

Online Social Networking and Citizen Engagement: Debating the Potential and Limitations

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Abstract

Empowered by the availability of social networking technologies with their inherent open philosophy, citizens around the world are increasingly participating in political activity on the Web. Recent examples range from opposing public policies, such as government funding cuts, to organizing revolutionary social movements, such as those in the Middle East. Although online spaces create remarkable opportunities for various forms of political action, there are concerns over the power of existing institutions to control and even censor such interaction spaces. The objective of this panel is to draw together different insights on the online engagement phenomenon and debate its potential and limitations as a mechanism for fostering democratic debate and influencing policy making. Panelists will explore recent examples from Europe, the Middle East and Latin America. The audience will be invited to contribute to the debate and bring their own experiences to bear on the discussion.

Keywords: Social media, citizen engagement, institutions, online social movements, e-participation, Web 2.0

Introduction

The last few years have seen an explosion of interest in social collaboration and participation on the Internet, a phenomenon enabled by the development and take-up of Web 2.0 technologies such as social networking sites, blogs, wikis, video sharing sites and umbrella applications like mashups. These networking tools provide users with web-based platforms to interact, collaborate, and share multimedia resources in ways that mark an evolution of the Internet from an information storage and retrieval source (cf. Web 1.0) to a platform for participation and collaboration. What opportunities are enabled by these new technologies, how are they constrained, and in what ways do the new forms of engagement challenge our understanding of what it means to participate, to organize and to oppose?

Much research in this area has focused on the personal and leisure use of online social networking (OSN) technologies (Griffiths and Light 2008; Hampton *et al.* 2011), due in no small part to the popularity of Facebook as a virtual social space. Other work has examined how individuals and organizations mobilize the potential of these technologies to connect with other professionals in their area of interest (Li *et al.* 2010; Toledano 2010) and to market their products and services to customers (Foster *et al.* 2010;

Kozinets *et al.* 2010). More recently, Web 2.0 technologies have attracted attention as mechanisms for citizen engagement, for example, in mainstream and activist politics, trades' union activities, and civic society participation as, say, 'citizen journalists' (Grant *et al.* 2011). Our panel focuses on this latter civic use of Web 2.0 technologies and specifically the utilization of social media platforms to engage and mobilize political activists in a variety of national and transnational social movements. We explore both the potential and limitations of the technologies for grass roots engagement in movements as diverse as opposition to government funding cuts in Europe and oppressive regimes in parts of the Middle East and North Africa to support for the sustainable development agenda in Latin America. The panelists' positions are outlined in the next section.

Controversial Issue and Panelists' Positions

The relationship between information and communication technologies (ICTs) and politics is a multidisciplinary research area which has attracted limited attention to date within the IS field. E-politics encompasses studies ranging from political campaigning and electioneering (Wattal *et al.* 2010) to citizen engagement in public policy making (Macintosh 2004). Scholarly opinion is mixed on the contribution of ICTs to politics. While some observers suggest that public authorities are marginalizing the democratic potential of ICTs (Chadwick & May 2003), there is recent evidence that existing political participation activities are increasingly being pushed on the Web (e-participation) owing to the availability of promising technologies (Saebo *et al.* 2008). Our panel contributes to the emerging area of interest in e-politics within the IS field and asks how and to what effect social media may contribute to citizen engagement and what this means for our current understanding of organization and participation.

In summary, the objective of this panel is to provide insights into the use of social media for political participation in multiple national and transnational contexts, and then to engage the panel audience in debating the future prospects for e-participation. Our larger goals of contributing to theory and practice involve exploring what e-participation means for our current theories of organizing and to provide a forum for information sharing among IS researchers across the global research community with interests in how social media may contribute to citizen engagement in public policy making.

Panelists Positions

Convener: Kathy McGrath will set the scene for the case studies of panelists 1 and 2 by outlining how Web 2.0 can enable citizen participation in a democratic public sphere (Habermas 1989) by fostering openness, inclusivity and the opportunity to debate issues of common concern. The new media may be perceived as expanding citizens' capabilities (Sen 2009) where existing institutional arrangements, such as established norms and power structures, or personal characteristics, like age and illness, limit opportunities for civic engagement. At present, the technologies are helping to mobilize support, nationally and transnationally, for a wide range of social movements reflecting common concerns, including protests about government austerity cuts in the UK and other parts of Europe, and pro-democracy civil unrest in North Africa and the Middle East. While activists are increasingly aware that governments can also mobilize the potential of the new technologies to monitor and thwart their activities, this has tended to strengthen support for the movements. In the longer term, key questions remain about whether (and how) such participation will influence policy making. Such concerns set the stage for a further co-evolution of the technologies and the engagement process in an effort to achieve desired outcomes.

