

Research Article

Kristina Broučková* and Kateřina Labutta Kubíková

Audience Democracy 2.0: Re-Depersonalizing Politics in the Digital Age

<https://doi.org/10.1515/humaff-2023-0039>

Received March 28, 2023; accepted September 29, 2023

Abstract: This paper aims to explore the changes that representative democracy is experiencing as a result of the transformation of communication channels. In particular, it focuses on non-electoral representation in the form of movements that emerged throughout the 2010s and that were defined by a strong social media presence (e.g. Occupy Wall Street, Black Lives Matter, #MeToo, Yellow Vests). Despite not attempting to gain political power via elections, these movements, through on-line and offline activities, nonetheless managed to shape the realm of politics. The paper thus analyzes the movements' inner representative dynamics and the ways they reshape representative democracy. It engages with a critical reading of Hanna Pitkin's concept of symbolic representation and draws on Michael Saward's framework of the representative claim to reevaluate Bernard Manin's notion of "audience" democracy as today's form of representative government. The argument is that, as digital development provides citizens with less demanding modes of political participation and platforms of representative claim-making, it enhances the sphere of opinion formation and the role of non-electoral representation. This sphere entails a tendency towards a re-depersonalization of politics, thus leading towards the transformation of "audience" democracy.

Keywords: audience democracy; personalization; social media; symbolic representation; representative claim; non-electoral movements

Kristina Broučková and Kateřina Labutta Kubíková contributed equally to this article.

***Corresponding author: Kristina Broučková**, Department of Political Science, Faculty of Arts, Charles University, Voršilská 1, 110 00, Prague 1, Prague, Czech Republic, E-mail: kristina.brouckova@ff.cuni.cz. <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-2774-116X>

Kateřina Labutta Kubíková, Department of Political Science, Faculty of Arts, Charles University, Voršilská 1, 110 00, Prague 1, Prague, Czech Republic, E-mail: katerina.labutta@gmail.com. <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-9535-7675>

1 Introduction

The long-standing “crisis of representation”, which has been a subject of debate among political theorists, has caused some to believe that we are witnessing the end of representative politics (Tormey, 2015). Others, however, maintain that we are instead witnessing an erosion of one form of representative democracy as the representative government transforms (Manin, 1997; Urbinati, 2016). This transformation – or in the words of Bernard Manin, *metamorphosis* – has been brought about by the transformation of communication channels, as well as other factors, that challenge the principles of representative government. According to Manin (1997), the most recent metamorphosis experienced by representative democracy is the one to *audience democracy*. Manin links this current form of representative government to a society shaped by new forms of mass media (e.g. television broadcasting) and the related personalization of politics.

The latest research seems to corroborate Manin’s assertion about the tendency towards the personalization of politics (e.g. Karvonen, 2010; Rahat & Kenig, 2018). While we concur with Manin’s stance on the growing role of personalities in electoral politics, we believe it is necessary to take a closer look into the sphere of non-electoral representation to gain a better understanding of the current state of representative democracy. We explore the changes being brought about in representative democracy that could not have been accounted for in Manin’s work (i.e. rapid digital development). The focus on representation as a matter not only of *will* but also of *judgement* in contemporary theoretical debates (Näsström, 2011, p. 502) allows us to focus on political actors unwilling to compete in elections, as well as on the digital platforms they may use to make their representative claims. When referring to the role of judgment or the sphere of opinion formation, we draw on Nadia Urbinati’s diarchic model of representative democracy. The diarchic model ensures that citizens possess power other than the will expressed by voting (Urbinati, 2014, pp. 22–24). We adopt Urbinati’s view on the sphere of public opinion as an informal space serving as a buffer zone in which freedom of speech is exercised and where political opinions are formed.

This paper argues that as digital development provides citizens with less demanding modes of political participation and platforms of representative claim-making, it enhances the sphere of opinion formation and the role of non-electoral representation. The thrust of the argument is that this sphere also entails a tendency towards the re-depersonalization of politics, leading towards the transformation of “audience” democracy as we have known it. The paper then goes on to examine the inner representational dynamics of non-electoral movements, which often lack a leading figure. Despite their self-proclaimed distance from representative institutions and their disavowal of “representatives”, they often adopt a slogan or visual symbol (e.g. France’s Yellow Vest Protests). In the digital age, these slogans or

visual symbols attached to the movements can be presented to an audience not only through traditional media channels but also on social media platforms, using these platforms' specific devices (e.g. hashtags).

