

Participation Barriers to Youth Civic Engagement in Social Media

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Abstract

Organizations aiming to foster civic engagement, such as government bodies, news outlets, political parties, and NGOs, struggle to purposefully use social media to engage young people. To respond to this challenge we conducted five group-interviews with 27 youth, 16–26 years, about their experiences of and barriers to civic engagement in social media. Our paper contributes to identifying specific participation barriers that young people experience concerning social media civic engagement, and how organizations should work to overcome these barriers.

Introduction

Traditional civic engagement practices are changing due to the disruption in information and communication patterns caused by social media (e.g. YouTube, Facebook, Twitter, etc.). Social media, "that allow for the creation and exchange of user generated content" (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010, p. 61), is seen as a new and promising arena for youth civic engagement, as young people are regarded as being at the forefront of social media uptake (Brandtzæg, Følstad, Mainsah, 2012; Delli Carpini, 2000). However, many organizations aiming to foster civic engagement, such as government bodies, news outlets, political parties, and NGOs, struggle to successfully use social media to reach and engage young people. Traditional models of engagement, communication and organizations are built around formal and hierarchical structures. These formal structures are argued to partly explain why many organizations struggle to reach youth online (Montgomery 2008).

With an emerging impact of social media in the organizational domain, more knowledge is needed on how to design and use social media to motivate youth civic engagement. Multiple studies present young people's experiences and perceptions of online civic engagement (e.g. Loader et al. 2014; Montgomery 2008; Valenzuela et al. 2009), while there are few studies that present experiences

related to specific participation barriers hindering civic engagement in social media, experienced by the youth themselves.

Our aim for this study was to learn from young people (16–26 years) that are targeted in social media by organizations such as new outlets, political parties and NGOs. The following research question was formulated: *What participation barriers to civic engagement in social media are experienced by young people?*

The contribution of this work is to provide important insights in current barriers to youth civic engagement and how organizations aiming to engage young people in social media should respond to these obstacles.

Background

Alarm has been raised concerning the decline of young people's civic engagement over the last 30 years (Delli Carpini 2000; Flanagan and Levine 2010). However, this picture of declining youth engagement is not entirely uniform (Delli Carpini 2000), as engagement changes character and become more difficult to grasp. Successful organizations are in a constant state of flux in response to their environment (Scott, 1981) and younger target groups. But many organizations perceive social media as a threat to productivity, security, privacy or management authority (Bradley and McDonald, 2011). Others consider social media and need to learn how social media have changed the character of civic engagement, and how they can design for efficacious social and civic engagement online.

The changing character of civic engagement

The character of civic engagement is changing, and has done so for several decades, but social media might have accelerated that process. Syvertsen and colleagues (2011), in their study of youth civic engagement from the 1970s to the present, showed how young voter turnout and conventional civic participation (writing to public officials, donating money, working in political campaigns) in the U.S. has seen a substantial decrease.

Some fear that social media activity could result in a further disengagement in community, while others have stressed the power of social media in connecting people. Social media have also caused some confusion with regard to how we should understand and define online civic engagement (Brandtzæg et al. 2012; Valenzuela et al. 2009). For example, should “liking” a societal cause be seen as instances of civic engagement? Brandtzæg and colleagues (2012) argued for a relatively broad definition of online civic engagement as online behavior “in response to societal needs, in the form of supportive, deliberative, and collaborative practices” (Brandtzæg et al., 2012, p. 67).

Civic engagement and social media

Gordon and colleagues (2013) suggest that civic media tools can be categorized according to two broad types: tools designed specifically for civic engagement (for instance, a digital game for local planning or an app to give feedback to the city council), and generic tools that are appropriated for civic engagement (such as in the example of political conflicts listed above). Though generic social media (e.g. Facebook and Twitter) serve to engage youth in episodes of civic engagement; “the critical design choices underlying those sites do not communicate clear conceptions of citizenship, nor are they concerned with developing the civic skills of users” (Debatin et al. 2009, p. 408). Hence, it is desirable, from the point of view of organizations with a social mission, to establish new knowledge in how to support for new forms of online civic engagement.

