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Social Media: An Ideal Tool for Public Participation to Promote Deliberative Democracy —— The Case of Public Participation in Refugee Crisis

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Abstract: On social media, the images of a drowned child on the beach continue to spark public's sympathy toward refugees and evoke international outcry over the governments' inability to adequately address the refugee crisis. These photos and refugee crisis can be seen as catalysts that have promoted the chain of political events. It has promoted civic engagement and inspired people to participate in this event. By analyzing this case, we can see the relationships between social media, public participation and deliberative democracy quite clearly; analyze why social media is an ideal tool for public participation; discover how powerful voluntary participation is; explore how the level of citizen participation varied during this process; and understand how public participation promote deliberative democracy by social media comprehensively.

Keywords: Social Media, Public Participation, Deliberative Democracy, Refugee Crisis

1. Introduction

"Increasingly, public participation in governmental decision making is considered part of the very definition of democracy". [8] Without the participation of public, it is impossible to achieve real democracy. "The media are prerequisite for sharping the democratic character of society". [9] Without media, the information cannot even be assessed by the public, not to mention interaction, engagement and participation. And the growth of social media has caused many "to rethink how we understand political activism and citizen engagement". [14] Thus, there is no doubt that public participation and social media are increasingly playing significant roles in the process of promoting democracy. In this paper, a public participation event will be studied, and the significance of social media and public participation in promoting deliberative democracy will be analyzed.

The selected case is public participation in refugee crisis after being touched by a heartbreaking photo named *Humanity washed up ashore*. This photograph became widespread on social media since 2nd September, 2015. It is about a dead three-year-old Syrian boy washed up on a beach. The name of that boy is Alan Kurdi, whose image made global headlines

after he drowned in the Mediterranean Sea, as part of the Syrian refugee crisis. Photograph of his body was taken by journalist Nilufer Demir, who thought that a photo was the only way to render him justice. In her words, this is the only way she can express the scream of Alan Kurdi's little silent body.

This heartbreaking photo soon became viral on social media and has been spread around the world quickly, drawing public's attention, leading to fierce debates among the public, and prompting international responses. The mainstream opinions and attitudes toward refugees have been changed. Citizens from all over world started to help Syrian refugees spontaneously. Under the pressure of strong public opinion, many countries have carried out some policies to help refugees. The public participation in refugee crisis need to be put in a political context and this event is surely very political in its nature.

The political consequences coming out of the public participation on social media can be understood from different perspectives. Both social media and public participation are necessary elements for promoting deliberative democracy in

this event. This case will be studied thoroughly to see the relationships between social media, public participation and deliberative democracy. The main purposes are: analyze why social media is an ideal tool for public participation; discover how powerful voluntary participation is; find out how high the level of citizen participation is; and explore how public participation can promote deliberative democracy by social media comprehensively.

2. Social Media: An Ideal Tool for Public Participation

2.1. A New Interactive Arena

The social media's interactive characteristic provides new arena where people could communicate with others easily. As Butsch (2007) says, the mass's vulnerability was presumed to be greater because they were believed to be isolated individuals, without means to change their views and communicate back to the centers of power. [4] However, the new media can solve this problem and make it possible for public to exchange their opinions about refugees with others and communicate their views back to the power-holders.

In a digital age, more complex types of information resource, such as data sets, platform designs, and witness images, can be shared more effectively and quickly than ever before. [7] There is a massive information sharing going on by using social platforms as everyone can produce and spread "news" freely. And the social media provide a perfect arena for ordinary people to get the information about refugee crisis and spread the photo of the dead Syrian boy. Compared to interactive arenas in reality, social media as a new interactive arena has its own advantages. It is more convenient, affordable, free and flexible for citizens to participate in political events by social media.