Over the past two decades, digital development has enabled numerous global and local movements to grow a strong social media presence (e.g. Occupy Wall Street, Indignados, Black Lives Matter, #MeToo, Yellow Vests, Extinction Rebellion, to name a few). Scholars have given these movements various descriptors, with some of them, such as the Occupy movement, being labelled populist (e.g. Aslanidis, 2017). Other scholars, however, have continued labelling them as popular movements, social movements, or protest movements, asserting that they do not fit the criteria of populism, as they lack a leader and are unwilling to gain political power through electoral procedures (Urbinati, 2014, 2017). To avoid terminological ambiguity, we refer to these movements as “non-electoral movements” due to their self-proclaimed unwillingness to become involved in electoral procedures or take part in representative institutions. Nevertheless, despite not occurring in representative institutions, the online and offline actions of these movements have not only profoundly shaped political discourses but have also contributed to shaping the sphere of electoral politics.¹

In the first section of the paper, we adopt a perspective of social media as an environment of micro-acts of political participation (Margetts et al., 2015) and reflect on the shift from the concept of collective action towards connective action (Bennett & Segerberg, 2013). Then we engage in a critical reading of the concept of symbolic representation (Pitkin, 1967) by leading theorists of the constructivist turn. Next, we turn to Michael Saward's theoretical framework of the representative claim, which allows us to study representation as a relational process between separate constituents – specifically, to distinguish the maker from the subject of representation. Through several examples, we show how even without representative figures, inanimate representative symbols may constitute and “stand for” – or be perceived as “standing for” – collective identities. Lastly, drawing on Manin, we posit that the transformation of communication channels experienced by representative democracy in the digital age leads to the transformation of “audience” democracy in itself. Therefore, as we see this form of representative democracy transforming, we propose rethinking the concept of “audience” democracy, and refer to its transformed version as “audience democracy 2.0”.

¹ For instance, despite the Occupy movement's short-lived existence, scholars point out its long-lasting effect in shaping the discourse about economic inequality (Gaby & Caren, 2016). Furthermore, they tend to associate the discursive shift with the rise in support for U.S. presidential candidate Bernie Sanders in the years that followed (Strauss, 2018, p. 35).

2 Micro-Acts of Political Participation on Social Media: From Collective to Connective Action?

Apart from mass media, today's social and political reality is profoundly shaped by social media. However, the influence of online platforms on human behaviour or political participation remains a conundrum in many ways. Some scholars have raised the question of how elective political representatives may use relatively new technologies to pursue electoral gains (e.g. Duncombe, 2019; Gerbaudo, 2018; Moffitt, 2016). Others have focused on the influence of digital communication on the collective action of social movements and the related question of collective identities (e.g. McDonald, 2015). The 2010s saw the emergence of numerous movements, protests, and uprisings that distanced themselves from representative politics, prompting a scholarly interest in the impact of social media on collective action and people's claims of not needing political parties or leaders (e.g. Margetts et al., 2015). In their 2015 work, *Political Turbulence: How Social Media Shape Collective Action*,² Helen Margetts, Peter John, Scott Hale, and Taha Yasseri argue that social media creates an environment of micro-action, social information, and visibility. The authors argued that social media enable users to undertake only tiny acts of political participation, as these "micro-acts" (e.g. updating status on Facebook, tweeting or retweeting, signing an electronic petition, sharing political news or videos, posting a political comment, etc.) demand from them only a micro-donation of their time, effort, or money (Margetts et al., 2015, pp. 48–54). Although these micro-acts may initially appear insignificant, they can eventually expand into a large-scale mobilization. The micro-act of hashtag-sharing, for example, was pivotal in the emergence of the Black Lives Matter movement. In 2014, alongside hashtags related to Michael Brown (#Ferguson, #MikeBrown, #HandsUpDontShoot) and Eric Garner (#EricGarner, #ICantBreathe), two Black men killed by police officers, social media users started to share the hashtag #BlackLivesMatter in an attempt to draw attention to the disproportionate number of African Americans dying during police arrests. Online mobilization subsequently turned into large-scale offline mobilization, resurfacing over the years as similar cases kept occurring (2015, pp. 58–61).