The challenge of reaching the young

In this study, we use the term “young people” or “youth” in reference to people between the age of 16 and 26.

Online venues specifically designed for civic engagement among youth have been characterized as technology-driven, set up under the assumption that “if we build it, they will come” (Montgomery 2008, p. 28). Furthermore, the design of such sites, as well as the engagement practices applied, may be hampered by rigid ideas about what constitutes “proper” citizen activity. Bennett and colleagues (2010) argue that communication about traditional politics targeting young typically do so in well-worn, top-down, highly managed ways. As a result, many young people find these engagement sites inauthentic and irrelevant. Rather, young people find spontaneous, non-institutional, and informal forms of collective expression online more appealing than the options typically offered by online civic engagement initiatives sponsored by governments, political parties, or NGOs (Brandtzæg et al. 2012; Montgomery 2008).

Nevertheless, young people are found to be more active than the older population in taking up social media for political and civic purposes (Brandtzæg et al. 2012; Brandtzæg and Haugstveit 2014; Delli Carpini 2000; War-

ren et al 2014), so there should be a great potential to involve youth in these new channels. Still, many organizations do not fully understand how social media are different from traditional online communications. Consequently, organizations are often unable to optimize how social media can be used to reach youth, and instead, inadvertently, raise barriers that hamper engagement.

The study

To respond to the research question, we interviewed young people about the experiences, needs, challenges and barriers related to civic engagement in social media. We conducted five group interviews. In total, 27 young people (11 males and 15 females) participated and their ages ranged from 16 to 26 years. To obtain a nuanced picture, we included both young people who were not actively engaged in civic matters and those who were. The interviews were conducted in two batches, in 2013 and 2015. The interviews were semi-structured and each interview lasted approximately 1 hour and 25 minutes. Our analysis is based on hermeneutical interpretation (e.g. Seidman 2012). The background described in this paper, served as an analytical basis to interpret our data.

Results

We present key participation barriers experienced by youth in social media civic engagement.

Language and content barriers

Many organizations use a language with concepts, terms or expressions, and meanings that communicate badly with younger people. Youth in our sample argue that language differences make it difficult to reach them. In addition, the content presented does not attract them, and should be more clearly defined to be comprehensible for a younger audience.

It's too text heavy content and it's hard to understand the purpose. What do they want me to do? (Youth, 2015 interview).

To avoid this language and content barrier, content should be presented in a relevant way by involving young people and giving them an opportunity to express the content in their own language. Young people argue that they want to be triggered by something that arouses them. They also need to be convinced to do some kind of action, preferable through a video that are telling a compelling personal story. The Kony video and the campaign that went viral was mentioned as a good example in regard to storytelling, as it was both action packed and addressing "you".

Youth at our age just follow the stream of others, one must actually know or see that others do bother to engage in or to start doing some actions. (Youth, 2015 interview)

This last quote illustrates the role of *social facilitation* (Zajonc, 1965) and how important it is to consider in social media, because it implies that youth's engagement does not rely solely on their abilities, but is also impacted by the internal awareness of being seen and be part of a group. This explains how important it is to visualize the crowd and the engagement of other through social media. Another factor supporting co-action is celebrities. They may want to identify with a known figure, and in effect a celebrity can be important motivational drivers.

Barriers to information

Through social media, young people both provide and receive information from their peers, making the information they exchange more targeted toward their generation. Youth today are used to information finding them, and not the other way around.

Paywalls to online newspaper articles are experienced as a barrier to relevant information they would otherwise want to read. Interestingly, even though some had parents that subscribed to certain newspapers, articles that required login information were rarely read, if at all. In one of the groups, this issue was expressed in the following way:

I think it sucks that they have started to charge you for reading articles, so I have recently stopped visiting [the web page]. (Youth, 2013 interview).

