

CAN SOCIAL NETWORK SITES ENABLE POLITICAL ACTION?

danah boyd

“ Technology’s majestic luster makes it easy to fool people into believing that its structure determines practice. ”

Social network sites (SNSes) like MySpace and Facebook have reorganized the Web. Activists have fantasized about ordinary citizens using SNSes for political action and speaking truth to power. Yet these daydreams are shattered through even a cursory look at actual practices. To date, the passion and interest for sharing political and policy information far and wide through SNSes—particularly by and for young people—doesn’t match the capability of the SNSes. It is this lack of motivation that we need to understand and address to improve our democracy and our government.

People participate in public life for many reasons: identity development, status negotiation, community maintenance, and, yes, civic engagement. Typical SNS participants are more invested in adding glitter to pages and SuperPoking their “friends” than engaging in any

form of civic-minded collective action. How did this happen, and is this outcome predetermined?

Technology's majestic luster makes it easy to fool people into believing that its structure determines practice. The conclusions seem obvious—video games will make us violent, the Internet will make us more informed, and social network sites will make us politically activated. Unfortunately, techno-determinist doctrine does not hold up to interrogation. Technologies are shaped by society and reflect society's values back at us, albeit a bit refracted.

If we accept that technologies mirror and magnify everyday culture, what do social network sites say about society? While we may wish that they shine a positive light on us, the most insidious practices on SNSes highlight how status-obsessed and narcissistic we are as a society. We may wish to blame the technology for creating self-absorbed people, but more likely, egoists love social network sites because of their desire to exhibit themselves for the purposes of mass validation. By demonizing the technology, we fail to fully grasp the not-so-subtle message that society values beauty, exhibitionism, and self-aggrandizement. Social network sites provide opportunities for ordinary people to showcase themselves as pseudo-celebrities. While these performances may not be "real," anyone can self-construct how to put their best foot forward, they are certainly less scripted than reality TV. It may not be possible for participants to get as much mindshare as Paris Hilton, but social network sites certainly provide a platform for attention-seeking people to do their thing.

While such a critique surely evokes profiles of women in provocative poses, the most active egoists on social network sites are musicians, politicians, marketers, and other populations who desperately want attention. By and large, when politicians and activists talk about using MySpace and Facebook, they aren't talking about using

it the way most people do; they are talking about leveraging it as a spamming device.

Most people are simply logging in to hang out with the friends that they already know. The warnings about stranger danger have worked; most people are not looking to meet new people, but to gather with friends when physical co-presence is impossible or impractical. For active participants on SNSes, particularly young people, networked publics substitute for physical publics that have become inaccessible, untenable, heavily regulated, or downright oppressive. If you can't grab a beer at a pub with friends or hang out in a public setting without being banned or shooed away for loitering, where else can you gather with friends? Online, of course.

A key aspect of SNSes is scale. Telephones allow people to communicate over long distances. Activists know that the bullhorn of the Web lets them reach many more people, even in the context of a supposed shared space. The Internet not only collapses space and time, but beyond bandwidth, there is no additional structural cost between communicating with ten people and broadcasting to millions.

Infinite scaling may be structurally possible online, but the attention economy—the tax on people's time and attention—regulates what actually scales. Just because someone wants to reach millions does not mean that they can effectively do so. Content may be public, but the public may not be interested in your content. Likewise, just because a private message is intended for ten people does not guarantee that it will stay just with those people if there is broader interest. Public and private are only guidelines online because there are no digital walls that can truly keep what is desired in and what is not out.

This possibility of scaling is what tickles the fancy of most political dreamers, who see the Internet as the ultimate democratizing technology. However, people pay attention to what interests them. Not surprisingly, offline or online, gossiping is far more common and inter-

esting to people than voting. While the Internet makes it much easier for activated people to seek out information and networks of like-minded others, what gains traction online is the least common denominator. Embarrassing videos and body fluid jokes fare much better than serious critiques of power. Gossip about Hollywood celebrities is alluring; the war in Iraq is depressing.

Over the last decade, the dominant networked publics have shifted from being topically organized to being structured around personal networks. Most users no longer seek out chat rooms or bulletin boards to discuss particular topics with strangers. Instead, they are hanging out online with people that they already know. SNSes are explicitly designed to be about “me and my friends.” Structurally, a social network site is the quintessential personal network tool. People are exposed to the things that their friends choose to share. If that content is valued, it is spread further through friend networks. Lack of shared interest results in a lack of spreadability.

Social network sites create cavernous echo chambers as people reiterate what their friends posted. Given the typical friend overlap in most networks, many within those networks hear the same thing over and over until they believe it to be true. It was the echo chambers of the blogosphere in 2004 that convinced mass media that Howard Dean had more traction in the U.S. presidential campaign than he did. Echo chambers are problematic because they give the impression that activists have spread a message further than they have.

Just as politically engaged people know one another, alienated and uninterested people mainly know people like themselves. Bridging the structural holes that divide these groups is just as challenging online as offline, if not more so. Offline, you know if a door has been slammed in your face; online, it is impossible to determine the response that the invisible audience is having to your message.

Rather than fantasizing about how social network sites will be a

cultural and democratic panacea, perhaps we need to focus on the causes of alienation and disillusionment that stop people from participating in communal and civic life. If we can figure out how to activate unmotivated groups, perhaps we can convince them to leverage their own networks and convince others to participate. The infrastructure is available for people to spread information, but the motivation is not there to either share or receive it. That's the problem we need to solve, and we'll know when we're successful from the messages that will be written on Facebook and MySpace.

About the Author

danah boyd is a PhD candidate at the University of California, Berkeley's School of Information and a Fellow at Harvard Law School's Berkman Center for Internet and Society. Her research focuses on youth engagement in networked publics like MySpace and Facebook.