Compared to membership in political parties or organizations, social media has managed to mobilize people who would otherwise be uninterested in participating in politics. Furthermore, their platforms offer users social information about the intentions and actions of other users, which they take into account when deciding

2 In the book, the authors work with the broad definition of collective action as "any activity undertaken by citizens with the aim of contributing to public goods" (Margetts et al., 2015, p. 9).

whether to participate. At the same time, as these platforms allow some users to seek visibility, they also enable others to remain anonymous (2015, pp. 68–71).

The decrease in the threshold of political participation due to social media has prompted scholars to consider its possible implications for the logic of collective action. Bennett and Segerberg argue that digital media, in reducing the cost of political participation, changed the logic of action, which they instead labelled as “connective”. The logic of collective action, which is defined by the dilemma of whether or not the costs of political participation outweigh the marginal gains, makes higher demands on formal organization and presses people into adopting a particular social identity. Digital media remove this predicament by allowing users to organize themselves based on interconnectedness without having to identify with anybody else (Bennett & Segerberg, 2013, pp. 27–29). According to Bennett and Segerberg, this new logic “does not require strong organizational control or the symbolic construction of a united ‘we’” (2013, p. 28). In other words, the logic of connective action – in contrast to that of collective action – does not require the formation of collective identities. Hence the replacement of the “collective” with the “connective”.

While we agree with Bennett and Segerberg’s position on the correlative relationship between the low cost of participation and the demand on organizing due to the connectedness provided by social media platforms, we dispute their stance on the needlessness of identity constitution. Unlike Bennett and Segerberg, we consider micro-acts of participation on social media to be constitutive elements in the process of constructing a united “we”. We also acknowledge that in the social sciences and humanities, the term “identity” encompasses multiple, often ambiguous meanings (Brubaker & Cooper, 2000). When we refer to “identity”, we are alluding to the concept of people not discovering their true identity, but instead “any identity [...] is constructed through a variety of identifications with socially available objects as images and signifiers” (Mouffe, 2022, p. 37). We subscribe to the idea that “an important dimension of politics is the construction of identities through a process of identification” (ibid, p. 37).

The following section thus focuses on the concept of symbolic representation and its critical reading by scholars of the so-called constructivist turn to explore how identities may be constructed through the process of representative claim-making in the digital age. We subscribe here to the assertion that slogans like the signature declaration of the Occupy movement, “We are the 99 %”, should not be read as people’s refusal to be considered representatives. Instead, the slogan may be perceived as a symbol “standing for” people, allowing them not to “act for” anyone but to “act as” someone (Disch, 2019, p. 2). Slogans and cultural objects have a group-defining effect and are thus integral to acts of representation and the groups’ representative claim (Disch, 2021, p. 19). In the case of the Occupy

movement, this “claim broke open a public conversation about radical income inequality in the twenty-first century, galvanizing new constituencies and new demands and leading to measurable – if not revolutionary – political impacts” (2021, p. 47). We posit that the online audience can share the slogans as symbols and engage with them via social media, claiming to be, or not to be, representative of a group’s identity. By claiming this, they participate by “acting as” makers of representation and as such, are making collective identities visible.

3 Symbolic Representation and Representative Claim-Making: Representation Beyond Elections

In her seminal work, *The Concept of Representation*, Hanna Pitkin introduced her view of symbolic representation as a form of “standing for”. Inanimate symbols (e.g. the flag) or animative ones (e.g. the king in the constitutional monarchy) may be believed to “stand for” a referent who may (be made to) feel symbolized by them. To Pitkin, however, symbolic representation does not supply criteria for responsiveness and renders representation prone to manipulation. As the judgment is based entirely on people’s beliefs, there is no way to judge whether the symbol represents well (Pitkin, 1967, pp. 92–111).

Numerous authors have contested Pitkin’s view of symbolic representation, arguing that Pitkin worked “on the problematic presupposition of the existence both of an unambiguously defined will or interest and an unambiguously defined social group from which the will or interest emanated” (Bíba, 2015, p. 159). The idea that political representation cannot be thought of in terms of responsiveness, which assumes that the represented is a pre-given, unambiguous entity with interests and a will untainted by the process of representation itself, is fundamental to the paradigm shift known as the constructivist turn (Ballaci, 2022, p. 1). Scholars of this turn often dispute Pitkin’s rejection of symbolic representation as politically irrelevant or fully undemocratic because of its (in Pitkin’s view) passive nature and susceptibility to manipulation. They object to Pitkin’s stance, as it does not allow us to see the active making of symbols and their reception as a central aspect of political representation (2022, p. 4).

