

# Social Networking; the People's Politics

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## Abstract

Social networking gives a public voice to individuals and allows them to engage with society in ways not previously possible. Shirky (2010) argues that a driver for building civic engagement is the group working which is fundamental to social networking technologies and that this is building skills in governance amongst those who actively participate. The 'wiring of humanity' lets us treat free time as a shared global resource, and lets us design new kinds of participation and sharing that take advantage of that resource. Flexible, cheap, and inclusive media offers opportunities to do new and different things. In a study by the Pew Research Centre those using social networks were more likely to be politically active (Evangelista, 2011). The increase in political engagement is suggested to stem from the fact that active social networkers tend to become more aware of issues from those in their network who are politically active. It acts as a 'social sharing machine'; increases the visibility of issues and 'speeds up that collective action model'.

Young active citizens are finding new ways to engage, often through volunteering and especially through networked digital media. Social networks have provided a means of engagement between young people and their communities in a way that previous communications technologies failed to do. This paper builds on the previous work in this field and reviews examples of social networking and active citizenship in the community.

## Social Networks

The Social Science Encyclopaedia defines a social network as, *any articulated pattern of connections in the social relations of individuals, groups and other collectives* (Scott 1999). In this paper social networks are defined more narrowly as the computer applications developed to facilitate this pattern of connections between individuals and groups.

In 2007 of the top ten most popular websites in Ireland, five were social media or social networking sites (De, 2007). In the intervening years the proportion of social networking sites in the top ten has remained stable but there have been some significant changes in composition and order. In 2011 half of the top ten were search engines or reference tools (Google.ie, Google.com, Windows Live, Yahoo and Wikipedia) and the other half are social networks<sup>1</sup>. Overall the top social networking sites in Ireland are, in order, Facebook, YouTube, LinkedIn, Twitter, Boards.ie, Flickr, LiveJasmin, MySpace, Bebo, and Foursquare. These ten social networking sites represent just a fraction of those listed in the online

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<sup>1</sup> This information was gathered from Alexa, the web information company ([www.alexa.com](http://www.alexa.com)). Alexa's traffic rank is a measure of a website's popularity. The rank is calculated using a combination of average daily visitors and page views over the preceding 3 months. The site with the highest combination of visitors and page views is ranked number one. Alexa update their rankings daily.

directory of Web2.0 websites, GO2WEB2.0 ([www.go2web20.net](http://www.go2web20.net)) which provides links and descriptions of over 3,000 Web2.0 applications. Amongst these are many hundreds of social networking or community applications. The popularity of these social networking sites, relative to the rest of the world, is reasonably consistent except for LinkedIn which ranks number eight in Ireland but just seventeenth worldwide. Outside of the top ten there are also a few local variations. Boards.ie, an Irish chat site, ranks fourteenth in Ireland but just 4,232 worldwide. MySpace which has fallen out of the top ten in both Ireland and the rest of the world remains popular in the United States where it is ranked 45 but just 126 in Ireland. Finally, the once dominant BeBo which has fallen to 2,208 worldwide retains some popularity in Ireland and is ranked 275.

The rate of change in the development, introduction, and normalization of communications technologies is increasing exponentially. Fisch, McLeod, and Brenman (2008) show the number of years it took to reach an audience of 50 million was; in the case of radio 38 years, television 13 years, the internet 4 years, iPod 3 years, and Facebook 2 years. Social networks allow its users to interact with other users or to change website content, in contrast to non-interactive websites where users are limited to the passive viewing of information that is provided to them. Previously much of the communications sector was about broadcasting, now it is about interacting. Interactive information sharing, interoperability, user-centred design, and collaboration are now available through social networking and other Web 2.0 applications. Examples include web-based communities, hosted services, web applications, social-networking sites, video-sharing sites, wikis, and blogs. New social networks are appearing all the time including some very specialist and unusual ones. The non-profit social network MyMicrobes requires interest parties to mail them a stool sample in order to sign up. They then analyse the stool sample (for a €1,500 fee) and match users up with other people with a similar presentation of gastrointestinal bacteria. The concept is that users suffering from an intestinal disorder, or some other kind of related health complaint, can be introduced to others with similar make-up and complaints.

