The Use of Social Media to Promote Civic Participation

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Abstract

The widespread adoption of social media as tools of communication has resulted in a potentially transformative change in the way people interact and engage with each other. Recent events in countries such as Brazil, Egypt, Turkey, and Iran have shown the power of social media to affect social change in ways never seen before. In an age where the rise of a network society provides a leap in global connectivity and instant access to information, this essay is aimed at examining the role that social media may be playing in shaping civic participation. The essay takes on an approach that looks at a number of case studies from around the world to show exemplars of the use of social media as tools to augment civic participation. The focus is also on the problems faced by these technologies and consider proposed strategies to address these issues of access, capacity, literacy and apathy. This examination is done through the lens of a strong theoretical foundation of scholarly literature in order to better position the work within the broader discussions in the field of communication studies which is concerned with the intersection of new media and society. Social media have become increasingly popular over the last few years with the rise of social networking sites such as Facebook, MySpace, and Twitter. These new technologies have been quickly adopted by millions of people where online communities can be formed and information shared in ways that were previously not possible. There is growing interest in how social media may play a role in shaping civic participation and what may be the consequences for democratic processes. It is posited that social media may promote and enable new forms of civic engagement in a number of ways (A Ayankoya, 2013). Traditional forms of engaging with politics, such as membership in a political party or voting in elections, while still

important, are being supplemented and, possibly, reinvigorated by the rise of these new online tools. At the same time, these technologies may also create a new set of problems. There is evidence to suggest that people are also very good at using these social technologies to insulate themselves from participating in civic events altogether. There are also issues to do with access to the internet in the first place and the level of information literacy needed to benefit from online civic activities.

Keywords social media, civic participation, social change, case studies, democratic processes, online communities, information literacy, access issues

2. Introduction

Considering the recent political and societal developments such as the Brexit referendum or the increasingly visible political campaigns of right-wing parties both in Europe and in the US, an exploration of social media's role in promoting civic participation is urgently needed. Most importantly, the current populist phenomena demonstrate impressively the urgency to discuss virtues and defects of civic engagement. It does not matter whether one likes the politics or not – what matters, though, is the necessity of a broad debate in order to reinforce, newly define, or readjust the structures of rule, classical constitutional law, but also those elements of, as it is put in this essay, 'soft' rule – the rule that is concerned with the lives of citizens and residents, and ensures mutual care and respect (B. Schmitt et al., 2024). Since ancient times, the resilience of a society has depended on the citizens' interest in the further development of their city's and state's future. Could resilient democracy still exist without civic participation, that is without active involvement in the 'matters of the city'? On the other hand, what happens when action dismantles the common good: could irrationalism still be seen as a part of democracy? Many more questions could be formed, and – due to the nature of the topic – all of them seem to converge somehow to connect(sion) where they stem from: from lies, fear, and irrationality. Ultimately, all of them somehow connect to potential new ways of the use of digital media. Finally, what are the effects of being constantly online, using social networks? This short exploration is an attempt to approach these questions by introducing some theoretical

views, underlined by the analysis of the use and abuse of social media during political campaigns and pointed out at a few examples of the use of digital media (A Ayankoya, 2013). Furthermore, this short note offers the closure in the form of some kind of a spectrum of the irrational, delirious, amusing, but also ridiculous comments that appeared on the web and raise the issues related to the freeness and transparency of communication.

3. Theoretical Framework

There has been a rapid growth of social media as a mechanism for fostering public discourse and collective action. With the increasing connection between user engagement on digital platforms and civic participation in the physical world, commentators across a range of domains debate the extent of those relationships. While some declare that social media's impact on civic engagement is primarily limited to the facilitation of talk on the internet, others are more hopeful that this new form of public talk will spill over into real-world participation. This argument is sharpened through the lens of theories commonly used in sociology and communication studies and critically examined the relationship between online interactions and offline civic behaviors. The analysis pays special attention to the role of agency, online communities, and the ways that information is disseminated to shape civic outcomes.

Scholars have started to examine how the architecture and design of social media platforms affect user behavior. Recent research has illustrated the importance of customizable features within platforms that shape the online environment and influence the creation, maintenance, and disclosure of social relations, fostering certain patterns of behavior over others. Understanding the impact of platforms on user behavior is also grounded in theories from communication studies. The spiral of silence theory is one of the foundational theories within the field; it posits that, in light of fear of social isolation, individuals who perceive that their opinions are in the minority are less likely to express those views publicly. In comparison, more mainstream views will be more widely discussed. Existing literature shows that these findings are also applicable to social media platforms. The structure of social media networks can have a

filtering effect where users only get exposed to like-minded opinions, thereby decreasing the ability of minority opinions to be widely circulated. When observations about the wider social environment occur primarily on social media, it further restricts the potential for counter-attitudinal view points to be encountered (A Ayankoya, 2013). In considering an increasingly connected world, although social media boasts new features that can challenge certain dynamics of the spiral while introducing others that are beneficial to the spiral, questions surface about how proponents and antagonists of political issues navigate these tensions to try and persuade Internet audiences.