Michael Saward contests Pitkin’s conclusions in two interconnected steps that align with the general critique of the constructivist turn. Firstly, he criticizes Pitkin’s contextualizing of political representation as “acting in the interest of the represented, in a manner responsive to them” (Pitkin, 1967, p. 209) as if the represented were “unproblematically given”. According to Saward, this unidirectional approach leads to a restriction of focus on the representative and omits the constitutive process

of the represented. Secondly, Pitkin's condemnation of the *passive* "standing for" in favour of the *active* "acting for" results in a denial of the legitimacy of a category of *active* symbolic or aesthetic representation and "screens out the idea of 'representations' as depictions or portraits of the represented" (Saward, 2006, pp. 300–301). According to Saward, these categories limit us from understanding the dynamics within the process of representation, i.e. exploring what is going on *in* representation. He thus proposes thinking about representation as a claim-making process which can be encapsulated in the five-constituent formula:

A maker of representations (M) puts forward a subject (S) which stands for an object (O) which is related to a referent (R) and is offered to an audience (A). (ibid, p. 302)

The process of representation starts with the maker claiming that the subject – whether themselves, someone else, or something else – can stand for or act for an object that is related to, but distinct from, the referent. The object is an image of an existing constituency to which the maker refers. Like a painter, the claimant makes the referent visible by constructing its visual or verbal image. Saward supports Bruno Latour's idea that politics is a "work of composition", meaning that constituencies exist prior to their constitution in politics, hence there is always a referent. Yet it is the active constitution that makes it present in politics (Saward, 2006, p. 312).

Therefore, the maker must demonstrate their creative abilities by constructing an image of the referent (object) in front of the audience by presenting themselves, someone else, or something else as a subject capable of its representation. This places a profound emphasis on the performative aspect of the process, making representation independent from the institutional aspect, yet not in opposition to it, since the institutions themselves are performed (ibid, p. 311). This emphasis consequently directs the attention towards non-electoral modes of representation. As Saward states: "Representing is performing, is action by actors, and the performance contains or adds up to a claim that someone is or can be 'representative'" (ibid, p. 302). This allows Saward to think of non-electoral claims of would-be representatives who do not – or in certain contexts cannot – aspire to subject the claim to the people's will in elections. However, they still maintain their claim to stand for or act for a constituency in front of an audience hoping that the audience passes favourable judgment over their claim.

Today, social media is one of the forums of opinion where the claims of unelected would-be representatives can be made and whose influence can also be observed in electoral politics.³ In the next sections, however, we do not focus any further on the

³ See, for instance, *Social Media and European Politics: Rethinking Power and Legitimacy in the Digital Era*, edited by Mauro Barisione & Asimina Michailidou (Barisione & Michailidou, 2017), in which the authors explore the influence of social media in European politics.

influence of informal actors (e.g. non-electoral movements) on formal institutions, or political decision-making. Instead, we elaborate on how non-electoral movements constitute themselves through the claim-making process when the claimant does not offer themselves as the one figure capable of representing the identity they refer to. Consequently, we explore how social media facilitates this process and how it possibly alters Bernard Manin's notion of *audience democracy*.

4 Separating the Maker of Representation from the Subject of Representation

Saward's five-constituent formula allows for contemplation of representation when the maker and the subject remain separate and different, i.e. the maker does not present themselves as a subject of representation but offers someone or something else as a symbol of representation. For instance, Marx (maker) presented the working class (subject) as a symbol of revolutionary hope (object) to the would-be members of that class (audience). Similarly, anti-globalization demonstrators (makers) set up themselves and their movements (subject) as representatives of the oppressed and marginalized (object) to the Western governments (audience) (Saward, 2010, p. 37). These two examples show that representation can occur even when the maker does not present themselves as acting for or standing for the subject and instead presents some other entity (the working class or the movement) as representative. More recent examples include the statement of the Yellow Vests movement, launched on YouTube on November 30, 2018, in reaction to the French government's attempts to communicate with the movement's representatives (Hayat, 2022, pp. 1040–1041).

