

Wonks and War Rooms

S03 E02 - Political Information Repertoires with Murad Hemmadi

Episode Transcript

Elizabeth: [00:00:04] Welcome to [Wonks and War Rooms](#), where pol[itical] comm[unication] theory meets on the ground strategy. I'm your host, [Elizabeth Dubois](#). I'm an associate professor at the [University of Ottawa](#) and my pronouns are she/her. Today I'm recording from the unceded and traditional territory of the Algonquin people. In today's episode, we're talking about political information repertoires with Murad Hemmadi. Murad, can you introduce yourself please?

Murad: [00:00:24] My name is [Murad Hemmadi](#). I'm a reporter at [The Logic](#), which is a Canadian business publication focused on technology and innovation. I live and work in Ottawa and mostly cover federal business policy, privacy policy, anything that really touches technology and the online world. Before this, I covered politics for [Macleans](#) (also in Ottawa) and worked at [Canadian Business Magazine](#) when that still existed. I'm mostly interested in the ways that technology is changing the economy and some of the ways that governments are trying to cope with that through regulation.

Elizabeth: [00:01:04] Thank you so much, I'm super excited to have you. Today we're talking about political information repertoires, and I thought that your background in both tech and politics is the perfect fit for this because political information repertoires are changing pretty drastically as new information technologies are integrated into our daily lives.

[00:01:24] So [political information repertoires](#) are essentially just the collection of different tools and sources we have to gather political information—and it's any sort of tool or source that we use to acquire political news, knowledge, and skills. And so this can include traditional news media, it can include information coming via social media, other online sources, [or] doing a deep dive on Wikipedia. All of these different things can contribute to somebody's political information repertoire. We talk about "rich repertoires" when somebody has a lot of different kinds of sources and a lot of different

types of political information in their media diet. And vaguely in the literature, it seems to suggest that the more rich your political information repertoire—so the more varied your sources are—the more likely you are to engage in politics. So, it's a pretty interesting concept, but it's relatively new. And what I want to talk to you today about is whether or not that fits with your understanding and your experience being in the news media world.

[00:02:33] So first off: Does that make sense to you? Do you see any red flags? Anything that you want to ask questions about?

Murad: [00:02:41] Yeah. How would you define political engagement in this context?

Elizabeth: [00:02:48] Yeah, that's a really good question. A lot of the academic studies each have their own definitions, and this is a problem across academia. We end up measuring the same thing, but in a bunch of different ways. So, sometimes [political engagement is] measured in terms of [asking], "Of this list of activities, how many have you done?" And that list of activities might be like: sign a petition, show up to a protest, vote in the last election. Sometimes it even includes things like reaching out to a political candidate to get more information or your news habits. In that grouping of political engagement and activities there's often also measures for people's political knowledge and how much they learn about politics, and there sometimes [it might include] skill testing questions like, "Do you know who the Prime Minister is?" And then other times [the measures may be] more about current affairs. So, there's a bunch of different ways it can be measured.

Murad: [00:03:43] Some of this is also on the citizenship test, which I recently did. Yeah, I think it's interesting.

So, in my day-to-day, I draw a distinction between politics and policy. Politics I tend to treat as the work of partisanship. In Ottawa, there's a divide between the political layer (which is ministers) and these [non-elected government workers], and those are two separate [layers, or branches, of government]. There's the government, which is the cabinet; and then the House, which is the MPs; and then the policy-making stack of the

public service. Obviously they're not completely separate, but they're functionally separate, sometimes in ways that are useful.

And I think it's interesting to think about these repositories [that you were talking about] and how varied they've grown over time. There's these statistics that people [bandy about](#), about people getting their news from Facebook—a lot of [people now use it as their primary news source](#). And I think you have to shade that between the partisan use [of these tools, including] the "My guy or gal is better than your guy or gal", the partisan attacks on opposition parties by the government and vice versa, that kind of thing. Versus the policy conversation, which is, "The government is making X move." And more importantly, frankly, for the public, "And here's how X move affects you."