When Robert Putnam (1995) wrote about social capital in 'Bowling Alone' he described the declining vibrancy of American civil society, as evidenced by the reduced participation in community-based groups. His solution was in large part built on the 'development of networks, norms and social trust that facilitate coordination for mutual benefit' (Putnam 1995, cited in Locke et al 2004, p2). Shirky argues that another driver for building civic engagement is the groupworking which is fundamental to social networking technologies and that this is building skills in governance amongst those who actively participate, *[Civic value] comes from the work of groups, small groups at first that grow in size and importance, the pattern of collaborative circles, communities and practice, and many other group patterns* (Shirky 2010, p.186). He further argues that this 'wiring of humanity' lets us treat free time as a shared global resource, and lets us design new kinds of participation and sharing that take advantage of that resource (Shirky 2010, p.27). The use of these technologies is not limited to younger more technology aware users nor is it limited to affluent western societies. According to Sunstein (2007, p.17) '...in both the domestic and in the international context, that problem (the digital divide) seems likely to diminish over time, as new technologies, above all the internet, are made increasingly available to people regardless of their income or wealth'.

It is forecasted by the International Telecommunication Union (ITU) that by the end of 2010, five billion people will have cell phone subscriptions (ITU 2010). In 2010, 162 million of the 226 million new Internet users were from developing countries, where Internet users grow at a higher rate. The explosion in cell phone use has been driven not only by developed countries, but by developing nations. The ITU expected one billion mobile broadband subscriptions during 2010 (CNET 2010). The mobile phone is fast becoming the device of choice for access to the internet leaving the laptop, PC or Mac behind. Today communication tools are becoming second nature to the most novice of user, young or old.

Writing about social networks Shirky (2009, p.105) said, *It's when a technology becomes normal, then ubiquitous, and finally so pervasive as to be invisible, that the really profound changes happen.*

Flexible, cheap, and inclusive media offers opportunities to do all sorts of things we once didn't or could not do. In a study by the Pew Research Centre those using social networks were 2.5 times more likely to attend a political rally or meeting, 57 per cent more likely to persuade someone to vote, and 43 per cent more likely to say they would vote (Evangelista, 2011). The increase in political engagement is suggested to stem from the fact that Facebook members tend to become more aware of issues from those in their network who are politically active. It acts as a 'social sharing machine', increases the visibility of issues and 'speeds up that collective action model'.

The advances in social networking technologies are providing us with the tools to rebuild social capital and encourage group working. This is in turn providing the opportunity to build civic engagement and introduce the skills of governance at a local level. These technologies are no longer the sole preserve of younger or better resourced individuals but are rather becoming universally available. A number of writers (Benkler 2006, Jenkins 2006, Leadbetter 2008) have all come to the view that the new networked media is going to change the way we communicate. As social networking and group forming has *gone from hard to ridiculously easy* (Shirky 2009, p.54) and there has been a move to *user-centred innovation* (von Hippel 2005) this has accelerated citizens ability to challenge the monopoly of control of media generation and distribution. This challenge to the monopoly of media is not drawn in clearly divided lines. The distinctions between traditional media and what has become known as citizen journalism have become blurred. As Loader (2012, p.5) points out mainstream news media is increasingly reliant upon political blogs and citizen-user content and the power of collaborative sharing has been demonstrated by the Wikileaks disclosure of US government foreign policy statements online.

The digital divide based on age is also narrowing. Technology once requiring advanced and specialized knowledge to understand and operate is becoming better and simpler to use. Advances in our understanding of HCI (human computer interaction) and usability engineering, combined with the natural progression of technology from novel to normal is reducing this divide. In the 1920s one had to be a skilled mechanic to drive a car and in the 1970s a programmer to use a computer. Today communication tools are becoming second nature to the most novice of user, young or old. As the digital divide diminishes the prospect of using technology for democratic engagement becomes a real option. The more people online, the larger the size, scale, and efficiency of the communication 'market' (Couldry 2007, p.390).

The growth of social networks has been rapid and shows no signs of slowing. Sites aimed specifically at children include HabboHotel, Clubpenguin and Barbie.com. These sites have users numbered in the hundreds of millions worldwide. Facebook, with a user population of 845 million as of December 2011 has more than 483 million daily active users (Protalinski 2012). Social networks have also expanded the market for online interaction. The massive growth in computer games drove boys and young males to their laptops for interaction with their peers in MMORPGs (Massively Multiplayer Online Role-Playing Games). What gaming achieved for young men, social networking has achieved for young girls. Social networking is of course gender neutral but because it appeals to young women in a way that gaming never did, there is massive growth in the use of ICT in that segment. These issues are well discussed by Mazzarella (2005).

