The Impact of Social Media on Fostering Civic Responsibility

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Abstract

In the fast-moving, modern world that is 2017, trends and technological advances are forever evolving. With so many ways to communicate—FaceTime, email, Twitter, and Facebook—and so many ways to get information—all-time news clicking, swiping and watching it—there just doesn't seem to be much room for civic responsibility these days (Anne Cummings, 2017). Engaging and being engaged in civic activities—such as your basic protests, contacting your representatives, and voting—are actions that are, for a lack of a better word, a real commitment, and take the time and effort of Joe Schmo to get into the swing of. This begs the question: Is civic responsibility being shirked on and forgotten about under the mass of Facebook and Twitter feeds and status updates? Despite the fact that social media is seemingly becoming more and more prevalent, is it perhaps possible that it can also be used as a tool to foster such civic responsibilities? As the intense growth in digital communication and distribution of media changes the face of journalism and public relations in the 21st century, these are issues that individuals, media companies, non-profits, governmental institutions, and society as a whole need to be aware of and informed about.This essay seeks to explore the rise of social media, and whether it can foster qualities of civic responsibility in a manner that has yet to be extensively researched. The objectives of this study also include analyzing multiple case studies featuring Facebook or Twitter usage and tracking the presence of relationship fostering and two communication models for fostering engagement in civic practices, as well as discerning from these successful case studies what may be considered best practices for either a future campaign or for individuals in general who wish to take part in civil civic acts through virtual platforms. The findings of this study are intended to serve as a guide for those who wish to become more participatory in their local systems and for public relations professionals to foster civic responsibilities through social media platforms. By exploring sub-topics, such as the rise of Facebook and Twitter, how different generations use social media, what exactly constitutes civic responsibility, and the infusion of social media practices into both news companies and government institutions, this study aims to broaden the scope of scholarship on that which social media can accomplish, and what the future may hold in the exciting new world of virtual interaction.

Keywords: social media, civic responsibility, digital communication, civic engagement, case studies, Facebook, Twitter, participatory practices

2. Introduction

The advent and proliferation of social media has drastically reshaped the social and political media landscape, enabling people to easily access and share information, debate, and mobilize support in the online public sphere. Recognition of the public value of social media use has emphasized its potential to foster civic responsibility, engagement, and cohesion. The growing use of social media in the public context has enlarged the examination on the dynamics of social media, especially how civic interests are intertwined with interpersonal and mass communication on social networking sites. In order to unveil the broader and officious image of what is believed as a rather intricate phenomenon, the thesis sets out to investigate citizens' long-term use of social media and its implications for civic responsibility and social engagement. It is recognized as individuals engaging in greater respect for one another (L. Chapman, 2022). Fostering civic responsibility and promoting the social fabric are identified as two closely related but theoretically different civic interests that are presumed to interact and be taken all together henceforth as the interest in civic participation resulting in enhanced civic virtue and active citizenship.

3. Theoretical Framework

This theoretical framework section aims to offer a basis for examining the impact of social media on fostering civic responsibility as people use intermediaries for civic engagement. It underscores the need to develop a conceptual framework on how social media platforms are useful to civic engagement, especially by adopting a bottom-up approach exploring how technology supports civic engagement activities. The section bridges the gap in the literature by introducing and analyzing various models and frameworks that offer better insights into digital participation in civic life. A few challenges and directions for further research are discussed, offering deepened understanding on the social impact of digital technologies.

There is an evident rise in the research on the use of social media for public or political engagement of any sort. Often it is lectured via a top-down lens, exploring

how digital platforms are useful for governments, politicians or other governance bodies to promote dialogue with citizens . Indeed, the press is crowded with examples of technology initiatives driven and initiated by institutional players. However, the complex environment of social media lets users have an active role in content production, e.g. co-creation and sharing. This points out the possibility to implement a bottom-up perspective and explore how technology supports various civic engagement activities initiated and promoted by the user base. In the same way, this opens the door to the analysis of initiatives that do not see the engagement of governmental players but are solely driven by individual citizens or organized non-institutional groups. As such, the overall aim is being carried out to embrace these reflections. Social media is decentrally organized and empowers different networked actors to communicate, share information, opinions, and ideas about public matters. Consequently, it is essential to work on clear and defined theoretical perspectives to encompass the several dimensions of social media influence. Thus, this essay starts filling this gap by introducing a conceptual framework ready to be investigated via specific examples and case studies, aiming eventually to encourage a broader reflection. (Mihelj & Jiménez-Martínez, 2021)