Elizabeth: [00:05:14] Mm hmm.

Murad: [00:05:14] Now, that second part that—that policy stuff— isn't always explicitly labeled as politics, right? It's just the stuff of life. It's the stuff of your interactions with government.

Elizabeth: [00:05:26] Right.

Murad: [00:05:27] So to answer your question in brief: yes, the concept [of political information repertoires] makes sense, and the idea of it becoming more varied in the digital age certainly makes sense. I think the sources of it are different depending on whether you're on that politics side or on the policy side. So on the politics side, you might have Facebook pages, meme pages, your various partisan and affiliated meme pages, news outlets that post on the internet are present on the internet, YouTube, all that sort of thing. And then on the policy side, certainly there's all the same set of things, but you also have digital delivery of government services, which includes information about policy. It's the actual government's digital presence. So to shorten that [answer]: yes, but I think they vary depending on which door you're coming through.

Elizabeth: [00:06:22] Yeah, I think that's super interesting and I really love the divide that you've set between formal politics (like "big P" politics) and then policy discussions, which are very political in terms of [often being] about power struggles, and there's very meaningful impacts on our daily lives—which are important political decisions that have been made and the enacting of those decisions. I think that's really helpful to divide those out. I would add in too that—you talked a lot about partisan politics—I think there's also a chunk of political information that comes from outside of formal party structures and government structures, and that could be [political information from] civil society groups, think tanks, academics, [or] other kinds of social groups that you participate in (whether it's online or offline) that end up being political in non-formal senses.

Murad: [00:07:20] For sure. And one of the things that I've been mulling over for quite a few years now... What was the— there was a word for it... There was this derisive term that was used for young people who engaged in or with activism online, but didn't necessarily live it out in their real lives. Do you know, what I'm talking about?

Elizabeth: [00:07:45] Oh, like the [slacktivism](#) thing?

Murad: [00:07:48] Slacktivism! Slacktivism—that's it. So, obviously the big idea is not necessarily new because back in the days of pamphleteering there were probably people who talked to their friends about what was in the pamphlets [but] then never [engaged in further political actions, like, they never] participated in a general strike and took down the government, or whatever the case may have been in that era. But there was this moment maybe six or seven years ago—I feel like it was in the early days of my career or the late days of university—when there was this big concern about, "What's happening to our youth? They're not they're not voting, but they're clicking like on things on Facebook and they're tweeting about things, but they never show up to the polls." And I remember people I respected at the time saying, "Look, it's a form of engagement in and of itself."

[00:08:37] And I bring it up because [of] the point that you make about some studies finding people who have a more varied political repertoire being more engaged with politics. I think this is why the "what the engagement means" matters, right? Because if

you are—certainly lots of people of our generation and maybe younger are—extremely online and probably participating in the tweet jokes of the day (some of which have a political flavour), the meme pages, and so on, the question is, "What is the impact of that political engagement?" Because it's no longer true that [youth voting rates](#) (I mean, we don't have the exit polls for this election, but) are declining. They went up in the last two elections; they're still significantly below where they are for other generations, but they're going up. They went up by about 12 percentage points in 2015 and have sort of stayed that way. But there's probably a larger cohort who are engaging with political actors and political topics, but not participating in democracy in the ways that are traditional (like voting, like donating, like volunteering and so on). And so when you talk about civil society and think tanks and that third layer between the work of Big P politics and policy—I think that that plays into it as well. There's a layer of people who are engaging with ideas and ideology in the abstract, or in the world of the online, but not necessarily in the ways that create impact in the world.