3.1. Social Media and Civic Participation

Social media services such as Instagram, WhatsApp, LinkedIn, YouTube, Twitter, and Facebook have gained widespread attention and interest over the last few years. They now have millions of users worldwide, integrating the people by allowing them to share content, interests, ideas, and opportunities (Pepra Djan, 2019). They have been used as a platform to raise questions, mobilize community action, and disseminate knowledge, among others. Individuals have used social networks to live and disseminate actual and non-actual descriptions of incidents and activities in different parts of the globe. The role of social media in transmitting factual and unrealistic news has heightened awareness of their significance in the communication process.

Vision, design thinking, narration, understanding, and taking force structure are some simple guides to doing digital interviews. Social media are mainly viewed from a broad viewpoint. Forms their usage range from varying domestic aspirations, conduct, and outlooks. Moreover, social media may be used to over-represent some simple location interests and under-represent different interests. Consequently, an individual's acts and or expressions via social media can supply for a visualization that differs from actuality. Examination of social networking sees an unequal migration of trust and impact. Limitations are also caused by the influence of different variables. Nonetheless, it cannot be neglected that they represent a living part of communication. Facilitating an expanded and transparent global debate is crucial to the exercise of social media. Social media have a role to provide a voice to the marginalized and underprivileged, and giving

communities a way of acquiring and disseminating knowledge is essential for averting or mitigating conflicts. Rather than ignoring moral guidelines, social media can be used to foster a more inclusive debate.

Social media is considered a strong engine for boosting public activity. Limited evidence shows that online social networking platforms are a forum not only for intensifying involvement, but also for stimulating the initiation of citizen movements. Social media interventions will also eventually target the maintenance and establishment of long-term services for increasing public focus problems. Nevertheless, the new technical age has taken with it distinct public behavior and the transformation of political expression, the growth of social media use being a double-edged sword for civic involvement. While one goal is to boost civilian involvement, behavior and attitudes on social networking sites can be complicated-they will lead to substantial potential for civic involvement while obstructing genuine behavior and promoting interests. The outcomes of this research are important for recognizing the accurate civil participation community background and the most successful social media concentration of participants. This is important both for the strategic focus of social media campaigns to improve public involvement and for seeing a video of civic engagement under the technical age context. (Nyagadza, 2022)

4. Case Studies

The Case Studies section offers practical insights into the successful civic mobilization campaigns on social media. It also underlines the important role of the researchers' socio-political and geographical positionality in understanding and contextualizing these case studies. Case studies are essential to this research. Particularly in the fairly young field of research, social media fostered the civic engagement of citizens, empirical evidence and real-life examples can enrich theoretical discussion significantly. Through the exploration of Civic Engagement and Digital Platforms, a number of campaigns and movements were identified that utilized various online platforms as a tool to foster civic participation. These examples have been pivotal in describing the complexities of social media usage by activists and the wide range of its effects on both the local and the

global level. Yet, much of this knowledge accumulated thanks to an insightful engagement with various movements and protests. The case studies expanded and refined the list of themes and theories relevant to this research, however, providing a rich harvest of lessons learned from the successful civic mobilization initiatives that are often broken down into the components of their effectiveness.

To do justice to this evidence, the case studies must be presented within the context of the age of the researcher as well as from his technologically advanced and democratic position. Discussing the location of research, as well as its socio-political and geographical positionality against the diverse background of the events, campaigns, and movements that took place globally in the past decade, can give a better sense of their relative novelty, impact, or visibility. (Priya, 2021)

4.1. Successful Campaigns

This subsection details successful civic engagement campaigns that occurred using social media. The rise of social media tools has provided new wide-reaching methods of pushing societal issues into the public space. This is evident through successes like the #15Now minimum wage hashtag movement, the Ice Bucket Challenge raising money for ALS research, and Kony 2012, which in the course of 6 days pushed the issue of Joseph Kony's crimes against Ugandan children into the global spotlight.

The #15Now movement, first starting in SeaTac, Washington, eventually claimed victories in Seattle and SeaTac when both cities implemented the raise in 2013 and 2014 respectively. Key to the movement's success was writing the legislation and creating the messaging through social networks and hashtags before any public work had begun to prevent opposition from stopping progress. Once the issue was public, $3,000 was raised in 45 minutes through crowd funding to pay for a Facebook ad campaign. Building an authentic and entertaining social media presence was achieved through personal worker testimonies that created viral content and utilizing humor in the message. Coalition building with local unions and community based organizations helped build relationships that were useful by getting the audience to become an active participant. Offline, both community outreach events and getting key figures in both the

organization and political groups to amplify the message on Facebook and Twitter were used to create multiple streams for users to come in contact with the messaging (A Ayankoya, 2013).