## Community versus Social

Civil society is sustained by groups much smaller than the *demos* or mass groupings of voters (Walzer 1998, p308). It is made up of the world of family, friends, neighbours and colleagues, where people are connected and feel responsible for each other. For Walzer, 'connected and responsible' is the key and civil society needs a new sensitivity for what is local, specific, contingent and a recognition that 'the good life is in the details'.

This emphasis on community and social networks is a move away from the language of society which preceded it. When Margaret Thatcher (1987) said '...you know, there is no such thing as society. There are individual men and women, and there are families' she seemed to reflect the writings of Jean Baudrillard (1983) who in the early 1980s diagnosed 'the end of the social'. Miller and Rose (2008, p.87) felt that the 'death of the social' may be an exaggeration but that 'the social' is undergoing a mutation. In this way they argue that 'the social' is giving way to 'the community'. In 1996 the leader of the British Labour Party, Tony Blair, said 'the search is on to reinvent community for a modern age, true to core values of fairness, co-operation, and responsibility'. In this way Miller and Rose (2010, p.90) claim that government has been reconfigured in terms of community. There has been a move away from the singularity of the social to the diversity of communities.

Individuals have become more responsible for the production and management of their own social and political identities. Young people enjoy unprecedented levels of freedom to define and manage their self-identities. This places increasing strains on governments to appeal to highly personalised political preferences that are harder to address, much less satisfy, than the broad group or class interests of an earlier era. Individual citizens, particularly younger ones who have grown up in this new environment, feel that their personalised expectations of politics are perfectly reasonable and often find that politics and politicians either ignore them or are far off the mark in their communication appeals (Bennett 2008, p.13). Shirky (2009, p.299) wrote that services like Twitter are eroding the distinction between traditional notions of media and communication, by fusing personal messages and publicly available forums. This gives a public voice to individuals and allows for an engagement with society not previously accessible.

## Decline in citizen engagement

Bennett (2005) cites a number of studies which show that younger people have disconnected with conventional politics. The conventional historical perspective is that there has been a shift away from citizen engagement with politics, that it is getting worse, and that this is a wholly negative process. This view is perhaps best expressed by Hobsbawm;

..by the century's end large numbers of citizens were withdrawing from politics, leaving the affairs of state to the political class whom read each other's speeches and editorials, a special interest group of professional politicians, journalists, lobbyists, and others whose occupations ranked at the bottom of the scale of trustworthiness in sociological enquiries.

(Hobsbawm 1994, p.581)

Indicators such as low electoral turnout, declining party membership, mistrust in government and contempt for politicians, are often cited as indicators of a crisis of participation, particularly amongst younger people who appear sceptical towards the formal institutions and processes of politics (Gerodimos 2012). Tapscott (2009, p.245) points out that the 'net generation' are often portrayed as caring only about themselves and popular culture. This he claims is not true; they are demonstrating their engagement by their increase in volunteering. Through volunteering young people are seeking to address some of the most difficult problems such as poverty and global warming as well as local community issues. Civic engagement can take many forms;

The digitally facilitated influence of supporters upon the corporate management of football teams, disabled people upon the governance of public transport, diasporas upon domestically-insulated dictatorships, and rock music fans upon government policies towards 'Third World' debt all suggest that the democratic affordances of new media are unlikely to be confined to the familiar world of constitutional politics. (Coleman 2007, p.377)

Bennett (2008, p.2) suggests that there are two distinct paradigms or ways of viewing the level of engagement of young people, 'active' or 'disengaged'. Researchers such as Benkler (2006), Coleman (2007), and Shirky (2009) support the active paradigm and point to changes in social identity, the growth of peer networks and online communities. Engagement with technologies such as Facebook and other Web2.0 applications illustrate the active nature of younger citizens.