Elizabeth: [00:10:25] Yeah, yeah. I get what you mean. It's interesting because when internet studies first started, there was this temptation to think about online life versus offline life. And a lot of the ideas like slacktivism were really rooted in this idea that we could separate who we are online from who we are offline. And the reality is, for the vast majority of us now, those worlds are deeply, deeply intertwined. And so, one of the things that you're bringing up, to me, speaks to this need to think not about the relationship between, "Oh, does your online political information consumption lead to offline activities?" But more, "How are they related to each other and what kinds of activities, whether they're online or offline, are ones that lead to political impacts and which ones are not?" Right? You can leave a lot of phone messages for your MP, and if they just all get deleted, it's kind of the same as emailing or tweeting at your MP if [those messages are] not being paid attention to. And so, yeah, I think that's a really interesting thing that we used to think of as an easy divide, but really is complex and related to each other now.

Murad: [00:11:47] For sure. And I remember taking a class in an undergrad with [Sarah Grimes](#) at the [University of Toronto](#), which was about online community and online worlds. There have always been interest communities, and obviously some might have nothing to do with politics, like I was on [Neopets](#)... But my Neopets are probably still somewhere starving. I haven't been feeding them.

Elizabeth: [00:12:14] Ohh, poor Neopets.

Murad: [00:12:15] I know. They really should shut down those accounts. It's cruelty after a while.

Elizabeth: [00:12:20] [Laughs]

Murad: [00:12:20] But you know, I think there is this kind of a bridge generation that was taught to think about that distinction[, right]?

Elizabeth: [00:12:30] Mm hmm

Murad: [00:12:30] Where you were either extremely online or extremely in person. To be online meant that you could connect with this world that was so far beyond the borders of your home and your community. If you were a kid who liked a thing and there was no one in your neighbourhood who like that thing, you could find someone online. That sort of pure[ness and] beauty of the first wave of the mass internet, before everything went to hell. I do wonder what this does for political engagement for the generation that doesn't have that divide. You know, a lot of fun has been made during this election of Jagmeet Singh, the NDP Leader's [TikToks](#). And I've got to say I feel like I was a hipster on this. I've been criticizing that for years now... but, I like to think I'm criticizing it in a smarter way than some people are. The issue is not, "Is it appropriate for a leader to be on social platforms speaking in the vernacular of that platform?" You know, what good is it to Jagmeet Singh to be on TikTok giving a speech? Like...

Elizabeth: [00:13:49] Right, nobody goes to TikTok to hear a speech.

Murad: [00:13:52] Exactly.

Elizabeth: [00:13:52] That's not the point of TikTok.

Murad: [00:13:54] Exactly. And yet we know there are people who get their political information from TikTok, right? Not all of it is good political information, or at least not all of it is accurate political information, but it is a source of learning about a thing that's happening in the world. It might not be in the form that that some people are used to, but it's there.

Elizabeth: [00:14:13] Yup.

Murad: [00:14:14] I think the question becomes: a) How can you be effective in speaking to that audience, so are you using the vernacular of that audience? (Jagmeet Singh is, fantastic.) But b) Is that the audience you need to cultivate? And is that audience going to provide the political and policy results that you want? And I think that's where we fall down. A lot of our discourse around political engagement in the online sphere is still in the first bucket: "Should we be talking about politics on TikTok?" I mean, it's not a yes or a [no]—there's no "should", people "are".

Elizabeth: [00:14:46] Yeah.

Murad: [00:14:46] It's...the Part B is like, "What is the appropriate message and the appropriate audience for that vernacular?"

Elizabeth: [00:14:56] Yeah. And then how, [when] thinking about what campaigns need to do, "How is that a good use of your resources?" Or, "Is it a good use of your resources?"

I think this is a really great example to draw on this idea within political information repertoires: not all information is necessarily equal. It's not like, "Oh, you've got an additional source? Great! You are one point better than somebody who doesn't have

that source at having richness [in your repertoire], therefore, you're going to be more engaged." Different kinds of information and different kinds of sources of information can contribute to different outcomes. So we know, for example—and we haven't even talked much about the role of news in terms of political information yet—there's a good amount of research that suggests that traditional news content, whether you consume it as a newspaper or [through] the newspaper's website (either way), is pretty well linked to political knowledge and learning about your political system and current affairs. Unsurprisingly. That's largely what the Canadian news media system is trying to do.