2.2. Involve Unlimited Number of Participants

One biggest defect of traditional participation arenas (such as meetings, workshops, etc.) is limited time and space. This further lead to the consequence that traditional way of participation can only involve limited number of participants, which is another biggest flaw. These participants are "representatives", but there always exist many deviations while these few "representatives" representing others' views and opinions in politics.

Social media can solve this big problem for democracy to some extent. Its characteristics enable it to involve unlimited number of participants. Everyone can represent him- or herself so that there are no deviations anymore. And this advantage of social media is very crucial and significant for promoting deliberative democracy.

2.3. Everyone Is Insider through Social Media

"As a foundation for agency, identities can be seen as the centerpiece of civic cultures". [9] "People's subjective view of themselves as members and participants of democracy" [9] is

very significant in the participation process to promote democracy. "Through engaging all stakeholders involved in the event, the distinctions between outsides and insiders are gradually wiped out" [11], and the boundary between "insiders" and "outsides" are becoming even more blurry in cyberspace.

Social media can convert everyone into insiders in the participation process. People from different countries can gain rich, detailed, varied, multifaceted knowledge [11] by themselves and participate in the events happening on the other side of the world through social media. The identity of "'we' that happens to come together under particular conditions on a platform is readily regarded as a typical 'we'". [7] Being engaged in the refugee crisis on social media, citizens will obtain the identities as insiders of this event and view themselves as participants of political events.

2.4. Empower Vulnerable Individuals

Vulnerable individuals' voices can be heard through social media. Democrats should "deal routinely with oppression and silencing to hearing the voices from below of the vulnerable individuals, and to bringing these voices to the table". [11] Social media provides platforms with much lower permit of use for those with less relative social power to participate in political activities. By social media, "they can more readily express their views, and counter those of the more powerful". [9] And then, the voices of the oppressed and the silenced can be heard.

Maximalist participation also stress the value of heterogeneity. [5] As social media can empower vulnerable individuals, the participants involved in this event were more heterogeneous. People have tried their best to help Syrian refugees and force the governments to make some change, regardless of different races, genders, nationalities, communities or social status, etc. During this process, non-elite and non-hegemonic voices did manage to sneak in, and generate interventions in public debates. [15]

3. Powerful Voluntary Participation on Social Media

According to the definitions of Creighton, public participation is "an organized process for involving the public, not something happens accidentally and coincidentally". [8] He also points out there are "four major categories of the continuum of participation: 1. Inform the public. 2. Listen to the public. 3. Engage in problem solving. 4. Develop agreements." [8] This event is not an organized process—governments did not plan to inform the public about Syrian refugees or listen to the public's opinions initially, not to mention developing agreements with public. However, is this event not a public participation process?

As Creighton admits in his book that these definitions of public participation exclude some kinds of participation, his definitions exclude all kinds of voluntary participation and the public participation in refugee crisis is one of them. This event

is "legitimate component of democratic society" and this form of participation is "also important to citizen activism". [8] Although this event is not an organized process, neither did it happen accidentally or coincidentally. As public's political awareness is being aroused and new tools (such as social media) are provided by new technologies, this voluntary participation event happened inevitably.

What's more, voluntary participation can be much more powerful than mandatory participation in some circumstances. Because the participation process is no longer controlled by government or other power-holders. The power is really held in the hand of public. This view will be argued from the four aspects mentioned by Creighton (2005) to illustrate that voluntary participation is more powerful in promoting deliberative democracy in this event.

3.1. Search for Information Actively

"Public information programs are essentially one-way communication to the public. Although public information by itself does not constitute public participation, it remains an essential component of an effective public participation program. People cannot participate unless they receive complete and objective information on which to base their judgments". [8] Access to the information is the prerequisite of participation. Especially in voluntary participation event, distribution of information to the potential participants is essential, because it determines the scale of participation process directly.