We do not want “representatives” who would end up talking for us! [...] Let's not get ensnared in representation and political manoeuvring. This is not the time to hand over our voice to a handful of people, even if they seem honest. They must listen to all of us or to no one! [...] We will not let ourselves be ruled. [...] No to self-proclaimed representatives and spokespersons! Let's take back the power over our lives! Long live the yellow vests in their diversity! LONG LIVE THE POWER OF THE PEOPLE, BY THE PEOPLE, FOR THE PEOPLE! (Cit. from Hayat, 2022, p. 1041)

The declaration, released by a group of Yellow Vests from the small town of Commercy in the east of France (Hayat, 2022, p. 1040), can be interpreted as follows: We (makers) proclaim the Yellow Vests movement (subject) as a representative of all the French negatively affected by the governmental politics (object) – a portrayal referring to the actual constituency of French people “in flesh and blood” (referent), who are in reality negatively affected by governmental policies. This construction of

a constituency symbolized by the movement is presented in front of all the people (audiences) watching (i.e. protesters, potential protesters or other potential supporters, the French government, etc.). Unlike Samuel Hayat, we do not regard the claims of the Yellow Vests movement as unrepresentative claims but as representative claims in which the makers of representation offer a symbol (the movement) as the subject of representation instead of themselves. The identity of French people discontent with governmental policies is not constituted around any leader who would offer himself as its embodiment. It is rather constituted around the “standing for” symbol in the form of (the name of) the movement that was acknowledged by the audiences and by particular audience accepted as representative of some identity.

This leads us to consider the role of the audience – or rather, the audiences in the claim-making process. Although the claim may be targeted at one intended audience, it is often presented in front of multiple, sometimes overlapping audiences. Other times, it reaches unintended audiences (Saward, 2010, p. 25). And sometimes, the audience may not even include the referred constituency (ibid, pp. 49–51). Along with the maker of representation, the audience belongs among the creative actors of the process. In Saward’s words: “Representative claims can only work, or even exist, if audiences acknowledge them in some way, and can absorb, reject, or accept them, or otherwise engage with them” (ibid, pp. 48–49). Thus, the audience’s activity dwells not only in its ability to reject or accept the claim based on the maker’s offer. It also resides in the audience’s cardinal role of acknowledging the claim and the capability to engage with the claim, which, for instance, can be “read back” or counterclaimed (ibid, pp. 53–55). Since the identity of a portrayed constituency is always partial, as well as selective (ibid, pp. 77–79), the claim remains open to contestation from the audience.

As the representative claim, first and foremost, makes visible the constituency, the claim itself needs to be, first and foremost, made visible to be acknowledged by the audiences. In the next section, we explore how the transformation of communication channels has led to higher visibility of (non-electoral) representative claims, and we consider the implications for contemporary *audience democracy* in the digital age, which we refer to as “audience democracy 2.0”.

5 Towards Audience Democracy 2.0?

In his 1997 book, *The Principles of Representative Government*, Manin presents three (ideal) forms of representative government – parliamentarianism, party democracy, and “audience” democracy – and the two major transformations that have led to the various metamorphoses of representative government. Here, we focus on these metamorphoses, particularly the one to *audience democracy*. We focus mainly on two aspects: first, the relationship between representatives and the represented

regarding the level of personalization, and second, the public opinion space and the formation of collective identities. Consequently, we draw conclusions regarding the problem of the personalization of politics. To reach our conclusions, we use the example of #MeToo and show that Manin's concept of *audience democracy* is already insufficient due to the re-depersonalizing tendencies that we find in the sphere of non-electoral representation.⁴ It should be noted that Manin is concerned with representative government based on the principles of elected representation, and non-electoral representation is thus irrelevant to his work. However, given the most recent transformation of communication channels (i.e. the rise of social media as a powerful platform of opinion), we consider it inevitable to take into account the platforms available for would-be representatives to make representative claims and shape politics from outside of electoral institutions. In this vein, we suggest gaining a more accurate grasp of contemporary representative democracy.

The first transformation, from *parliamentarianism*, was characterized by a personal relationship between the representatives (notables) and the represented and a separate public opinion space from parliament, to *party democracy*. In the second form of representative government, whose installation was fuelled by the extension of voting rights, people voted for a person who had borne the colours of a party, regardless of the trust they may or may not have had for a particular person. Electoral attitudes in party democracy were therefore determined by social identity, and representation reflected social diversity and social conflicts (Manin, 1997, pp. 206–211). For *party democracy*, the symbol of representation became the political party rather than a particular person. Thus, we can speak of a depersonalized relationship between the representatives (party activists and bureaucrats) and their constituents. The second transformation is related to the change in communication channels. While *party democracy* was characterized by the (party) press in the case of *audience democracy*, we encounter mass media that are no longer associated with specific political parties or actors.

