Beppe Grillo's 'Five Star' movement shows the probable limitations of the internet as a replacement for politics

By Democratic Audit

*In a recent post, the RSA's Adam Lent argued that politics could learn from the internet in order to stem the tide of political apathy and disengagement. But can (and perhaps more importantly, should) politics actually be more like the internet? Democratic Audit's co-Director **Jonathan Hopkin** argues that events in Italy show that it is much too soon to draw conclusions from their unique web-based experience, but it does suggest that the internet is far from a panacea.*

The Comedian/Politician Beppe Grillo, Credit: 20centisimi, CC BY 2.0

Adam Lent's post on politics and the internet puts forward an intriguing and provocative interpretation of political alienation in British politics. Lent argues that political disengagement is the result of politics following a fundamentally hierarchical pattern of intermediation between citizens and government, where the political agenda is controlled by elected career politicians with little popular input. This type of politics may chime with the life experiences of older voters, but younger generations of citizens prefer the 'disintermediation' made possible by the internet, which can 'create platforms where users can choose from a vast pool of options to shape what gets read, bought and funded'. Not surprisingly, the stultifying climate of Westminster politics, with its career politicians and intense focus on the established media, is desperately unappealing to younger citizens.

This analysis certainly fits the observed facts of British political life. The political class is increasingly closed in on itself, the press and the media are rapidly losing market share, and standard forms of political participation such as party membership and voting are in decline, with a particularly steep drop amongst the young (in fact Britain has the biggest gap in electoral turnout between young and old of all western democracies). Reforms based on refinements of existing political institutions, such as devolution or party primaries, have made barely any impression on the problem. Conventional democracy is losing appeal, and the rapid changes in the way we interact with each other and with wider society in the internet age suggests there is no easy way to revive it. But is Lent's solution – to 'make politics more like the internet' – possible, or even desirable?

There are certainly practical difficulties involved. Lent cites for example NHS Citizen, a platform which attempts to use web technology to encourage citizen participation in the management of healthcare services. By allowing

citizens to set the agenda by raising issues and concerns, this potentially extends the 'disintermediation' of the online world into the UK's largest public sector organization. However it is noticeable that the NHS Citizen project involves an Assembly, meeting twice a year, which will 'gather' citizen views and concerns to hold the NHS Board to account. Innovative though this is, it still involves an 'intermediary' to channel citizen opinion into the policy process, and although the Assembly is 'open to individuals' it also envisages a 'balanced selection of other participants'. In other words, this experiment falls short of the 'neutral aggregation' that reflects the 'spirit of the internet'.

This is not a criticism of the NHS Citizen project itself, which is an innovative and laudable project: it is natural to think of citizen engagement with political institutions in terms of representatives meeting in one place to translate a collection of views into an aggregated, collective policy choice. Is this because we are so accustomed to the medium of a Westminster-style representative assembly that we cannot think beyond it, or because these much maligned institutions are the only feasible way to provide citizens with a fair say in policy decisions? Representative assemblies have the virtue of simplifying a complex society with myriad opinions and interests across multiple dimensions into a mini-community whose preferences broadly reflect those of the community as a whole. This simplification, of course, is both an asset, because it allows collective decisions to be taken in the name of a differentiated collection of individuals, and also a hindrance, because some individuals may feel left out, and worse, may end up being systemically excluded.

Can the internet resolve this problem? It can certainly open up channels for less well represented groups to air their grievances, and even to organize and mobilize protest. But the virtues of 'disintermediation' cannot always be translated into political life. The appeal of the internet is that it allows individuals to 'customize' many aspects of their experience, accessing an online space where like-minded individuals can interact, free of the deadhand of inherited prejudices and restraints. However it also allows us to separate ourselves from those who don't see the world the same way, to live in isolated online communities of the similar. This is not always possible in politics – we all have to share public space, and many collective decisions have to made on behalf of the wider community, bringing all of the structural dividing lines in our societies centre-stage.

Cass Sunstein, in a very prescient book written well over a decade ago, foresaw that these opportunities for differentiated lifestyles could undermine democracy by breaking up the shared cultural and political spaces that structure political debate and provide a language and context in which to make legitimate collective decisions. Like all structures, the existence of political ideologies (free market liberals against socialists, social liberals against social conservatives) embodied by organized political parties act as a restraint on individuals' ability to shape their own political preferences and express them freely. But they also provide convenient heuristics for citizens seeking to make their voices heard through the blunt instrument of the vote – they are therefore typical of political institutions in that they empower and restrain at the same time. If competitive elections for political representatives remain the defining feature of democracy, can we manage without organizations such as political parties?

Recent experience in Italy offers us a real-time experiment of sorts. There, popular resentment towards the existing political system is if anything more intense than in the UK, and the main beneficiary of the crisis in electoral terms is a political movement (anxious not to call itself a 'party') whose main tool of communication is a blog: the Five Stars Movement of comedian Beppe Grillo. Grillo's movement has been extraordinarily successful, gaining a quarter of the votes in the first national election it ever contested and becoming the largest political party in the Italian Parliament. Grillo rails against existing political parties and institutions, demanding a more participatory democracy exercised through the internet, bypassing the corrupt and discredited political class. Its popularity is particularly high amongst younger voters, suggesting that it has captured some of the potential of Lent's idea of 'creative democracy'.

But Grillo's very success has quickly exposed some of the limitations of this kind of democratic participation. Despite winning one sixth of the seats in the Italian Parliament and holding the balance of power, the Five Stars Movement refused to involve itself in any serious negotiations with the other parties, making a grand coalition of the discredited centre-right and centre-left parties inevitable. There were a number of tactical and personal reasons for this refusal, but the Five Stars Movement could not easily exercise power because it had no coherent political programme, beyond hostility towards the existing governing elites and a commitment to involving its

members in decisions through online votes. In the absence of an agenda-setter, the wave of energy mobilized by Grillo has proved difficult to channel into a real contribution to policymaking. However, Grillo has been quick to use quite traditional disciplinary tools of party management, expelling a number of recalcitrant parliamentarians from the Movement, albeit subjecting the expulsion to online plebiscites of members.

Perhaps it is too soon to draw conclusions from the perhaps unique experience of internet-based politics in Italy, but it does suggest that the internet is far from a panacea. The internet in principle is a more supple and flexible arena for the expression of political ideas and preferences, but is it really a more effective way of channelling these ideas into the policy process? The appeal of 'disintermediation' is clear, but the benefits of the internet for democracy may lie in more in its potential to change intermediate institutions such as political parties and media organizations, rather than replace them.

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Dr Jonathan Hopkin is an Associate Professor in the Department of Government at the London School of Economics and Political Science (LSE), and a co-Director of Democratic Audit. He is mainly interested in political parties, elections, redistribution and inequality. His work has appeared in a range of journals including the *British Journal of Politics and International Relations*, *European Journal of Political Research*, the *Review of International Political Economy*, and *West European Politics.*