Chapter 20

The Potential of Social Media as a Communication Tool in Rural Community Development

Pádraig Wims
University College Dublin, Ireland

ABSTRACT

This chapter analyses the social media site Facebook as a communication tool in rural community development. The analysis was focused on the Facebook page of one rural community in Ireland. The research was conducted using a mixed method approach, using Facebook insights, key informant interviews, and questionnaires. The evolution of the Facebook page was documented. The study presents the attitudes towards the Facebook page of users and non-Facebook users. The findings indicate that friends of the community Facebook page believe it plays a vital role in their community forging debate, discussion and higher levels of participation. The non-Facebook users have made the conscious decision not to engage with Facebook, but nonetheless are aware of Facebook and on occasion, kept informed indirectly from sources close to them. Overall the research presented in this chapter illustrates that Facebook can be an effective communication tool in community development even in rural areas.

INTRODUCTION

The aim of the chapter is to analyse the social media site Facebook as a communication tool in rural community development. Using a case study approach, the analysis is primarily focused on the Facebook page of one rural community in the midlands of Ireland and the complex interplay between those who use the page and those who do not engage with the technology. The aim of this approach is to provide an insight into how one rural community is successfully adopting social media which may in turn help other rural communities develop a similar service.

When we think of communication, most people probably think of talking, texting, email or maybe even silent physical forms of communication such as smiling or hugging. However, how we communicate has fundamentally changed. The informality of social communication has brought about a new playing field. It is not just about the traditional media of newspapers, TV and radio,
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but also the Internet, both mobile and interactive. Rural communities are also changing and adapting to the modern world of communication. The old art of communicating with friends over a casual meeting on the street is being challenged by the ever increasing presence of Facebook. Local news, reports of burglaries, places to visit and calls to action are all daily occurrences on Facebook, replacing the community bulletins of old. Facebook is revolutionising how people communicate and community groups and organisations are embracing the new technology.

Social media and networks are essentially Internet sites where people interact freely, sharing and discussing information about each other and their lives, using a mix of personal words, pictures, videos and audio. At these web sites, individuals and groups create and exchange content and engage in person-to-person conversations. They appear in many forms including blogs, forums and message boards, social networks and wikis. There are lots of well-known sites such as Facebook, LinkedIn, Myspace, Twitter, YouTube, Flickr and WordPress. Three of the most popular in Ireland are Facebook (62% of adults have Facebook accounts), Twitter (30%) and LinkedIn (26%) (Ipsos MRBI, 2014).

The efficiency of calling around to somebody’s house for face to face meetings in an urban setting is very different from the reality in dispersed rural areas. Allowing a community to engage people in the same physical space, even though they may be geographically and remotely apart is a major benefit to any rural community organisation. A well designed Facebook page can help to alleviate some of these disadvantages. The implementation of Facebook can help to innovate and reduce response time in times of key decision making, providing the tools to easily search out relevant information from similar experiences elsewhere, relevant to a particular group or area. On the surface, it would appear that Facebook has all of the credentials to deliver a connected community in rural areas. Facebook is now an accepted means of communication. It is changing the way many people relate to one another and share information. But can Facebook be used as effectively as a communication tool in rural community development?

Successful rural community development is the process of helping a community to strengthen itself and develop towards its full potential. Communication is a key component of any sustainable development. Engaging people for community development purpose is important but members of communities can only be engaged when communication is effective. Good community communication leads to successful collaborative efforts and transformation of a community which in time helps to bring about social change among the marginalized and vulnerable groups within the community. Successful communication will help move people to a collective and community focused model of participation, appreciation and equity. More and more communities have realized the potential that Facebook has to offer in bridging the community gaps in rural Ireland. Using one such community, Abbeyleix in County Laois, Ireland this study investigates their community Facebook page to help analyse if Facebook can indeed be an effective communication tool in community development.

The central research question for this chapter is: can Facebook be used as a communication tool in rural community development?

A rapidly growing body of research has accompanied the meteoric rise of Facebook as social scientists assess the impact of the social network on social life. However, while researching this chapter it was clear that very little has been written about utilising Facebook in rural communities. Hence, the purpose of this chapter is to present research to provide an overall view about the use of Facebook in rural community development. This will be done through a study of one rural area and its community Facebook page. It aims to demonstrate how the community of Abbeyleix are using Facebook to increase transparency and e-participation, opening real community dialog on what has become their community virtual notice board.