Audience democracy is characterized by the (return of) a personalized relationship between the representatives (“media experts”) and the represented (ibid, p. 219), which is significantly impacted by the rise of mass media. Another aspect is electoral instability caused by “the reactive dimension of voting predominates” (ibid,

4 By “re-depersonalisation”, we are not suggesting that representative democracy has returned to the state of *party democracy*. Rather, we are arguing that in the context of the most recent transformation of communication channels, representative democracy reincorporates a tendency that was present in the past. Similarly, to mass media, social media enable citizens to forge a relationship with a particular individual claiming to represent them, whether that individual is running for office or not, by disseminating an image of herself. However, we suggest that the claim-making process on social media might as well be initiated without this figure and her image and with the help of symbols claimed to stand for collective identities by social media users.

p. 222). This reactive aspect, present in the selection of representatives, implies the role of citizens who become the audience, which reacts to representatives who participate in creating cleavages in society, but also reacts “to the terms that have been presented on the political stage” (ibid, p. 223).

The complexity of the issues and the unpredictability of social and political realities have transformed political competition. Individual parties and their leaders no longer focus on policy programmes and promises but on the “image” of themselves and their ability to differentiate themselves from their opponents. Notably, it is precisely these “images” that shape the personal relationship between the representative and their constituents, since “the personal trust that the candidate inspires is a more adequate basis of selection than the evaluation of plans for future actions” (ibid, p. 221). This shift from clearly defined political platforms to vague images is a result of the complexity of the issues mentioned above.

The rise of mass media has also greatly influenced public opinion. In the past, for party democracy, political parties had their party press, but for audience democracy, the media (the press, television, radio) are not tied to political parties and thus appear as impartial actors (ibid, p. 228). Therefore, information is disseminated among citizens regardless of their political preferences or socioeconomic cleavages. Manin drew attention to the role of public opinion polls in significantly shaping public opinion (ibid, pp. 229–231). In the context of non-partisan media and the existence of opinion polls (as in the case of parliamentarianism), public opinion does not necessarily overlap with electoral expression. The role that Manin attributed to the mass media in the context of public opinion (i.e. as a source of non-partisan information) does not apply to the rise of social media. This sphere is not purely informational but also shapes representational claims that do not necessarily compete for election votes.

Social media has altered the sphere of opinion, and today we may observe that it has provided new room for citizen (online and offline) action and new forms of political (micro)participation that can influence even the sphere of formal institutions and electoral politics. The not-so-recent decline in voter turnout and other modes of political participation (e.g. party membership) thus should not be interpreted as a decline in political participation per se. Manin suggested that in *audience democracy* the decline of party-based politics transforms into politics where the represented tend to forge their relationship based on the would-be representative’s image disseminated through mass media. We suggest that in *audience democracy 2.0*, this tendency is enriched by the changes brought about by digital communication to the sphere of opinion, which also influences the sphere of formal institutions. As elaborated in the first section, social media facilitates new – and often more accessible – ways of participating in politics. The #MeToo movement, we argue, shows how this change demonstrates itself in the process of collective identity

constitution outside of the sphere of formal institutions. Along with the aforementioned movements, the #MeToo movement not only made a splash in the discourse of sexual harassment at the time (Mohammed, 2019), but it also appears to have had a long-lasting effect on the sphere of opinion formation. It achieved this effect without disseminating an image of one specific figure claiming to be the one representative to be trusted by the audience, but rather with the help of a slogan that has reached a wide audience through the micro-acts of political participation performed on (yet not exclusively) social media.

On 15 October 2017, in response to the sexual assault allegations against film producer Harvey Weinstein, American actress Alyssa Milano asked her Twitter followers to reply to her tweet by writing “me too” if they *too* had experienced sexual harassment or assault. The following day, she had 55,000 replies, and it became a trending topic on Twitter. Within 24 h, Facebook had recorded 12 million posts from 45 million users in the United States using the hashtag, and by January 2018, 6.5 million tweets had used the hashtag (Hosterman et al., 2018, pp. 69–70). Despite the phrase “me too” having previously been used as a symbol of solidarity with the victims of sexual abuse for the first time by civil rights activist Tarana Burke in 2006, it was not until 11 years later that this statement reached a worldwide audience, this time stirring up wider public debate (ibid, p. 69).