3.1. Social Media and Civic Engagement

Social media platforms have in recent years become an important arena for civic participation. They serve as an easily-accessible stage for both traditional organizations and individuals to mobilize and participate in civic activities (B. Schmitt et al., 2022). Movements such as #MeToo, #BlackLivesMatter, and March for Our Lives are notable cases where issues go viral on social media and lead to broad engagement and tangible political change. Common platforms such as Facebook and Twitter have proven to be efficient tools for their reach and hashtag function. The ease of establishing and disseminating information through events and pages on Facebook fosters discussions and collaborations across local and global barriers. Twitter's short format is effective in shaping the public narrative and enables direct communication with influential figures. These social media platforms are powerful tools for civic engagement, allowing traditional barriers of participation in

civic life to break down. Most individuals have a voice, and many are likely to have a larger audience compared to traditional participation. Social media facilitate the possibility to have more voices and thus broadening the dialogue. As a result, digital platforms can amplify underrepresented voices that may have been censored by traditional civic channels, i.e., in a closed political system. Thus, social media enable greater participation in public affairs, contributing to a more inclusive civic life.

However, working on social media comes with many difficulties. The possibility of sharing false information, such as fake news or propaganda, is higher than in other forms of medium, and the spread of misinformation can be uncontrolled. Furthermore, since the rise of social media, researchers have been deeply concerned about the proliferation of echo chambers, closed environments on social media or elsewhere where the vast majority of information a person sees supports their existing opinions, so content opposed to their worldview is automatically hidden. This technological trend harms democratic societies because citizens do not have access to all political perspectives. It also erodes the possibility of compromise and consensus in political life. Finally, echo chambers foster less informed citizens, as they are not confronted with opposing valid points. There is an urgent need to promote civic engagement on social media that is informed, participatory, and inclusive. It would combine social media's reach and mobilization capacity with the existing channels of participatory civic formation. This requires, however, that both civil society and educational systems adapt to social media's particularities: rapid speed, reach, and simplification. Developing media literacy is essential in this matter, accentuating social media content quality and its potential for manipulation, and therefore yielding more effective civic engagement. (Rodrigues2021)

3.2. The Role of Social Media in Promoting Civic Responsibility

This subsection delves into an analysis of how social media actively promotes civic responsibility among its users by fostering a sense of duty, civic engagement, and other behaviors linked to civic matters. People have been using social media to raise awareness and call to action. For example, "Part 3: Have you taken action this week?

If so, drop a comment of what you did and inspire others to take action too" is a post and call to action from a popular user on Carousell. To comment, users may have attended an event, protest, or provided support to a GoFundMe page (Anne Cummings, 2017). Similarly, individuals from all backgrounds on Twitter follow trending movements, campaigns, and hashtags, and attend fundraisers or protests. Many people may interact with tweets by liking, retweeting, or sharing them on other platforms. These behaviors show societal engagement among Twitter users and other social platforms that involve people with civic matters.

Lessons from the Netflix series show that social media can be a powerful tool to mobilize the public. The series has viewed a documentary on social issues and included a link to "how you can take action" for each episode. Through this collaboration, each documentary has created around 300,000 to 500,000 calls to action throughout time. These petitions range from leaving reviews for the documentary to contacting local representatives. With bought pizza and the proprietor of a local pizzeria, the Concerts, a group of concerned students and parents with no other affiliation, host meetings in homes to discuss issues and strategize. They project a post of upcoming events either a tweet or reply request on their community group's blog post. Over 8,000 individuals begin to follow and participate in their online community engagement processes through blog replies, Facebook, and Twitter. Through this, the group of concerned community members acquires power and a larger voice in issues concerning subpar education. Beyond raising awareness, social media can also be used to move towards action, change, and progress. Some social media forms facilitate the development of groups and communities around topical interests like climate change, homelessness, and animal rights. Users of Reddit are engaged in discussions, debates, news article shares, and idea presses concerning these issues and many more. Through social platforms, online communities can cultivate craft and request resources on these social issues and behaviors.

