I would maintain, a conceptually powerful and practically valuable way of understanding community, democracy, and by implication communication.

In the interests of conceptual clarity, it is important to be clear that when I refer to common interests I do not mean to refer to what is often called the 'common good'. The basic difference is that the idea of the common good usually suggests one value, or a set of values, that is good for a community or society as a whole. It would be something like the idea of the 'public good', which I used moments ago. I made the point then that I am in fact reluctant to use the term 'public good', and we can now specify the reason for my reluctance. It is in fact far too easy to refer to the common or public good as if there really are or were some values on which we would all agree or which we would all accept, and then assert such a value or values as that to which we should aspire. The problem is that it becomes far more difficult to identify such values. Even certain obvious candidates, for example peace, may turn out to be a value that arm makers, and the average people who need the jobs in their factories, as well as arms dealers, not to mention many with aspirations to political or military power, would not endorse. The 'common good' may turn out not to be as common as we might think.

Common interests, however, imply no general or overarching applicability, but rather interests that some set of individuals or communities or societies or nations may share with some others. One of the reasons for the practical value of the idea of common interests is precisely that it does not require too much of us. To illustrate the point, one of the more common ways that democracy, and other forms of social and political life for that matter, have been conceptualized requires that we gradually achieve some degree of consensus in society, which is to say the recognition of some sort of common good, or that the value of a given way of life is that it is conducive to consensus. The relevant assumptions in such theoretical analyses is that consensus is a virtue and that it is achievable.

I rather doubt that either of those assumptions is true. It is not at all clear to me that we are better off if we agree on every, most, or even many things. At the level of intellectual satisfaction, to speak autobiographically for a moment, I certainly enjoy the satisfaction that comes from having my own ideas reinforced by those who agree with me, but I enjoy at least equally the challenge and engagement of the company of those who do not agree with me. On a broader scale, there is great advantage to the diversity of ideas, habits, and social practices over the commonalities implied in consensus. It is not that consensus is to be avoided, but simply that it ought not to be regarded as an overarching individual, social, or political end. Moreover, it is almost certainly impossible anyway. Any society of lively, intelligently engaged individuals is going to contain a multitude of differing conceptions and ends, and there is no reason to think that those could somehow be shaped, through discourse or any other means,

into a single homogenous whole, or into a 'common good'. Consensus as a general social and political objective, in other words, is neither desirable nor possible.

Another way some theorists have characterized democracy is in terms of embodying and spreading certain values. The 'spreading' side of this has been characteristic of US foreign policy in recent decades, in the hands of both neo-conservatives and liberal interventionists, in the form of regime change and 'spreading democracy'. In the aftermath of the 2003 US invasion and destruction of Iraq, a tee-shirt appeared for sale in Russia that had a picture of George Bush over the phrase, 'So you don't support democracy? Then we're coming for you next'. Consequences alone should enable us to infer that such neo-conservative and liberal interventionist conceptions of democracy are counter-productive and damaging to perpetrator and victim alike.

Among the advantages of understanding individual, political, and international relations in terms of common interests is that it requires neither the intellectual straight jacket of consensus nor the moral arrogance of interventionism. Dewey was right that it is a simple social fact of the matter that we have some interests in common. We do not have all interests in common, and we do not in any given case need to be convinced that we should have any particular interests in common. We simply do share some interests among ourselves and between our societies and others, and these commonalities are distributed variously rather than as a single whole. On an individual level, it is almost certainly true that, for example, any given member of the audience and I share some interests and not others, and some of those others he or she or I may share with some of the rest of you. If we were to outline and trace them we would have among us a web or latticework of intersecting lines rather than a solid block. None of us has to be convinced to have common interests; we simply do have them by virtue of living together. To demand more of us, for example consensus or the recognition of a common good, in terms of what we individually embrace and pursue is to overreach in our objectives. I suspect, in fact, that one of the reasons we are seeing today a nationalist backlash in many of our countries is that those with certain more internationalist and cosmopolitan goals were forcing those perspectives socially in ways that many people have resented. If, on the other hand, we chose, or choose now, to engage one another in terms of the common interests we already have rather than telling one another how we ought to think and act, we may find that the result is far more satisfactory than we have currently managed.

The same is true at the level of social institutions. To offer a personal example again, and as earlier one that has to do with my current position, a few months ago I had the pleasure of meeting with the Rector of the University of Malta. The possible consequences for that university of the creation of mine has been among the sensitive points that have created controversy. My university, the American University of Malta, is the 'new kid on the block', we may say, and there has been some concern over what this would mean for the University of Malta. I think, though I do not wish to put words in the Rector's mouth, that we came to an understanding that expresses my point about common interests. Our two universities do not share all interests, and there is no reason we would or should have all interests in common. We do, however, share some interests, and we agreed explicitly that in those areas in which we have common interests we will be pleased to cooperate with one another. With respect to interests that we do not share, we will mind our own respective business in those matters that do not concern the other, and we will communicate and work through those matters

that may come up that involve a conflict of some sort. Nothing more than that is required or even desirable. Malta will benefit from various sorts of institutions, so there is no advantage in our attempting to reach an overall consensus. This point can, I would argue, be generalized to other social institutions in other contexts, including in Timisoara and Romania generally.

The same approach, I have argued elsewhere, could and should be the basis of relations among nations. All our nations have some interests in common and not others, and the set of nations that share an interest shifts from one issue to the next. Among nations there is a web of distributed common interests, just as there is among the individuals in this room. It would behoove any and every nation, I would submit, to recognize this fact and look to engage one another on this basis rather than the all too common assumption of morally haughty interventionism, or the traditional idea of 'spheres of interest'. The latter two are both conducive of conflict, whereas identifying and acting on common interests is conducive of cooperation and the relatively peaceful pursuit of the solution of problems. In fact, I would go further and advocate not only the recognition and pursuit of common interests, but the active attempt to engender them. But that is a stronger claim that we need not develop here.

Dewey identified democracy with a healthy, successful society, which is a common enough assumption by Americans and others in the west. I am not convinced that a society must be democratic for its citizens to be healthy, wealthy, and wise, and to live valuable and meaningful lives. But let us also leave that question for another time. For now, it is enough to notice that even on the fairly modest social and political conception that I am urging here – that a strong and healthy society is characterized by the pursuit of common interests within and across borders – one of the most important features of social life is communication, which returns us to the initial purpose of these remarks.

4. Conclusion

Is there a problem, we might ask, with political communication? The answer of course is 'yes', though in part that is because there are always problems, and anything that is important and complicated is always in need of clearer understanding and of improvement. In a more substantial sense, though, there is the serious problem with political communication of the sort Obama pointed to in his plea that we discussed at the beginning. To a much greater extent than healthy societies can tolerate, we are not understanding one another; we are not engaging in the shared meanings and aspirations that individually and socially we need in order to prosper; we are not making the necessary efforts to identify and pursue common interests. We are, I am afraid, focusing far too much on what separates us than on what we share, and we seem to assume too often that what separates us is more important than what we have in common. That can be true in any given case, but I would submit that genuine and fruitful communication requires of us that we assume the opposite, at least as a point of departure, which is to say that what we share is in fact enough for us to build on, and that we can deal with what separates us as need be. This point is especially significant for political communication and discourse.

If this is right, or at least reasonable, then as we suggested earlier, digital communication, or 'politics by Twitter', does not have to be a problem. We can pursue our common interests through any digital or face-to-face communicative mechanism

that is available to us. The priority is that we recognize the significance of our common interests and that we cultivate the communicative channels necessary to realize them.

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