To place the #MeToo movement within Saward’s framework, Alyssa Milano and others who decided to share the hashtag (makers) claimed the “#Metoo” declaration as a symbol (subject) standing for those experiencing sexual violence (object) in front of social media users (audiences) referring to women who had in their lifetime experienced sexual violence (referent). By sharing the symbol (i.e. engaging with the claim online), the line between the makers and audiences blurs. Taking the micro-acts allows social media users to acknowledge the claim as someone’s audience and to “act as” makers of the claim in front of others (i.e. in front of “their” audience) by making a claim visible again. Yet, there remains an element of distinction among the makers, as an American actress with a large social media following gets to “act as” a maker with lower effort than someone who does not possess the same status. Furthermore, behind many influential movements stand activists whose efforts to make identities visible go beyond online activities.

Consequently, we do not suggest that social media is new in terms of “making” symbols, as we acknowledge that “standing for” symbols is an inherent part of the process of identity constitution, regardless of social media. What is new, however, is the extent to which social media makes the symbols visible and the number of people who can make them and claim them as representative. What is also new is how, by allowing the audiences to take only micro-acts of participation when engaging with representative claims, it enables the creation of collective identity in the process. Although it is not always easy to distinguish which micro-acts of online participation

may count as an acceptance of the claim and what may count as a rejection or a counterclaim, all the engagement “makes” the representative claim. This all renders social media an influential platform of non-electoral representation and a possible source of newly (re)establishing tendencies within representative democracy, such as (re)depersonalization.

6 Conclusion

The famous “We are the 99 %” slogan, which originated from an anonymous blog post on Tumblr, was instrumental in the emergence of Occupy Wall Street, one of the first movements that created a “compelling and easily digestible spectacle” (Lowndes, 2017, p. 235) with the assistance of social media. Since then, many other movements have emerged with the assistance of social media, demonstrating their capacity to not only be a nonnegligible platform of opinion formation, but also a crucial platform for forming identities capable of taking collective action and influencing the political realm. Through the micro-acts of political participation, the respective identities can be made visible with little effort and without a figure in which people put their trust. This figure tends to be replaced by slogans, declarations, movement names, or visual symbols attached to them (e.g. “Long live the Yellow Vests!” or the yellow vest itself) and shared on social media platforms. In this paper, we have thus suggested that personalization is not the only tendency we can observe in today’s politics. Non-electoral movements today can make representative claims despite the absence of a single figure claiming to represent the respective identity.

Over two decades ago, Manin observed that the most recent metamorphosis (to *audience democracy*) had absorbed some elements (e.g. the personalization of politics) from the earlier form of representative government. Nevertheless, this paper has shown that this is not necessarily the case, especially in non-electoral representation, where we can also witness the process of the depersonalization of politics. In the digital age, a would-be representative does not rely exclusively on mass media to facilitate their entrance into politics. Furthermore, to make representative claims and enter the political realm, one does not need to present themselves as the one figure capable of representing an identity, but rather they can instead offer a representative symbol. This prompts us to speak of a tendency towards re-depersonalization, which we have identified as especially prominent within the inner representative dynamics of non-electoral movements. This tendency, which we have found in the sphere of opinion, somewhat distorts Manin’s notion of *audience democracy* and urges us to assert that we are facing a transformation of the current form of representative government, which we propose to call *audience democracy 2.0*.

Acknowledgments: A previous version of this article was presented at the graduate workshop “Non-electoral Representation in Contemporary Democracies: A Challenge for Representative Democracy?” The authors would like to thank the participants for an inspiring discussion of the text. The authors also sincerely thank their colleagues from the Department of Political Science for valuable comments and a thought-provoking debate at the intern seminar. A special thanks to Jan Biba for his careful reading of the article’s early drafts and invaluable suggestions.

Research funding: The article was supported by the project “Grant Schemes at CU” (reg. no. CZ.02.2.69/0.0/0.0/19_073/0016935).

Declaration: All individuals listed as authors qualify as authors and have approved the submitted version. Their work is original and is not under consideration by any other journal. They have permission to reproduce any previously published material.