In a designed participation process, participants have to wait to be informed. But in a voluntary participation process, citizens can search for information actively. They do not need to wait to be informed by the power-holders anymore. New technologies make the information assessed across several platforms (such as social media) "searchable, movable and share-able". [15] If citizens want to know something about refugee crisis, they can search for the information by themselves. "The open and accessible characteristics of the new media means that traditional centers of power, such as government and media owners, have less informational and ideational control over their environment than previously". [9]

Sometimes, citizens do not even need to search for the information. Social media will send them the information they want directly. And then, they can share the information on social media to help others, who are using social media for other purposes, such as "entertainment or catching up with friends" [17], to gain the information easily. Social media users are also "attempting to persuade their online friends". [16] Here is a quote from *Spreadable Media*, "If an audience is going to spread media content, it will be because it serves their own communicative purpose and fits into conversations they were already having". [13] Refugee crisis hit the point that public are really concerning about for a long time, so it is easier for this photo to become widespread on social media. Both access to and distribution of information about refugee crisis on social media are necessary steps of participation.

3.2. Express Opinions Freely

Citizens do not need to be invited by the government to express their opinions in voluntary participation process. They can express their views, thoughts, and opinions freely on social media. "Today's media environment is reshaping the opportunity structures. Many people are taking up these opportunities, with more chat, messages… than ever before in human history". [15] Public took up the opportunities provided by new communication technologies and use social media to "protest or support something already in motion". [1] Citizens have the desire to express their own opinions and make their voices matter.

"The Twitter hashtag is an affordance of the Twitter platform's design that enables individuals to quickly connect with others and form online political networks". [17] The devastating photo of the dead child has been widely spread on Twitter under the hashtag "#Humanity washed up ashore". It became the top trend on Twitter and caused intense discussion on social media. The international outcry has been sparked over the present refugee crisis and the governments' inability to address it adequately: "If these extraordinarily powerful images cannot change Europe's attitude to refugees, what will?", "There is a global refugee crisis. The UK is not offering proportional asylum in comparison with European counterparts". Conor Pope also said on Twitter: "This little boy lying dead on a beach is heartbreaking. But it must be seen. Because we are not doing enough to help."

Couldry (2010) writes in *Why Voice Matters*, the citizens' voices are crucial to the deliberative democracy. "Citizens intend their discussion to influence a decision the government will make, or a process that will affect how future decisions are made". [12] However, "whether the intended aim of discussion is to produce immediate political effects, it injects public issues into 'everyday politics'". [14] As the governments paid attention to the public's voices on social media and carried out lots of new policies to help refugees, it is surely that the public's voices really matter through social media.

3.3. Help Refugees Spontaneously

In voluntary participation, citizens do not need to wait for the government to engage in problem solving. They can participate in any event and do many things to help solving the problems. Millions of citizens began to help refugees spontaneously on social media. One could also assume that this is based on society's low expectation of the government and humanity. As they said: "We can't allow refugees who have risked their lives to escape horrendous conflict and violence to be left living in dire, unsafe and inhumane conditions in Europe. We must help", it was the citizens' social motives drove them to help refugees.

The activities to help refugees are "largely facilitated by social media coordination". [10] Citizens took advantage of social media's interactive characteristic to contact with each other and do something together. "Many volunteers organize themselves into action groups to assist in welcoming, feeding,

housing, and orienting the newcomers". [10] They have almost made use of all kinds of means online to participate in this big event. A total of millions Tweets were shared and seen by numerous people, making this photo and the sorrowful story behind it widely known. More than 400,000 British people signed the petition, "Accept more asylum seekers and increase support for refugee migrants in the UK", on the website in two days. Twitter has raised a large amount of money for Aylan Kurdi Fund, whose aim is supporting and honoring child victims of war in Syria who are bravely pursuing peace, well-being and education.

3.4. Co-decision Making Process

Carpentier (2011) states, "through the media sphere, citizens can deploy their discursive powers by voicing their views and use their generative powers to become part of the society decision-making processes, or to resist them". [5] Burke also emphasizes the importance of public opinion, and the need for government to be ruled by public opinion. [6] So, the reactions within the public in this event are essential for co-decision making process.