Rachel Botsman (2011) makes the case that technology is enabling trust between strangers. Products like Swaptree and eBay which facilitate online trading only work in an environment of trust. Collaborative behaviours and trust mechanics are embedded in these systems. These networks mimic the ties that used to happen face-to-face but on a massive scale. Social networks and real-time technologies are taking us back to a system of bartering, trading and swapping where we have wired our world to share. This is happening in our neighbourhood, our schools, our workplaces, and on our Facebook network. This she calls collaborative consumption. We are moving from passive consumers, to creators, to active collaborators. This transition is actually a return to the behaviour we should be most comfortable with. Human beings are social by nature. Sociologists and psychologists have studied the implications of this for years. People have always formed networks and built relationships. Each of us has a network of family members, school friends, work colleagues, neighbours, members of clubs or associations, and so on. Some individuals belong to more than one of our sets of relationships and thus networks of interrelationships develop as we get to know friends of friends or meet a colleague in a new context and alter the nature of our relationship as a result.

As we are increasingly interconnected through social networks this is providing us with opportunities to express this social dimension and to be active in our many communities. As the concept of community has grown in our understanding of governance, social networking has been both supporting and reinforcing this behaviour. The growth in the perceived importance of self in the minds of younger voters and their desire, and increasing ability, to build and contribute to communities is providing them with a sense of identity as an actualizing citizen. Ideas of an evolving online identity have been discussed in different contexts (Power and Kirwan 2010, Power and Kirwan 2011). These new, younger, citizens are developing networks of trust and confidence in virtual spaces which are informing their behaviour in their communities and informing their sense of the polis. If this desire to be connected and part of a group is strong but traditional political engagement is on the decline, where is this community engagement happening?

## Volunteering

One feature of youth participation in democratic and civic life, not in decline, is volunteering. Volunteering has been defined as the commitment of time and energy, for the benefit of the society and the community, the environment or individuals outside ones immediate family. It is undertaken freely and by choice, without concern for financial gain<sup>2</sup>. Locke et al (2004, p.7) listed the benefits of community volunteering as: skills and personal development,

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<sup>2</sup> <http://www.volunteeroffaly.ie/volunteers.html> and <http://www.volunteerdnr.ie/index.php/volunteers/articles-for-volunteers/23-what-is-volunteering>

development of civic attitudes, career development, improved school performance, and reduced risk behaviours. In relation to developing civic attitudes participants said community service helped them; 'be aware of community needs and programs, develop and implement service projects, understand about good citizenship, learn how government and voluntary organizations work, believe people can make a difference and should be involved, accept cultural diversity and personal and social responsibility, and be committed to community service now and later in life'.

The 2000 National Survey of Giving, Volunteering and Participating in Canada (NSGVP) showed that people who volunteer are more likely to participate in society in many other ways such as voting, attending events, keeping up on news and public affairs, and contributing financially to charities<sup>3</sup>. In 2005, some 83.2 per cent of incoming college freshmen classes throughout the United States had volunteered in the previous year - and 70.6 per cent did it on a weekly basis (Higher Education Research Institute's annual survey, 'The American Freshman, cited in Tapscott 2009, p.277). This volunteering activity, valuable in itself also offers a pathway to political engagement.

Such pathways to political engagement are often not accommodated in traditional civic education and or government sponsored e-citizen sites, leaving many young citizens at odds with brittle conceptions of proper citizenship imposed upon them by educators, public officials, and other institutional authorities.

(Bennett 2008, p.5)

The ability of social networks such as Facebook and other to facilitate the formation of groups and communities and to enable them to act collectively and promote communication is a critical extension of this process of enabling community governance activities.

Research from Canada (Bernard 2009, cited in Clarke 2010, p.7) showed that despite low levels of voting amongst younger citizens a large number were engaging in political activities on social networking sites. 52% had started or joined a Facebook group or cause, 47% went online to debate issues and 39% had forwarded emails about caused. Research in the UK also shows that young citizens were more likely to use the internet to find information about politics and social causes (Di Gennaro and Dutton 2006, cited in Clarke 2010, p.7). Bennett (2008, p.8) argues that digital media provides young people with an important set of tools to build social and personal identity and to create the online and offline environments in which they spend their time.

Younger citizens are in many ways the defining users of the new media and many authors have written about the new digital culture they are developing (Tapscott 1998, Calvert 1999, Lenhart, Rainie and Lewis 2001, Lewis 2001, Livingstone 2002, Mazzarella 2005, and Buckingham and Willett 2006). Pettingill (2008) contrasts the decline in youth civic engagement, documented by Levine (2007) and others, with the rise in participation by young people in New Digital Media (Lenhart and Madden, 2005). Benkler (2006) sees the nature of the internet as a democratizing force. He sees it changing how individuals can interact with their democracy and experience their role as citizens.