References

- Aslanidis, P. (2017). Populism and social movements. In C. R. Kaltwasser, P. Ostiguy, P. A. Taggart, & P. O. Espejo (Eds.), *The Oxford handbook of populism* (pp. 305–325). Oxford University Press.
- Ballaci, G. (2022). Constructivism, democracy and symbolic representation: A formal/stylistic perspective. *Representation*, 1–18. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00344893.2022.2143414>
- Barisone, M., & Michailidou, A. (Eds.). (2017). *Social media and European politics: Rethinking power and legitimacy in the digital era*. Springer.
- Bennett, L., & Segerberg, A. (2013). *The logic of connective action: Digital media and the personalisation of contentious politics*. Cambridge University Press.
- Biba, J. (2015). Symbolic representation and the paradox of responsive performativity. *Human Affairs*, 25(2), 153–163.
- Brubaker, R., & Cooper, F. (2000). Beyond “identity”. *Theory and Society*, 29(1), 1–47.
- Disch, L. (2019). Introduction: The end of representative politics? In L. J. Disch, L. van de Sande, & N. Urbinati (Eds.), *The constructivist turn in political representation* (pp. 1–18). Edinburgh University Press.
- Disch, L. J. (2021). *Making constituencies: Representation as mobilization in mass democracy*. University of Chicago Press.
- Duncombe, C. (2019). The politics of Twitter: Emotions and the power of social media. *International Political Sociology*, 13, 409–429.
- Gaby, S., & Caren, N. (2016). The rise of inequality: How social movements shape discursive fields. *Mobilization: An International Quarterly*, 21(4), 413–429.
- Gerbaudo, P. (2018). Social media and populism: An elective affinity? *Media, Culture & Society* 2018, 40(5), 745–775.
- Hayat, S. (2022). Unrepresentative claims: Speaking for oneself in a social movement. *American Political Science Review*, 116(3), 1038–1050.
- Hosterman, A. R., Johnson, N. R., Stouffer, R., & Herring, S. (2018). Twitter, social support messages, and the #MeToo movement. *Journal of Social Media in Society*, 7(2), 69–91.
- Karvonen, L. (2010). *The personalisation of politics: A study of parliamentary democracies*. ECPR Press.

- Lowndes, J. (2017). Populism in the United States. Populism and social movements. In C. R. Kaltwasser, P. Ostiguy, P. A. Taggart, & P. O. Espejo (Eds.), *The Oxford handbook of populism* (pp. 232–247). Oxford University Press.
- Manin, B. (1997). *The principles of representative government*. Cambridge University Press.
- Margetts, H., John, P., Hale, S., & Yasseri, T. (2015). *Political turbulence: How social media shape collective action*. Princeton University Press.
- McDonald, K. (2015). From Indymedia to Anonymous: Rethinking action and identity in digital cultures. *Information, Communication & Society*, 18(8), 968–982.
- Moffitt, B. (2016). The global rise of populism: Performance, political style, and representation. Stanford University Press.
- Mohammed, D. (2019). Managing argumentative potential in the networked public sphere. In *Proceedings of the ninth conference of the international society for the study of argumentation* (pp. 813–822). Sic Sat: International Center for the Study of Argumentation.
- Mouffe, C. (2022). *Towards a green democratic revolution: Left populism and the power of affects*. Verso Books.
- Näsström, S. (2011). Where is the representative turn going? *European Journal of Political Theory*, 10(4), 501–510.
- Pitkin, H. F. (1967). *The concept of representation*. University of California Press.
- Rahat, G., & Kenig, O. (2018). *From party politics to personalised politics? Party change and political personalisation in democracies*. Oxford University Press.
- Saward, M. (2006). The representative claim. *Contemporary Political Theory*, 5, 297–318.
- Saward, M. (2010). *The representative claim*. Oxford University Press.
- Strauss, C. (2018). Engaged by the spectacle of protest: How Bystanders became invested in Occupy Wall Street. In J. R. Friedman & C. Strauss (Eds.), *Political sentiments and social movements: The person in politics and culture* (pp. 33–60). Palgrave Macmillan.
- Tormey, S. (2015). *The end of representative politics*. John Wiley & Sons.
- Urbinati, N. (2014). *Democracy disfigured: Opinion, truth, and the people*. Harvard University Press.
- Urbinati, N. (2016). Reflections on the meaning of the “Crisis of Democracy”. *Democratic Theory*, 3(1), 6–31.
- Urbinati, N. (2017). Populism and the principle of majority. In C. R. Kaltwasser, P. Ostiguy, P. A. Taggart, & P. O. Espejo (Eds.), *The Oxford handbook of populism* (pp. 571–589). Oxford University Press.