

Social Media as an Innovative Means of Communication and As an Agent of Social Change

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1. INTRODUCTION

To understand how social media can be used for social change, it is important to understand the ways that one can communicate online. This section will discuss the ways that users can communicate and interact with groups of people. A group can be a formally organized number of people or simply people who identify with similar values or who have a common interest or experience

“Social Media” are “a group of Internet-based applications that build on the ideological and technological foundations of Web 2.0, which allows the creation and exchange of user-generated content” (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010, p. 60). As of June 2010, 22% of time spent online (or one in every four and a half minutes) is spent using social media and blog sites worldwide (“Social Networks/Blogs Now Account for One in Every Four and a Half Minutes Online,” 2010). The global average time spent per person on social media sites is now nearly five and a half hours per month (Jennifer Van Grove, 2010). Popular social media include Facebook, Twitter, YouTube and Flickr.

Facebook:

Facebook is a social network service launched in February 2004. As of January 2011 it has more than 600 million active users (Nicholas Carison, 2011).

According to Mashable.com: Facebook is a social utility that helps people communicate more efficiently with their friends, family and coworkers. The company develops technologies that facilitate the sharing of information through the social graph, the digital mapping of people's real-world social connections. Anyone can sign up for Facebook and interact with the people they know in a trusted environment. Facebook is a part of millions of people's lives and half of the users return daily (retrieved 2/26/2011).

Twitter:

Twitter describes itself as “a real-time information network that connects you to the latest information about what you find interesting.” A micro-blogging site, Twitter allows users to send out messages in short spurts of up to 140 characters per “tweet.” Users can “follow” other users or communicate by searching for hashtags (e.g.egypt), user-identified key words that clue readers in to what others think is important. Twitter is based in San Francisco, but it's used by people in nearly every country in the world, and is available in English, French, German, Italian, Japanese and Spanish. As of September 2010, there are 175 million registered users and an average of 95 million tweets written each day (retrieved February 25, 2011). Twitter is an extremely personal method of communication. Users must choose whom they follow, and thus create a unique experience that is specific to them. Like email or the telephone, Twitter is a non-prescriptive communication platform. Each user experiences "Twitter" differently depending on the time of day and frequency she checks her feed, the other people she follows, and the interface(s) she uses to access the network. Because of this

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flexibility, norms emerge, mutate, collide, and fade away among Twitter users with a fluidity that may not be easily apprehendable to a non-user. One of the strengths of Twitter is that it can be accessed using computers or mobile phones, making it a lightweight method of communicating during crisis.

YouTube:

According to Mashable.com, YouTube, founded in February 2005, is the leader in online video, and the premier destination to watch and share original videos worldwide through a Web experience. YouTube allows people to easily upload and share video clips on www.YouTube.com and across the Internet through websites, mobile devices, blogs, and email (retrieved February 25, 2011). YouTube changed the way people share videos because it created a simple way to share otherwise cumbersome and large video files. Before YouTube, it was difficult to share video with a large number of people.

Flickr:

Flickr is a photo-sharing site that allows users to share photos on www.flickr.com or through embedded apps on other websites. Flickr allows users to tag photos with keywords, which creates communities around common interests or events. Flickr users who tag their photos with the same event tag could be considered a group.

Users can:

- Virtually join a group
- Get updates and messages about a group
- Read, post, or comment on news and information
- Receive / send private messages with group leaders and members
- Read and engage in transparent conversations that can be seen by others
- “Lurk” in a group—read information without making oneself known as a follower or member of the group
- Interact with others despite social or location boundaries

Communication online is different from the one-way communication of television, radio, and newspapers because online users can respond to messages in real time, not just receive them. However, much like learning of a news story from television, receivers of that information are not necessarily prone for action. Even those who virtually “join” a group may take no further action. “Instead of attending meetings, workshops and rallies, un-committed individuals can join a Facebook group or follow a Twitter feed at home, which gives them some measure of anonymity but does not necessarily motivate them to physically hit the streets and provide fuel for a revolution” (Papic & Noonan, 2011).

There are some clear benefits of online communication for social change. Online groups are less expensive for training, recruitment, and organization than traditional methods (Papic & Noonan, 2011). Most people are already using the social media platforms that activists can use for communication, so there is no need to convince recruits to find or join another site, or in the case of traditional media, watch or subscribe to a new program or publication (Greeley, 2011). Also, groups of people naturally form groups around shared causes or interests, so finding an audience is easy online (Mainwaring, 2011).

Studies have shown that people who are active online are likely to be active in group activities. The Pew Research Center found that 80% of Internet users participate in groups, compared with 56% of non-Internet users. Social media users are even more likely to be active: 82% of social network users and 85% of Twitter users are group participants (Rainie, Purcell, & Smith, 2011, p. 2). Additionally, if users feel that they can actually make a difference, they are more likely to engage in a group (Rainie et al., 2011, p. 14).

Activists who use social media for social change can use them to plan in-real-life and in-virtual-life meetings, keep followers informed about events and news, and gain followers. Social media use can increase users’ self-efficacy to join a cause because, in part, their peers’ involvement and actions are transparent. It can also be useful by giving an on-the-ground view to people not culturally or physically close to the users.

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In recent years, social media has exploded as a category of online discourse where people create content, share it, bookmark it and network at a prodigious rate. The five key characteristics of social media: collectivity; connectedness; completeness; clarity and collaboration lend itself to be used increasingly to support crisis management functions.