The network allows all citizens to change their relationship to the public sphere. They no longer need to be consumers and passive spectators. They can become creators and primary subjects. It is in this sense that the Internet democratizes.

(Benkler, 2006 p.272)

Zuckerman (2011) has written about a 'Twitter Revolution' in relation to the 2011 democracy protests in Egypt. Wael Ghonim, the most identifiable of the protesters was quoted by

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<sup>3</sup> Statistics Canada; Caring Canadians, Involved Canadians, (Catalogue no. 71-542-XIE), pp. 47, 49 (cited in Locke et al, 2004)

Chohen (2011) as saying 'This revolution started on Facebook. This revolution started in June 2010 when hundreds of thousands of Egyptians started collaborating content. .... if you want to liberate a society just give them the Internet....' Ghannam (2011), a critic of this 'oversimplification' concedes that, 'few can deny that social media has enabled the most significant advance in freedom of expression and association in contemporary Arab history. During the protests, social media aggregated, disseminated and accelerated vital news and information'

Less dramatic expressions of democratic engagement can be found in the devolution of power to local communities and is discussed for example, in the white paper *Communities in Control: Real People, Real Power* (Communities and Local Government 2008). Tapscott (2009, p.258) uses the term 'Democracy 2.0' to make the point that Web2.0 technologies are opening possibilities for engagement that were unimaginable before and talks about the democratisation of information content, 'a blog makes you a publisher, and YouTube makes you a broadcaster. Young people innovate and participate in economic activity in ways that were previously unimaginable.'

If you're a poor student from India you can "attend" MIT on the Web and if you become a kick-ass programmer, you can join the TopCoder network and be gainfully employed from your village.

(Tapscott 2009, p.258)

The assertion that young people are not interested in, or ambivalent to, the political would seem to be incorrect, rather they are finding new ways to express those interests. Young and active citizens are finding new ways to engage, often through volunteering and especially through networked digital media. Social networks have provided numerous examples big and small of young people's energy and desire to engage with each other and their communities to effect change. Digital media technologies and particularly social networking technologies are facilitating and stimulating this volunteering activity through an increased sense of community. Montgomery (2008) lists a number of examples of innovative uses of the interactive digital technologies for a variety of civic and political purposes. These range from promotion of tolerance between straight and gay communities, providing resources for environmental activists, breaking down racial barriers, and celebrating public art. Montgomery (2008 p.28) suggests that these sites provide evidence of an emerging 'youth civic culture' on the internet and goes on to say that they provide youth with the opportunity to hone important civic skills such as fundraising, volunteering, and communicating with political leaders.

Despite a drop in the participation rates of younger citizens in the traditional measurement of democratic engagement, such as voting in elections, young people continue to be engaged in other ways. Volunteering is on the rise amongst younger citizens and this is providing an outlet for their civic responsibilities as well as providing them with a pathway towards more conventional methods of political and civic engagement. Digital media and social networking are both, facilitating existing volunteering activities, and opening up possibilities for community and social engagement in ways that were impossible before. It is important to expand our conception of politics and the political, as young people, both wittingly and unwittingly, push those boundaries through their application of digital technologies. The politicians and public officials who represent the official world of politics to young people must learn more about their citizenship and communication preferences and how to engage with them. Young people themselves can better learn how to use information and media skills in ways that give them stronger and more effective public voices (Bennett 2008, p.10).

## Conclusion

Social networking technologies provide the tools to build social capital and encourage group working. This is in turn providing the opportunity to build civic engagement and introduce the

skills of governance at a local level. As we are increasingly interconnected through social networks this is providing us with opportunities to express this social dimension and to be active in our many communities. Younger citizens have a desire, and increasing ability, to build and contribute to communities. This is providing them with a sense of identity as an actualizing citizen developing networks of trust and confidence in virtual spaces which are informing their behaviour in their communities.

Social networks, in contrast with other developments in communication technology such as radio, television, and 'broadcast' internet, allows for a two way engagement. Digital media and social networking are both facilitating existing volunteering activities, and opening up possibilities for community and social engagement in ways that were impossible before. Social networks have provided numerous examples of young people's energy and desire to engage with their communities to effect change. Young, active citizens are finding new ways to engage through volunteering and networked digital media. This holds out the possibility for a step change in political engagement.



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