Flow as a Framework to Engage Youth in Participatory Politics on Social Media Platforms

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ABSTRACT

Recent studies indicate that youth’s increased exposure to political content on social media platforms does not correlate positively with an increased interest in politics. This seemingly contradictory high exposure versus low interest indicates a certain level of apathy towards political participation. This article proposes that in order for youth to experience a stronger engagement in participatory politics, they need to feel challenged and skilled enough to be able to make an impact. This article draws on Csikszentmihalyi’s flow theory premise that a state of total absorption, or “flow,” can be attained in a game-like environment in which the actors are highly skilled and the challenges match their skills. The author proposes a framework that relies on combining memes’ viral properties—their ability to transmit political content—and the strength of engagement in a game-like environment to create politically provocative memes able to improve youth participation in politics.

KEYWORDS

Flow Theory, Internet Memes, Participatory Politics, Social Media, Youth Engagement

INTRODUCTION

Young people throughout the world are increasingly relying on social media as their main source of news, entertainment, and information. This has been especially evident in the last decade, with the phenomenal success of large social media platforms, starting with Myspace and followed by Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and Snapchat (Boyd, 2007; Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010). While there is empirical evidence that this increase in media consumption also increases young people’s exposure to more political content (Delli Carpini, 2000; Head, 2007; Xenos, Vromen, & Loader, 2014), this increase in exposure has not significantly increased their interest in political participation. Instead, we have witnessed a steady decline in interest in political activism among youth (Harris, Wyn, & Younes, 2010; Smith, 1999; Snell, 2010). Therefore, how do we reconcile a higher exposure to political content with a low interest in politics? One problem is in the nature of what is present on social media in terms of political videos. Most of them lack a meaningful call to action, or a challenge requiring youth to use their skills in order to participate. This lack of a meaningful challenge results in apathy towards participatory politics among youth (Hao, Wen, & George, 2014; Hooghe & Boonen, 2015; Pilkington & Pollock, 2015). Another key problem is that the creators of digital political videos are often advocacy groups, non-profit organizations or celebrity politicians. Youth are rarely involved in this process. This top down approach contributes to the lack of engagement of youth in political messages. In relation to youth’s engagement on social media platforms, we consider the action of viewing a political message as the lowest level of acceptable engagement in which the youth...
is ‘informed’, while the highest level of engagement is when the youth takes ‘ownership’ of the political message and proceeds to participate in the creating (or re-versioning) of this message. Our definition of engagement is based on research published by the International Association for Public Participation, which proposes five levels of participation: inform, consult, involve, collaborate, and empower as the highest level (Participation Spectrum, 2014). The objective of this paper is to look at what would produce the highest level of engagement with the aim of involving the youth in the process of creation and not just viewing. This would empower those youth and ensure meaningful engagement beyond the token ‘share’ and ‘like’ - often referred to as ‘slacktivism’ (Christensen, 2011; Lee & Hsieh, 2013; McCafferty, 2011; van Gestel & Strick, 2015; Kristofferson, White, & Peloza, 2014). The mechanism by which these youths feel empowered and the nature of the content that they would create and consume, is key for this process. In this paper, we will not present specific solutions, but rather we will point to a framework and a mechanism that can be used by activists and researchers to create real life political content made for (and by) the youth. This gives it a better chance of producing participatory political engagement (Head, 2007; Sheedy, MacKinnon, Pitre, & Watling, 2008).

One major problem when it comes to engaging youth in the process, is that a majority of the digital videos on social media platforms that youth typically watch, are often humorous viral videos or celebrity pulp. These videos are often sensational with very few cultural or political messages (Agichtein, Castillo, Donato, Gionis, & Mishne, 2008). By contrast, most political messages available online are dry and somber and are created by non-youth. This seems to decrease the chance of feeling ownership and interest in the content by the youth (Smith, 1999). Understanding the nature of content that youth consume on social media and how to improve the quality of the messages that are embedded in this content, is important not only as a study of online habits but also because it informs the youth’s offline actions and world view. Dana Boyd discusses how social media platforms affect how young people interact in society and the importance of understanding their online and offline engagements with content:

*Social network sites have complicated our lives because they have made this rapid shift in public life very visible. Perhaps, instead of trying to stop them or regulate usage, we should learn from what teens are experiencing. They are learning to navigate networked publics; it is in our better interest to figure out how to help them. (Boyd, 2007)*

Embedding a cultural or political message in a video and then making this video go viral, is no easy task. This is where the concept of a meme becomes a valuable tool to study how cultural and political memes can become viral on social media platforms and how we can utilize this understanding to create a framework to enable better methods to communicate these messages to the youth. The term meme in its original form was coined by Dawkins (1976). However, it has since been appropriated by the Internet to mean a digital unit of content that is shared, copied, re-versioned, and spread virally. It is also important that the concept of memes implies that this self-contained, self-propagating digital content is able to keep the cultural or political message embedded, even after it is duplicated and re-versioned (Distin, 2005; Shifman, 2012). It is important to note that Shifman’s definition of memes departs significantly from the original concept of memes that was coined by Dawkins in the 1970s. The major difference is that digital memes because they are online and can replicate quickly “are now present in the public sphere not as sporadic entities but as enormous groups of texts and images”, as Shifman notes in an interview with Henry Jenkins (2014). Therefore, memes in the digital world

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