5. Challenges and Limitations

The use of social media for civic engagement presents a set of challenges. Armed with a smartphone and an internet connection, it has become easier than ever to call for protests or online campaigns. The digitalisation of civic activism allows like-minded people from different parts of the world to unite for common good, forming and joining discussions on numerous topics of state-level importance (Pepra Djan, 2019). But does having an outlet for all opinions lead to active participation in the public sphere and contribute to a better understanding of democracy? The answer to these questions is not straightforward.

The more critical adopters of newly-established digital forms of civic engagement see them as ruinous. One of the disvalues of using social media for civic participation is the eruption of misinformation. It has been influencing public opinion for years through traditional media, but the internet has only exacerbated the expansion and popularity of fake news. Modern design creates echo chambers or even informational bubbles that are more likely to be viewed and shared by the audience, which can lead to widespread belief in untrue facts. The next one is the existence of a digital divide. Despite the fantastic wealth of social media giants, there are regions in most countries (to a much greater extent in poorer ones) that have no access to the internet and therefore are deprived of the right to social participation. As studies show, most of the networked public discussion takes place in just 1% of the most active spaces. The rest remain passive, which may decide on not getting informed at all. The last factor that is increasingly not spoken about when it comes to digital activism is the declining trust in digital platforms. Accusations of cooperation with the NSA, the Cambridge Analytica scandal, social media blockings – all this has made the network society aware of the dangers and drawbacks of the free internet. It is well known that one can earn a lot of money on fake information, conspiracy theories, and inflammatory content.

6. Best Practices

As there are many ways that activists and activist groups communicate to the general public and promote civic engagement. Some create exciting events and venues where the public can participate, while others pass around petitions, attend council meetings, or go door-to-door to talk with individuals about their causes and/or issues. This study examines a different approach: how individuals are using social media platforms to engage the public in their civic interests and how the interests are then effecting change in communities. As part of this study, the 350 most recent posts to the CampusPointe Portland Facebook page were analyzed, coded and tallied. These data revealed five approaches these activists employ to promote civic engagement: PSAs and TFSAs, access to information, focus on local and alternative viewpoints. It is worth noting as well that the way CampusPointe has engaged the public in its efforts seems to be in opposition to whistle-blowing actions brought against architects and the City by one of their own cohorts.

Scholars and practitioners alike each gave useful advice to organizations or individuals looking to use social media as a platform to start or further civic engagement. Among the advice given by scholars are suggestions to create more compelling content (Anne Cummings, 2017), to re-imagine how social media can promote issues and build coalitions, to focus on community felt grievances, to ground social media in community organizing best practices, and also to promote a wider range of voices. Some of the suggestions are to use the data analytics built into almost all social media platforms, though also to not depend solely on these analytics, to ensure that dialogues are as inclusive as possible, and to grow content-centered communities for discussion around issues. A professional in city government, involved in engagement and grants, gave enlightening advice as well to organizations or individuals looking to use Facebook to further civic engagement. This is to be transparent, build trust, foster meaningful dialogues where multiple viewpoints are posted, ask and answer questions in a timely manner, constantly fact check everything that is posted, warn against or delete off-topic, abusive, or violent posts, and also to share and engage with one's own posts to as many

community groups as possible to amplify the post's reach. A question also addressed by this reporter is how much engagement is through CampusPointe's Facebook page, this being determined through the analysis of 690 comments on the 350 posts that were analyzed to help this reporter develop influential public relations campaigns for promoting its 100% affordable housing interests. (Lee & Hsieh, 2022)

7. Conclusion

After researching the transformative potential of social media in engagement with civic and political processes, it is time to conclude the exploration. In recap, this essay discussed the opportunities and challenges of using social media to promote civic participation. It shifts the focus toward social media from its collaborative nature and offers a review of the impact and limitations of social media platforms. Nevertheless, several controversial issues have originated from the social media era. It is a reflection on how the mass use of social media transforms the daily life experience and is a reminder to constantly adapt to the evolving environment. Insights are then presented from the viewpoint of a student on how multiple issues have taken place in the era of digital media platforms and ways to further address these issues.

To sum up, from the week-by-week observation on how social media is used in organizations, it is hopeful that the overview of the underpinning critique of social media and the alternative ways for promoting civic engagement would provide a broader insight for the utilization and development of social media as a positive force of societal growth in the future. It should also be remembered by both civilians and organizations that technology by itself is never a panacea, but an ally for the good work that needs to be planned, created and evaluated constantly.

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