On social media, there was a general sense of solidarity criticized the European leaders' and the international communities' inability. Citizens communicated their views and opinions about refugee crisis to government through social media. The public opinion towards refugee crisis showed citizens' strong will to force government to make some change, and they really had some level of impact on the result. Under the pressure of strong public opinion, many governments began to carry out some policies to help refugees. Public and power-holders collaborated with each other to solve the problem. They have really made co-decision making process came true.

4. High Level of Citizen Participation

The level of citizen participation in this case is quite high. At the beginning, it was at the level of placation. Arnstein (1969) argues that, citizens begin to influence the result while tokenism is still apparent at the level of placation. [3] In order to build reputable images, many governments, communities and organizations have made some change to help refugees. UN called on European Union to take 200,000 more refugees. David Cameron, the prime minister of United Kingdom, said in a speech that the U. K. will take in "thousands" more Syrian refugees. Angela Merkel and Francois Hollande called for mechanism forcing countries to take an obligatory number of refugees. They urged EU-wide refugee resettlement plan. These results indicated that the public participation has wide effects and it has influenced government's policy making process.

Gradually, governments and citizens jointed together to tide over the refugee crisis like partners and power is redistributed through interaction between citizens and governments. [3] Governments encouraged public to help refugees and public responded to the governments actively. Due to the refugee crisis, the Hungarian train stations used to

closed. As European countries began to accept refugees, they are open again now and provide free buses to transport refugees to every corner in Europe. The government of Iceland will take in 50 asylum seekers a year, and there are more than 11, 000 Icelanders express their willing to offer houses to refugees. Governments and citizens were attempting to maximize participation together and appealing others to take part in.

After analyzing this public participation process, we can find out that the level of citizen participation might not be fixed from the beginning to the end in an event. It is also developing in the participation process. In this event, the level of citizen participation varied from placation to partnership also indicates that the public participation has promoted deliberative democracy successfully.

5. Promoting Deliberative Democracy by Social Media

5.1. Mutually Respectful Process

"Democracy without citizen deliberation and participation is ultimately an empty and meaningless concept". [8] The public participation in refugee crisis has promoted deliberative democracy. "One purpose of deliberation is to promote mutually respectful processes of decision-making. It responds to an often-neglected source of moral disagreement—incompatible moral values". [12] Even though government and citizens might consider this event from different standpoints, they still respect each other and make decisions together.

A large quantity of governments around the world used to resist refugees for the sake of the whole countries. However, they still listened to the public' voices through social media and respected citizens' opinions. As the public criticized the governments that they have not done enough to help, many governments carried out new policies to aid refugees. On September 21st, 2015, the European Union approved a plan committing itself to take in 120,000 refugees. European citizens also respected governments' decisions and help refugees actively. Thus, the mutually respectful process of decision-making was accomplished.

5.2. Open to Challenge

According to Gutmann and Thompson (2004), the continuation of debate about refugee crisis on social media illustrates that the process of deliberative democracy is dynamic. [12] "Deliberative democrats care as much about what happens after a decision is made as about what happens before". [12] This is due to the reason that "decision-making processes and the human understanding upon which they depend are imperfect, so that citizens and officials will make some mistakes inevitably when they take collective actions". [12]

Because Kurdi's family has reportedly been trying to reach Canada, his death and the wider refugee crisis has an immediate impact on the domestic Canadian politics. Canada

was accused for refusing to accept the family of Kurdi by many people on social media. Leader of the Opposition Thomas Mulcair said that: "We're worried about how we got here, how the collective international response has been so defective, how Canada has failed so completely". Prime Minister Stephen Harper was forced to address the "heartbreaking situation" of Kurdi's family. The public has helped to correct these mistakes [12] made by government by participation on social media.