Murad: [00:16:01] Yeah, on our best days, that's what we hope for.

Elizabeth: [00:16:05] Yeah. But then, things like social media are really great for mobilizing and engaging people and getting people who care about something to take the next kinds of political engagement steps. And so the question for me is, well, "What can TikTok be good for? In somebody's political information repertoire, what are the possible utilities of it?" And then, "Can political actors plug into that to make sure that they are effective using those tools?"

Murad: [00:16:35] Yeah. So, to that point, it's not strictly speaking, a ladder, right? Because it's not one step after the other. But inherently, in the idea of a repository, there is perhaps an index of information on any given topic—some bigger books and some smaller books, or something like that. One thing that I am increasingly interested in, in a meta way in writing about things, is the idea of backstory and context. So, when you are covering a policy on "day of", [that means it's the day when] the government tables legislation, [or] something happens. There's the "day of" story, which is typically fairly focused on the thing itself, because there's a lot of information in whatever the thing itself is (hopefully), and you would need to communicate all of that. But, there's a certain assumption that your audience, if they have chosen to engage with this [article], [has] some level of backstory to understand why this matters. So, for example, if you're talking about an election and the fear of foreign interference in an election, you might reference [the 2016 election and WikiLeaks and the allegations of Russian interference](#), or what have you. And you typically won't spend a ton of time explaining the entire backstory of that because, for one thing, even on the internet, there are word counts. And you assume a certain level of familiarity, but, also you now have this backup, which is: [Wikipedia](#) exists. Right?

[00:18:18] A few years ago, when I first arrived in Canada, I remember reading an article (an op-ed that someone had written) that argued that Canadian newspapers don't spend enough time explaining, for example, who the NDP is. That was a very specific example—some news outlets will just use the "NDP" acronym, they won't even spell out the name. There's no backstory about who [or] what the party is, what they stand for—there's a certain level of assumed knowledge. And this op-ed made the case that, particularly for new Canadians or people who are just becoming engaged civically, this was doing them a disservice because they didn't know the fundamentals to get involved with the story. I actually kind of disagree with that. I think we live in a world now where there is that information available and it's online, particularly if you're clicking between online sources. It's the way that you used to look up a word in a book that you didn't know when you read it; you had a dictionary in the house and you would go and find it. That engagement [now] is just much more accessible. I guess the point that I'm making is: the shorthand—people talk about the language of the internet and the shorthand of the internet. You will see a meme on Twitter (or whatever), and you don't know where that came from, but now there's somewhere you can go look it up. And that, in some ways in a good way, could allow the more in-depth parts of the political and news repository to focus on those things without necessarily needing to do all of that context work. Because [the information on the issue's backstory is] now out there if you want to find it.

Elizabeth: [00:20:00] Yeah, and I've even seen in some instances linking happening. So for example, [The Conversation Canada](#)—which is an explanatory journalism outlet that works with academics so that we can communicate better to the public because we're not always the best at it—part of their style guide is, "include links to all of these different things to explain more," so that there's always that harnessing of the network that this information is part of. This season of Wonks and War Rooms we're actually talking about media and digital literacy, and this plays exactly into larger ideas of the skills you need to be able to consume political information. And, in a networked context, a core skill is learning where else to go to get information, to back things up, to dove deeper, to understand connections, and identifying when it is important to go and do that versus when you don't need to go and do that. So, I'm really glad that you brought that up because I think you're right. It's a really important piece of this puzzle.

Murad: [00:21:10] Yeah. [It's probably a cynical view, but] I think one thing that we have to accept [is] that absolute or significant political engagement is not everyone's desire. There are people who... There is no absence of information about a large number of topics with which people could choose to engage. Now the negative side of this is the "doing your research" culture right? The misinformation in specific pockets of the internet; people who [are] anti-vaxxers, climate change deniers, [or] who treat "doing your research" (that phrase) as a sort of catchall for, "You don't know what you're talking about," even if you happen to be the person that spent decades researching it, actually doing the research.