This are-

- a. **Collectivity.** The collective nature of social media serves to connect people across geographical boundaries and time zones via common platforms, to foster the growth of online communities with similar interests;
- b. **Connectivity.** Unlike other forms of media or communications, social media is able to connect users to other resources through the sharing of web links;
- c. **Completeness.** Social media is able to capture contributions and keep them in a persistent state for others to view and share;
- d. **Clarity.** Content on social media websites is usually highly visible, with participating people aware of each other's activities and content posted;
- e. **Collaboration.** People are encouraged to share and contribute in areas they are interested in, by gathering information and providing feedback.

Social media devoid of purpose and content would do little to enable people to prepare, respond and recover in the face of disasters. Generically speaking, social media can be defined as "a form of new media that facilitates social interaction and communication through the use of online internet-based platforms." Within this broad ambit, social media tools can be categorised into the following:

- a. **Social networks and blogs.** Social networking sites refer to sites that allow people to build their own personal pages to enhance content sharing and communication with other people (e.g., Facebook). Blogs are online journals or discussion sites used to post content and relevant updates (e.g., The Huffington Post);
- b. **Bookmarking sites.** This refers to websites that help people store, classify, share and search links through the practice of folksonomy¹ techniques on the internet (e.g., delicious.com, digg.com and reddit.com). When people tag and share content on bookmarking sites, the vis visibility of shared content typically improves across the board;
- c. **Collaborative projects.** Collaborative projects are communal databases created through user generated content (e.g., Wikipedia);
- d. **Content communities.** Content communities are online communities where people share various types of content such as photos, audio and videos (e.g., YouTube, Flickr);
- e. **Social reviews.** This refers to websites that allow people to search, rate and share information as well as provide recommendations (e.g., Google Places). Using social reviews, people are able to vote on content based on personal interest, inclinations and perceived relevance.

2. SOCIAL MEDIA, THE PUBLIC SPHERE AND SOCIAL CHANGE

The spread of affordable information and communication technologies, such as mobile phones and the internet, has broadened the public sphere; and shifted it from the institutional realm to the new communication space. The global civil society and public sphere now have the means to exist independently from political institutions (Castells, 2008). Social media are used as organizing and mobilizing tools; and as a medium for debate, dialogue and collective decision-making. Non-state actors rely on horizontal networks of communication and mass media to shape debate in the public sphere, influence opinions, and foster social change. Web-based media technologies have allowed for participation in a new type of public sphere that can be difficult for the state to control. The effectiveness of new media technologies to bring about social change is highly contested.

The widespread diffusion of the Internet, mobile communication, digital media and a variety of social software tools throughout the world has transformed the communication system into interactive horizontal networks that connect the local and global. This helpdesk research report looks at the role of social media in the formation and functioning of civic

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groups, protest and social movements, the effectiveness of social media and success factors. Social media is considered to contribute to democratic processes, and to be an important mechanism for collective action, protests and social movements. While many claims are made about the effectiveness of social media, there is little systematic research that seeks to estimate the causal effects of social media. Various factors discussed in the literature as contributing to the success or weakness of social media includes: leadership, links to conventional media and other activists, elite reaction and external attention.

3. SOCIAL MEDIA IN FRAGILE AND CONFLICT-AFFECTED STATES

The growth of social media has changed the information space around conflict. People affected by conflict increasingly have the tools to record and share their experiences with the world and to be a part of the media through the use of a cellphone camera and internet access. Information that moves through these networks can have an impact on the course and outcome of the war by affecting public opinion and support domestically and internationally (Sigal, 2009).

While social media can contribute to stability, dialogue, collective identity, and nonviolent political solutions in conflict-affected and fragile states, it can also have adverse outcomes. Elites and others seeking power can use these same tools to organize for political influence, recruitment, and political violence. Citizens too may use ICTs to polarize

4. CONCLUSION

Many of the most important social challenges facing the world require radical innovation that cuts across organizational, sectoral, and disciplinary boundaries. These challenges require innovative ways of applying new technology along with new forms of organization, new network processes to build human and social capital, and new grassroots-based solutions. The good news is that social innovation is a remarkably creative field. It is growing in popularity and is having a global impact. Unfortunately, it is still a nascent field, only beginning to take shape and move beyond anecdotes.

Although it is gratifying to note that social innovation has attracted a great deal of interest worldwide, five areas require attention if we are to unleash even more innovations for social and economic prosperity:

- Social innovation needs to be explicitly taken into account when we are formulating science, technology, and innovation policy. To ensure that innovation benefits the entire society, these policies must establish democratic platforms where diverse actors can participate.
- To ensure the successful implementation of social innovation activities in different countries, we need proper coordination and integration of these activities in national and regional socio-economic planning.
- Education and research in science, technology, and innovation must go beyond focusing on elite science and begin to support science that is focused more directly on meeting diverse social needs.
- Social innovation can be successful only if there is sufficient capacity to scale up the innovation. Rejuvenating the social base through a heavy investment in capacity building, and creating a platform conducive to interaction and collaboration, are prerequisites for social innovators to prosper.
- Public-private partnerships play an important role in supporting social innovations. Strengthening these global partnerships and platforms can be effective for understanding and fostering social innovation worldwide.

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