Chapter 5

Social Media, Participation, and Citizenship: New Strategic Directions

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ABSTRACT

Social media is a worldwide phenomenon with applications like Facebook and Twitter credited with everything from Obama’s 2008 election victory to the Arab Spring. But alongside claims of a social media inspired ‘revolution’ lay more nuanced questions around the role and impact of digital tools, smartphones, and social media in ‘every day’ contexts. The chapter discusses the role and impact of social media in organisations through two case studies where social media and digital technologies were used to increase energy awareness and environmental citizenship within organisations. Encouraging findings are presented that show the potential of such tools to facilitate change within individuals and organisations yet a cautionary note is offered with regards implementing and measuring such campaigns. Results from the interviews are discussed revealing how claims of social media on participation can be tested, and recommendations offered on how to design interventions for future social media and environmental communication initiatives.

INTRODUCTION

Our electronic networks are enabling novel forms of collective action, enabling the creation of collaborative groups that are larger and more distributed than any other time. (Shirky, 2008, p. 48)

Social media has emerged as a worldwide phenomenon with applications like Facebook and Twitter credited with everything from Obama’s 2008 election victory (Zhang, Johnson, Seltzer, & Bichard, 2009), to the Arab Spring (Ghonim, 2012). This chapter will explore the role and impact of social media
in wider society before considering the implications and opportunities for social media to be used in organizations for widening participation and improve their operation and performance.

Findings from two distinct but related cases are presented. The first is a social media campaign run by the sustainability team of a city centre University in the United Kingdom. The second is a participatory approach to energy management in the energy services team of local authority in the same city. Both projects aimed to utilise and explore the same public participation principles afforded by new technologies. This chapter will first reflect on the literature surrounding social media, public participation and citizenship and introduce the two cases that illustrate the potential as well the barriers. Then findings are presented before critically reflecting on the challenges and opportunities for organisations using social media.

**THE RISE OF SOCIAL MEDIA**

This chapter is concerned with the potential of social media to connect people. Clay Shirky (2008), one of the great proponents of the benefits of social media cites numerous examples of social media achieving this; such as the ability of people to self-organise photographs on Flickr, contribute their knowledge on shared documents on Wikipedia and engage in social activism. Groups like the American Red Cross (Briones, Kuch, Liu, & Jin, 2011), the UK based Forestry Commission (Stewart et al., 2012), and business leaders (Fischer & Reuber, 2011) are all using social media, especially Twitter. Through these interactions messages, information can spread – or go viral – in a matter of minutes to hundreds and thousands of users. Messages can be searched and identified using a #hashtag and enable messages to be aggregated and searched. Alongside the banal and gossip laden tweets, there are numerous examples of news stories breaking on Twitter before the formal news channels (Rheingold, 2002). So, what Ghonim (2012) referred to as ‘Revolution 2.0’ has cemented the argument for many that the dawn of the internet, and now the web-enabled capacity of smartphones, has changed the nature of how people connect and interact, share knowledge and act in a way that ‘amplifies’ individual actions.

Social media is not without its detractors though. Castells (2007), for example, argues that social media is a form of horizontal networked communication that is far from the democratic claims made by some. With only approximately 10% of users generating over 90% of the content there is understandable skepticism over the role and impact of Twitter and the limits of ‘point and click’ politics (van Dijck, 2012). Perceptions are not helped when commentators such as van Dijck argue that analysis of social media content shows that 40% of Tweets can be classified as ‘pointless babble’ (van Dijck, 2012) and Dahlberg (2001) argues participants simply huddle together in like-minded communities of interest.

Critics also argue that the notion that on-line spaces are neutral or uncontested is idealism (Castells, 2007; van Dijck, 2012). Mass self-communication spaces such as Twitter and Facebook are still subject to power relations and self-interest. Governments, corporate interests and the media are all influencing and affecting these on-line public spheres in ways that challenge the democratic and deliberative nature of the Internet. Critical theorist Jurgen Habermas’ concepts of the public sphere and communicative competence have been explored as possible interpretive tools for the success or impact of social media (Dahlberg, 2001; van Dijck, 2012). Similarly, Habermasian ideals have been utilized to interesting effect within the risk communication literature where similar claims have been made around the power of discourse, participation and collaboration with increasing claims around social learning and behavior change (Bull, Petts, & Evans, 2008; Petts & Brooks, 2006; Webler, Tuler, & Krueger, 2001).
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