In addition, some decisions are reasonable at present, but they might be defective in the future. This is the reason that decisions should be recognized provisional. [12] The decisions made by European governments to help refugees have already caused many problems after a large amount of refugees flooded into Europe. So, the decision-making process must keep open to challenge to correct the mistakes and revise the decisions.

What's more, "in politics most decisions are not consensual. Those citizens and representatives who disagreed with the original decision are more likely to accept it if they believe they have a chance to reverse or modify it in the future. And they are more likely to be able to do so if they have a chance to keep making arguments". [12] Many citizens resist refugees and disagree with the governments' decisions. They can keep making arguments on social media so that their voices can be heard.

5.3. Consider for Refugees or Citizens

"In the modern world, many decisions that a government makes, such as a decision to go to war, obviously affect many people other than its own citizens. It would therefore seem that a theory such as deliberative democracy…would extend its requirements to the international arena". [12] In refugee crisis, decisions that European governments made have affected many Syrian refugees other than their own citizens. However, things are a little complicated here, because the government is doing something good rather than going to a war. But it is unfair and not objective to judge if it is good from one perspective. As a Syrian boy told Hungarian police: "Just stop the war, and we don't want to go to Europe", the governments should also consider refugees' opinions when they make decisions.

Extending the analysis of this concept, governments should also consider for their own citizens. Although many European citizens are welcoming refugees, there are still a large amount of people who do not feel this way. They think refugees might disrupt the peace in their lives, terrorists might disguise as refugees, and the incidence of rape might rise, etc. Besides, they have to afford the cost of refugees' daily life. Polls show most Swedes still welcome refugees, but there have been attacks on asylum centers. The anti-immigrant Sweden Democrats party is set to launch an advertising campaign in foreign media to discourage people from coming. These views can be understood because it is just a part of human nature that cannot be judged as good or evil. Just as Appiah (2007) says, are we really supposed to abjure all local partialities in the name of the vast abstraction—humanity? [2]

In this event, no matter European governments consider for Syrian refugees or European citizens, there is no doubt that widespread participation on social media will help decision makers gaining more complete information and understanding from different perspectives and standpoints so that they can make more considerate decisions. And this process can also contribute to promote deliberative democracy.

6. Conclusion

Social media is surely an ideal tool for public participation to promote democracy. "The internet is placed in the front-lines of media development and seems as a significant resource for political change". [9] It was the internet—especially social media—makes everyone can access to and distribute the information easily. Social media can involve unlimited number of participants, empower vulnerable individuals and convert everyone into insiders in the participation process. Participation is ever more mediated and it is a promising trend that people are exploring new approaches for participation.

As public's political awareness is being aroused and new tools (such as social media) are provided, this public participation event happened inevitably. In some circumstances, voluntary participation can be much more powerful than mandatory participation. The level of participation in this event is very high—it varied from placation to partnership. Government and citizens were attempting to work together and they have really made co-decision making process came true.

In order to promote deliberative democracy, government and citizens have to respect each other. The decision-making process must always keep open to challenge. Widespread participation on social media will help decision makers gaining more complete information and understanding from different perspectives and standpoints so that they can make more considerate decisions. The fact that policy towards refugee crisis has been affected by public's reactions further illustrates that the public participation on social media has the power to effect politics and promote democracy.

Participating on social media may "contribute to not only the proliferation of a networked society but also it may facilitate a healthier democracy. Or at least, a more participatory one". [18] According to Dahlgren (2009), "it is self-evident that the future of democracy lays in its youth and the younger citizens are less likely than older generations to assert that democracy involves obligations……This age cohort is the first one to grow up with the Internet as part of their normal environment, and their competencies here not surprisingly surpass older generations". [9] As the younger generations prefer voluntary participation and they can handle new tools very well, it is an inevitable trend that more voluntary public participation on social media will take place in the future. And such kind of public participation should be considered as a promise for political progress. [1]

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