Open access to important information is therefore a key to support youth engagement.

Slow feedback as barrier

Time is a crucial issue in the world of social media, where fast-paced publishing and interaction are so important. It is hard for the organizations to adapt to the needs and the real-time expectations of youth within a social media world. Young people are used to real-time communication and 24/7 availability, which is problematic for many organizations from a resource perspective.

If the organization urges you to send a message or communicate in some way, I want immediate feedback. Such interaction should be in real-time via chat or similar. If you don't get any response from the person on the other side in days or weeks, it's not really interesting. (Youth, 2015 interview).

The time and resource barrier is as an inevitable problem, where the advantages of using social media create

new challenges by raising the expectations of end-users. The solution is to manage expectations by being transparent and explicit with what end-users can expect.

Disbelief as a barrier

The young people interviewed expressed disbelief that their engagement in civic issues had any actual impact. This disbelief derived from several reasons: lack of trust in politicians and other authority organizations (e.g., the municipality, the police) and feelings of powerlessness. Stories of engaged youth in the local community who had tried to address important issues but failed to gain recognition and be heard, strongly contributed to these feelings. Response time was also an important issue; they wanted fast response and if they communicated they wanted chat and real time communication.

However, it takes time from when one starts to address an issue until changes are made, if at all. The young participants said this especially was a barrier against engagement in local community matters. As many knew that they would leave their hometown soon after high school and move to a different part of the country to go to college or university, they did not see the point in trying to contribute to making changes in their local community, as they might not see the results of their engagement for themselves:

There have been no changes since I was in the eighth grade (...). Which makes me think that I won't bother to use a lot of my free time to try to do something, because if you become engaged now, then you know that the changes won't happen until you have moved away anyway. (Youth, 2013 interview).

Privacy and social identity as a barrier

The younger users reported that privacy issues were central for why many young people do not engage in civic matters online. Many claimed that they will not engage by "liking" or commenting on organizations' Facebook pages because it will be visible to others in their network. Their personal communication on social media in general is also more hidden now than some years ago, and their general sharing practices are getting more private:

Youth: I never share or publish anything on Facebooks newsfeed. We mainly share in group chats on messenger or via Snapchat. I prefer Snapchat.

Interviewer: Why do you prefer Snapchat?

Youth: It's less stress when few people see it and you can't trace the history of the conversation on Snap. Everything will be deleted after some seconds (Youth 2015 interview).

Thus, it is difficult to get the general crowd of young people to participate in open social media platforms where

everybody can see everything. Many reported an unease and ambivalence about the information shared and in-person visibility related to civic issues.

Too much commitment and workload as a barrier

They (the organizations) need to offer us, which are not so into it (civic engagement), some action that is easy to handle. Mainly through social media and something that does not stress you out (Youth, 2015 interview).

Young people in our sample clearly differ in terms of civic engagement. However, to reach out to those less engaged, it is key to minimize the threshold and make it easy to participate.

Conclusion

The results from our study indicate important participation barriers among young people's civic engagement in social media; related to language, content disbelief, and privacy and times issues. This feedback suggests that new communication models should focus on immediate feedback and dialogue combined with a clear goal and action-oriented engagement. It also indicates that it is important to support flexibility and easy forms of engagement, at least when organizations are aiming to support civic engagement among the bigger crowd. Moreover, few young people are reading long pieces of plain text in social media. Therefore, information presented in longer plain text should be avoided and the language should be easy and understandable, with young people in mind. Short and engaging videos are found to be a key content modality when communicating with younger people.

We believe that these results usefully identify barriers of relevance to civic organizations looking to engage younger populations, and that our findings will work as a basis for developing more concrete design recommendations. Future research could extend the work presented in this paper by incorporating younger users from an international sample and to include organizations that are forerunners in engaging youth in social media.

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