Panelist #1: Panos Panagiotopoulos will draw from his ongoing work on the potential of social networking to foster political participation and the organizing of collective action in labor movement organizations. He will argue that non-profit organizations such as trade unions are considering Web 2.0 tools to increase interactivity with their members, involve new audiences, foster transnational networking and better disseminate their positions in society. In an increasingly globalized environment, union activities such as campaigning can largely benefit from new engagement repertoires which will integrate online and offline means. Panos's empirical exploration will focus on the case of UNI Global, an international trade union federation which unites over 900 unions in 140 countries. UNI Global has developed the Communicators' Forum which is a community of practice where unions share their experiences of using Web 2.0 tools in terms of both risks and opportunities. Such efforts evolve around reaching new audiences or groups of employees which, traditionally, have been disengaged (e.g. the young), as well as organize new forms of

collective action. A noteworthy example concerns the first Second Life “virtual” trade union strike against IBM Italy in September 2007. This event attracted wide media attention and was attended by about 1850 participants from 30 different countries (Blodgett and Tapia 2010).

Panelist #2: Elizabeth Saad will focus on Brazilian digital social networks (DSN) and their potential to influence decision-making during the 2010 presidential elections. She will present a case study of the Green Party candidate’s performance in these elections and the strategic role of the Web and its cyberactivists on DSN during this process, especially the post-election voters’ engagement with the sustainable development cause. Elizabeth believes that the Web 2.0 arena offers positive conditions for: i) the emergence of a mediatized public sphere (Habermas 2008) leading to a new form of political participation and citizenship; ii) the reconfiguration of the power and counter-power of social groups (Castells 2007); iii) the emergence of digital spaces for cyberactivism and political communication (*ibid.*; Barros *et al.* 2007); and iv) establishing a new media role for shaping public opinion (Deuze 2010).

Convener: Kathy McGrath will set the scene for the case studies of panelists 3 and 4 by exploring key arguments about the challenges to the use of Web 2.0 for political participation. First, even though the new media offer remarkable opportunities for participation, online spaces remain in many cases bounded by existing institutions which may attempt to regulate and constrain online interactions. Furthermore, social networking tools themselves are not neutral; they are developed and administrated by third parties who may influence online movements according to their own interests. Second, even when institutions are encouraging online participation, they have shown limited capacity to enact engagement from the grassroots in formal political structures. Policy making is fundamentally different from campaigning (e.g. Anduiza *et al.* 2009), so the fact that citizens use Web 2.0 tools to organize ad hoc around single issue movements does not necessarily translate into meaningful, sustainable participation in public decisions unless institutions adapt accordingly. Finally, issues of access and technological competency remain exclusive factors for large parts of the population. In fact, online participation might even amplify existing inequalities (Lindner and Riehm 2011). Hence, it is not unreasonable to question the extent to which benefits such as openness, inclusivity and enhanced democracy are actually materialized in online worlds.

Panelist #3: Amany Elbanna will focus on the recent Egyptian revolution. She will argue that social media open up a larger window of opportunity for democracy and freedom of expression, which supports the formation and mobilization of social movements (Rheingold 2003) away from the prevailing societal structure and formal authorities. However continued dependence on them after the revolution can deepen the gap between discussion and opinion formulation on one hand and policies and action on the other. Indeed, policies and actions seem permanently lagging as OSN speeds up discussions. Combined with the high rate of illiteracy, the low penetration rate of the Internet, and the lack of processes for public engagement and participation, OSN user groups could be alienated from the rest of the society resulting in societal discontent and division. This use of online social media also changes the role of service providers. Although these systems seem open, they are developed and administered by third parties, e.g. Facebook and Twitter, or by local governments in the case of voting and consultation. The value propositions of service providers change their traditional role as they become players in shaping politics. In short, online social media could contribute to the formation of new forms of political struggles (Lorana *et al.* 1993).