Elizabeth: [00:22:11] Right.

Murad: [00:22:12] The flip side of that is: it's certainly true that on many issues of political engagement, there is no shortage of information out there. So, just one brief example: I cover immigration as part of my beat, in part because I am an immigrant and I'm interested in immigration and the way it works in Canada. It's not hard to figure out how the immigration system works. It's not hard to figure out things like data about economic outcomes for immigrants, [and] about all kinds of things. That has not stopped outright meme lords from their activities, or even the more right-leaning outlets who have a particular view of this policy area. I don't know that anything I write explaining the problems, explaining the reality of the data on immigration, is going to convince them. That doesn't mean I shouldn't do it, but I do think we have to understand the limits of putting information out into the ecosystem if someone chooses to narrow their repository to their worldview.

Elizabeth: [00:23:25] Yeah. I think that kind of dovetails with the idea of algorithmic filtering, too. So what you've described links a little bit to the idea of echo chambers and the choices that we make in a media environment where there's tons of things. [In this high-choice media environment,] it doesn't matter how many people are saying thing 'A', [because] if you just want to see 'B', you can make it so that you only see 'B'. [For example,] if all you want is cat videos, you can find all of the cat videos to fill all of your time. There's tons of info out there. But then [the] filter bubble idea, that's more algorithmically driven—and we have a [whole episode from season one](#) where I talked about the differences of filter bubbles and echo chambers with my guest. I think it's an important point because choice plays such a huge role in the information environment at this point.

[00:24:18] That actually leads perfectly into the next thing I wanted to chat about, which is one of the critiques of this political information repertoire idea, [which is that larger repertoires are] leading to or supporting more political engagement. There are some scholars who, in [very recent studies](#), have suggested that some people might be able to use all of these different sources to their advantage and be super engaged, but other people might feel extremely overwhelmed. They might be less confident in their political knowledge because all of a sudden they're getting information from a bunch of different sources, which [are] all saying different things. We touched on, earlier, a little bit of [the idea that] it's still political information, even if it is not accurate, right? So that could lead people to be less certain about whatever the political information is and then maybe less confident in going and acting upon that information because they're less certain. And so, I'm wondering what your thoughts are on this debate of whether or not more political information—more sources in our repertoire—is likely to be problematic, potentially.

Murad: [00:25:28] Yeah. This the discouragement problem, right?

Elizabeth: [00:25:32] Mm hmm

Murad: [00:25:33] So during the election, I saw some people who I generally respect on other issues making this broad claim, "Is it just me, or is the polarization worse than it's ever been? Is it just me, or are no news outlets honest anymore, or, are they not trying to hide their bias anymore?" To which my response is, "I don't know what news you're reading." But, I think that is a part of this—it's this idea that you are seeing more of what's out there, on any given day on the internet, than you would have had access to earlier. And because you're seeing more, you can see the differences in it more. I think that inherently makes it feel more polarized.

[00:26:25] The three newspaper household was only ever a very small portion of the population to begin with. The one- or no-newspaper household was probably far more prevalent. And so those people are now coming out to the world and seeing... I mean, even in an echo chamber—or maybe, more accurately, even in a filter bubble—it's pretty hard never to see something outside that. You can certainly filter your way in, but

it's going to pop up once in a while, right? And the difference between that and what you are used to looking at will make you see more polarization than you thought, because now you can see the other side. So, in brief, yes, I do think it can have that effect.

