

Social Networking for Social Capital

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What is Social Networking?

Put simply, social networking in the Internet context refers to Web applications that create online communities where people can connect and communicate with each other, share their opinions and organise into groups, whether of friends or people with common interests. The major social networking sites, such as Facebook, Orkut, Yahoo360, Hi5 and Bebo, have gathered millions of users, primarily from the under-30 generation.

Social networking sites differ from other popular Web sites such as Flickr and YouTube which are primarily for self-publishing of user content, such as pictures and videos. Blogs are also self-publishing sites, mainly for text. MySpace has acquired a reputation as the place for new music artists and bands to promote themselves by self publishing their music.

A completely new generation of social interaction sites, such as Second Life which is more like a video game than a website, encourage a far greater degree of involvement and participation but not necessarily social collaboration. In fact, personal triumph and the cult of the individual on such sites has reached the stage that virtual achievements, akin to reputation, are traded for real money on e-Bay and have even been the subject of theft and legal action.

Although social networking sites have tended to concentrate on re-uniting old friends, finding jobs, new friends and activity partners or dating, niche sites are now appearing based on lifestyle, hobbies and travel. Question and answer areas and ‘nano-blogging’, where users repeatedly update their social circle on what they are doing and how they feel, are also gaining in popularity. Many of the sites are now showing significant overlap and convergence as they compete for users by copying successful ideas. However, social networking has yet to make any real impact in the political arena whereas Blogs have already achieved significant exposure and some success.

How could Social Networking be used to promote citizen engagement?

Perhaps the most interesting possibility lies in the connection between social networking and social capital, famously examined by Robert D Putnam in his essay and subsequent book “Bowling Alone”. The World Bank defines social capital as “*the institutions, relationships, and norms that shape the quality and quantity of a society's social interactions... Social capital is not just the sum of the institutions which underpin a society – it is the glue that holds them together*”.

Putnam argues that improving or restoring social capital can have a beneficial effect on child development, health, crime, social disadvantage and personal, corporate and

national prosperity. He claims that the simple act of joining and being regularly involved in organized groups has a very significant impact on individual health and well-being, whether they are organized around enthusiasms and interests, social activity, or economic and political aims.

The largely unknown factor here is whether online social networking can have the same beneficial effects cited by Putnam when referring to physical groups. However, traditional ‘community’, often equated with social capital, is actually only one of several identified kinds of social capital.

The ‘linking’ dimension of social capital, proposed by Woolcock, is characterised by connections between people with differing levels of power and status, e.g. the public and the political elite. This is an area where social networking could help. Extending that further to what has been termed ‘Open Politics’ is only just beginning to emerge.

In his BCS Lovelace lecture, in March 2007, Tim Berners-Lee referred to the “Inter-creativity” challenge of finding “new forms of democracy for difference cases”. Harnessing ‘the energy of dissent’ to enhance social capital may be the key.

The old ‘Think Global, Act Local’ proposition now all too often manifests itself as single issue politics, with people becoming democratically active only to promote or oppose a very narrow agenda that affects them directly, like “Stop the hospital closure!” or “Stop the airport expansion!”. Getting the people to remain engaged once that single issue has passed is crucial for the success of online democratic communities. Research suggests that for this to happen, a mixture of information, functionality, participation and, above all, feedback is required.

Feedback can, of course, work both ways. Citizens must get sufficient, and timely, feedback from politicians and government to feel that their views are being heard and genuinely considered so that they feel motivated to continue participating. The email generation will not accept a postcard to acknowledge your letter which will be answered in due course.

Government can also benefit from citizen feedback on the implementation of policies and the quality of service delivery, the ‘democratisation of delivery’, not forgetting that this includes the notion of democracy itself as a service: ‘the delivery of democracy’. Responding promptly to such feedback closes the loop and accelerates the community. The corporate world has had to embrace the notion of the ‘agile organisation’ to remain competitive in a fast-changing, service-oriented world. Agile government remains an oxymoron.

The agile, fast-learning, tech-savvy, novelty-seeking, content-hungry ‘i-Pod’ generation, with their compulsive communication, open content sharing and complex online social networks, have very different expectations from previous generations, both in speed of response and the extent of their interaction and participation. They embody the Web 2.0 philosophy of “users as co-developers”. Is mainstream politics ready for that?

An interesting illustration of the current state of mainstream political thinking about the Web is the trend for politicians and major companies to create a presence on sites

like MySpace and Second Life in the hope that this will attract the attention of the young. The downside risks are ridicule and fashion ‘down-streaming’ when the young decide these sites have become ‘establishment’, ‘boring’ or ‘un-cool’ and move on.

Here lies a key problem in establishing social networking as a tool for political engagement: it’s a new digital generation divide, no longer about access to the Internet but about access to the closed worlds of social networking used by youth often precisely because their parents don’t understand and can’t see what they are doing. But, with the power of personalisation – altering the form or function of a website to suit your needs or wishes – social networking could be helped to reach across the generations.

Another problem is fashion; social networking sites seem to exhibit a kind of ‘half-life’ of around 18 months after which most users lose interest and move on. Change, novelty and transience are the norm. Chasing the youth generation’s attention is a problem even the multinational corporation marketing experts are finding difficult. It’s a new kind of disintermediation with peers not advertising guiding choices and behaviour. Google et al want to present targeted advertising, the users don’t want to see it. Running battles rage between ad-blockers and ad-blocker-defeaters. The marketers dream of a channel they can completely control – the rumoured “Google Phone” may be the first example of just that. Other recent developments from some mobile phone network operators hint at the emergence of ‘walled channels’.

Perhaps the greatest weakness of social networking sites is that they don’t really ‘do anything’ apart from make connections, send messages or share content; they mostly lack real functionality. There are more specialised and business-oriented sites that allow users to organise meetings, sign up to attend and run mailing lists but these have not captured attention to the same extent as the mainly social and self oriented sites. The few politically based sites that have achieved any degree of success have tended to be single function or ‘spot fixes’ for particular topical issues and lack broader, more integrated functionality.

If a balance can be found between fashion, function and feedback, genuinely engaging sites that get citizens motivated and keep them motivated could be created. There is a tantalising ‘triple bottom line’ in this proposition, which could offer a wide range of significant benefits at the personal, community and national level.