4. Case Studies

It all started in Portland, Oregon – an unassuming corner of a social media screen shared a simple message, "Let's have a parade!", with ground zero set at the corner of SW 10th & Alder. 12 horses, 3 bike amplies, a Mariachi band, frowned upon open container laws, and a precession of several thousand people all started with a simple message on MySpace. Within just a few years, those same streets, parks, and rallies were filled with a very different crowd; protestors, civil disobedience, and a media covering episodes of what seemed to be political unrest. Entire movements, some friendly and fun, others more serious and of historic significance, have been born recently – the ties that bind them, the little share buttons filled with social network links that allow news and ideas to spread like (memetic) virus.

The following pages contain several such case studies to illustrate the main thesis. Some are success stories. They are the innovative uses of social media that resulted in citizens reformulating their engagement with their community and becoming more active participants in civic life. Others are analytical, looking at how different communities try to harness social media for civic engagement and the challenges they face. There are both excited discussions of the potential for social media to foster civic responsibility and concerned essays on the darker side of available tools, often one and the same at once (B. Schmitt et al., 2022). These studies come from a variety of types of research, local campaign evaluations, and national communication surveys, large scale data analysis, and personal interviews. The successes often come in small nuggets of activities layered beneath more traditional forms of activism. To find success through Facebook it takes a new and innovative approach, one that a community must develop in a trial-and-error procedure. The opportunities on Facebook and other SNS are abundant. Discussed issues range from the fundamental ability to disseminate ideas through networks, mobilize support for causes, quickly discern the support for an idea, or coordinate events. On-the-fly sharing of articles and videos means users now have the power to act as an editorial room instantaneously responding to events as they unfold, altering the course of the headlines just as fast.

However with these fantastic abilities also come numerous challenges. The first issue concerns the structure of SNS, in particular, how any given account can be handled. The second major issue involves the mounting business-side pressures that are steadily turning a site founded on egalitarian principles into a pay-to-play advertising platform. Facebook has slowly inched away from the near-equal weighting of all items posted in a user's feed towards a more sophisticated model, one that will push more sponsored stories and that hides away items based on automated algorithms. A third challenge might be perceived as an indirect offshoot to the previous two; the concern over the lack of diffusion such tactics might allow for pertinent information for any healthy democracy, an issue that Facebook and Twitter turned a blind eye towards privacy. (Rosa)

4.1. Successful Examples of Social Media Fostering Civic Responsibility

While social media has been considered traditionally for its delivery of entertainment and advertisement to users, in the digital age many have used it increasingly to address civic issues. It has been argued that social media has the potential to foster civic responsibility by enabling influential individuals' grassroots friendship networks who spread information among friends, family, and colleagues (Richards, 2017). Supporting this view, there are already instances where social media has been successful in engaging citizens in addressing civic issues. In 2012, for example, when unarmed black teenager Trayvon Martin was fatally shot by neighborhood watch volunteer George Zimmerman, the saying "I am Trayvon Martin" flew virally on social media platforms as a hashtag, drawing attention to the incident and pressuring law enforcement. An African American civil rights organization also collected more than 2 million signatures to petition the arrest of George Zimmerman. Following Martin's family's civil lawsuit, which called George Zimmerman to pay a civil penalty for his egregious measure against Martin, members successfully applied pressure to corporations, effectively terminating contracts with Mr. Zimmerman.

Harvard University scholars analyzed 230,000 tweets about the #BringBackOurGirls campaign over one week after Boko Haram's kidnapping of more than 200 girls in Nigeria. This analysis revealed that actions to draw attention to injustice on social media were particularly concentrated in European and African countries, while American newspapers were uninterested in covering the incident. However, global calls for its rescue on Twitter pressured America to investigate the event, and U.S. special forces were ultimately dispatched to rescue the girls. Certainly, the rise of social platforms like Facebook and Twitter in recent years has also seen a drastic rise in activism on them. Combine these observations with previous research, it is purported that as a single user visualizes the strength of their community, their likelihood to be enthused will rise as well. To test this thesis, a study was undertaken on thousands of Twitter accounts making public displays of ego communities while sanctioning further action.