[00:27:19] But again, I think we need to ask ourselves the perhaps less optimistic question, which is: there is now a lot more of a forum for people to get up and say, "Oh, this is all discouraging. I don't want to engage with this because it's too polarized, it's too complicated. Nobody's telling me the truth. Everybody has an angle." You know, whatever else. One of the classic examples of this is the, "Why is no one in the mainstream media reporting this link to an article in some very mainstream outlet?" That's not to diminish the problem—certainly, that information overload can be a problem. I don't know that it's a bad thing that we're asking people to complicate their thinking about issues by giving them more information about it... in the infinitive. In practice, yeah, everybody has space for only so many things in their brain, right? And I think one of the things that happens is—I do this myself with my own news media consumption—there are whole areas of information and, frankly, parts of the world, where I won't read much about them. Just because: I've got to pick something, I've got to pick a set of focuses. And maybe that maybe that's a "news diet", "news training" thing of helping people understand that it's OK: you're not a bad political actor or a bad news consumer if you make choices about the things that you care about. Within those choices, it would be nice if people read widely. But, choice is not inherently bad.

Elizabeth: [00:29:05] Yeah, I agree. And when we think about even just the idea of being in a representative democracy, we acknowledge that not everybody can be, or should be, informed on every single thing and able to make every single political choice. That's why we elect people to do deep dives, and committees go crazy deep on particular issues. And then, even there, not every MP is an expert on all of the things. So, I agree with you: choice is inevitable and valuable.

[00:29:38] And that actually connects with one thing that we're not going to have time to discuss (because we're coming up to time), but I want to flag for anybody who's interested in this as something to think about moving forward: the idea of a political information repertoire might not be static. Right now in academic research, we don't have a lot of studies that are looking at whether or not people's political information repertoires change over time. But we do know that people's news consumption ups during elections, for example, or at times of crisis. And we know that people tend to be

more engaged politically on social media when there is a particular campaign happening or action in place. And so, it's reasonable to think that there might be shifts in the kinds of sources that people are encountering in their day-to-day lives, depending on things like current affairs, or, maybe even over time—as somebody becomes more media and digital literate, maybe they're incorporating different kinds of sources at that point. But we just don't know yet. Haven't seen the studies done.

Murad: [00:30:48] Yeah, and I think that finding or statistic that I referenced about most people getting their news from Facebook [is relevant here, although] we haven't necessarily gone the one layer deeper on some of this stuff. Obviously, some researchers are working on stuff like this, but I don't think there's a popular conception of what that means. I think we need to understand [that] the platforms, in some ways, have sort of flattened. I think it makes a difference whether you're getting your news from a meme page or a newspaper page on Facebook, and that we need to get that one layer deeper.

Elizabeth: [00:31:26] Yeah. And I think what's really important is to question those kinds of stats about where people are getting their news. Because, just because you get news from Facebook does not mean you only get news via Facebook. Just because you get some political information on TikTok does not mean that is the only political information you get. And at least in terms of news, which is only one slice of the wider political information pie, the [Reuters Digital News Report](#) does a really great annual study. There is a Canada-specific report, so you can go and see an actual breakdown of statistics on how many Canadians get news from each of a set of different sources. I'll add that in the show notes, for anybody who's interested in that.

I have one final question for you. It is the pop quiz.

Murad: [00:32:16] I've been dreading this.

Elizabeth: [00:32:19] [Laughs] All right, so, we've been talking about political information repertoires. Can you define for me, in just a sentence or two, what that means?

Murad: [00:32:28] Political information repertoires—which I now realize have been called in repositories for half this conversation—are the set of sources and forms of news, media, information, [and] messaging that people consume about political topics that may or may not lead to political engagement.

Elizabeth: [00:32:52] Perfect, yes. And I love that you very specifically said news and then other things as well, because in political communication research there is a longer history of talking about news media repertoires, and it just is an insufficient idea. We need to be able to think about political information beyond just mainstream news. So, I'm super glad you included that in your definition.

Murad: [00:33:18] Listen, I have a lot of love for my industry, but we're not all the information in the world.

Elizabeth: [00:33:23] All right. Well, thank you so much. This was absolutely wonderful. I really appreciate you taking the time.

Murad: [00:33:27] Thank you.

Elizabeth: [00:33:31] All right, that was our episode on political information repertoires. If you'd like to learn more about any of the topics, concepts, [or] theories we talked about today, head over to polcommtech.ca or check the show notes.

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