Panelist #4: Magda Hercheui will argue that even though social media channels offer new opportunities for fostering democratic debate and citizen participation, research has not yet paid enough attention to the role of institutions in influencing the kinds of virtual interactions that may emerge from using internet tools (Hercheui 2011). The behavior of individuals in online environments is strongly influenced by powerful institutions – such as governments and universities. Analyzing two case studies, one considering virtual communities in Brazil and another considering the use of blogs in Iran, Magda will present the view that institutional forces may frame the way social actors behave in online environments, especially in cases where either participation is not anonymous or identities may be discovered by state apparatus (for instance through identification of IP addresses). For sure, people keep the freedom to challenge institutions – it is not a matter of denying agency – but before being over optimistic about the role of social media for democratizing societies we need to discuss how established powers use current institutions to keep virtual interactions within an acceptable range of behaviors (Hercheui 2009a, 2009b). In summary, Magda’s position is that the appropriation of social media channels is influenced by rules, norms and cultural-cognitive frames, and by the social perception of legitimate behavior, and that sanction mechanisms of reward and punishment impact virtual interactions.

Panel Structure

The convener will open the panel with a brief introduction, highlighting citizen engagement in political activism as the focal concern and the possibilities for Web 2.0 technologies to foster such participation as a controversial issue on which members of the panel will express contrasting viewpoints. She will then set the scene for the next two panelists by outlining three key themes about a democratic public sphere which are the heart of this debate. Panelists 1 and 2 will point to empirical examples that highlight the enabling role of Web 2.0 with specific reference to the outlined themes of openness, inclusivity and the opportunity to debate issues of common concern. This presentation format will be mirrored on the other side of the debate where the convener will present some contrasting themes relating to the limitations of Web 2.0 as an actor subject to institutional forces and manipulation, while panelists 3 and 4 will point to supporting empirical examples. Panelists come from three geographic regions – Europe, the Middle East and Latin America – and their research addresses these diverse contexts. After the presentations, the audience will be encouraged to participate, by contributing their own views and relevant research experiences. Examples from similar or alternative contexts will be welcome, as will cross-country comparisons.

Biographies

Kathy McGrath is the panel convener. She is a Senior Lecturer in Information Systems at Brunel University in London. Her research focuses on the relationship between information and communication technologies (ICTs) and socio-organizational change. She has studied the use of Web 2.0 technologies in personal, professional and civic society settings. Kathy is interested in the conditions of possibility for social collaboration and participation in a variety of contexts and the implications for current concepts of organizing, mobilization and engagement.

Amany Elbanna is a Senior Lecturer in Information Systems at Royal Holloway, University of London. Her current research focuses on the collective organizing of action and innovation in ICT development and use. She has studied the development of ICTs in different organizational contexts and recently its relationship with business innovation. She is currently examining the development and use of Web 2.0 technology to foster innovation in society, business, and among individuals.

Magda Hercheui is Senior Lecturer in Project Management at Westminster Business School in London. Her research focuses on virtual environments and interactions through social media channels. She is concerned with understanding the forms of interaction and governance structures that emerge from the appropriation of Internet tools by individuals, groups and societies. She has a particular interest in how these tools are used to foster democratic debates, and the role of institutions in influencing behavior in online interactions. Magda is vice-chair of IFIP working group 9.9 on ICT and sustainable development.

Panagiotis (Panos) Panagiotopoulos is a researcher in Information Systems at Brunel University in London and an informatics advisor in the Greek Federation of Bank Employee Unions. His research focuses on the strategic use of ICTs in governance activities by different society's institutions. He is currently involved in the EU funded project Di@logos Net: "Achieving more inclusive European Social Dialogue through networking technologies". He is also a member of the IFIP working group 8.5 on IS in public administration.

Elizabeth Saad is a Professor in the Journalism and Publishing Department of the University of São Paulo (ECA-USP), Brazil, and Research Group Coordinator on Social Media and Digital Communications at the same University. She is also responsible for the Communication and Social Interactions area for the Graduate and specialization levels at ECA-USP. Her research focuses on digital media and social media and their inter-relationships with corporate strategies, social behavior and content-expression forms of communication. Professor Saad is a digital strategist consultant for media and communication companies, and has published many articles and books on these themes.

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