4.2. Challenges and Limitations

The challenges and limitations associated with the use of social media for fostering civic responsibility will be addressed in this subsection (B. Schmitt et al., 2022). The first challenge and the most crucial one to address is misinformation. Misinformation on social media platforms can lead to unnecessary panic and detrimental information uptake. In the worst case, false health reports can lead to harmful and severe self-medication attempts or side effects. Another significant challenge of users of social media sites trying to foster civic responsibility is that personal interests tend to focus on engaging with like-minded peers and potentially malicious agents, forming echo chambers and exacerbating the prevailing differences and ultimately alienating the civic presentation of the opposing view. From the view of suppliers of information, they must cope with the attention economy, where the vast amount of information strives for visibility and engagement. Therefore, algorithms attempt to predict the information to which a user is most receptive, often leading to biased platform-centric effects, further aggravating the social disparity, and often leading to adverse outcomes. This is particularly critical for users on social media sites aiming to foster civic responsibility, since accurate and objective accounts may not get enough attention,

thus hindering the desired effect. Beside these challenges, heavy users often feel overwhelmed by the sheer volume of information and might withdraw from engagement. Moreover, the number of active users in online platforms has surpassed the psychological bundled limits of group size, making them feel for digital exile. Furthermore, growing familiarity of the audience with the architecture of the underlying algorithms is tedious with efforts to control public narrative, hence fostering a hostile environment that harms civic engagement, discussing how to address these challenges. Another barrier to civic engagement is the fear of pervasive digital surveillance, often fueled by controversies regarding privacy breaches. An effort is made to shed light on the opaque collection, management, manipulation, and utilization of the data generated by the social web. Ways to protect user data are discussed, and directions to develop privacy-preserving open source tools are provided. Finally, it is vital that middle ground is found in direct regulation between the benefits of data-driven innovation and the dark sides of data exploitation, advocating the careful and informed use of social platforms. Ultimately, given the unique ability of connectivity and scalability of the dissemination of social platforms, and their role in shaping public discussions, this focus should take the most command when considering methods and arrangements for engaging civic responsibility.

5. Best Practices and Recommendations

The centrality of social media for disseminating and discussing news and information with personal and broader civic networks indicates that facilitating enhanced media literacy can help increase discussions on public affairs and citizens' confidence to prevent news misuse on others (W Gleason & Von Gillern, 2018). But the relationship between using social media for news and civic empowerment would be conditioned by media literacy level and discussion strength with different networks. However, due to the circulation of information from site to site, even mediated hate speech might grow in users' filter bubbles. Therefore, effective strategies could support open discussion to open up networks and foster the civic use of social media's information propagation as a deterrent, while at the same time enhancing media

literacy to discern critical news information and reducing overall information sharing. Along these lines, social media platform providers are encouraged to develop easy-to-use features that could foster a broader spectrum of information exposure and warn users from sources of misinformation, as well as to provide concrete recommendations and training to enhance media literacy. Furthermore, by engaging with these site owners and policy-makers, actions could also be suggested to provide more indicators to the public on information propagation mechanisms as well as on accountability for information sourcing, in order to foster greater transparency, awareness, and public debate. Public entities and activists pursuing open and democratic discourses should rely on civic engagement and communication practices that foster the civic use of network information spread. As such, effective strategies could involve moving beyond the network boundaries and promoting cross-community information flow. Importantly, practitioners are also encouraged to engage with media literacy and empowerment campaigns aimed at educating citizens' ability to discern critically news and potentially misleading information spreading techniques, who will thus be less likely to amplify the hate speech content. If filtered and unverified information keeps cascading, we suggest it should be the responsibility of activists, journalists, and public entities to implement counter-education and public awareness campaigns on controversial or concerning cases.

6. Conclusion

Social media is a double-edged sword. On the one hand, it can serve as a catalyst for civic responsibility, fostering empathetic attitudes, building transversal relations, providing insights into political processes and helping people voice their concerns. However, its effectiveness is contingent on how people engage with it. For this reason, the general strategy is to engage with social media in a pro-active and informed manner. In other words, to not be a mere 'end consumer' of social media content and to carefully consider what kind of content gets disseminated online (Van Den Bergh, 2016). As organizations start to adapt to these rules, it becomes increasingly important

to strategize their online activities. The willingness and ease to interact and the change it intends to enact must play leading roles in this strategy.

In any case, a number of concerns affect social media platforms as potential agents for fostering civic responsibility. These include the tension that users navigate between social media engagement and actual participation in non-digital civic activities, the prioritization of the individual over the collective promotion of change and both the moderation of content that might be violent or shocking but is also in the public interest and the over-moderation and removal of content favorable to minorities as a result of upload filters and take-down requests. In view of these concerns, additional pieces of research are expected to be carried out, both on new, upcoming social media platforms and on their existing, known big counterparts as to understand better what is difficult to measure beyond conspicuous metrics and to inform policy and support intervention.

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