

## The Impact of Social Networking Sites on Politics

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## **Abstract**

In lieu of an abstract, below is the first paragraph of the paper.

With every advance in technology comes impact on everyday life. This holds true especially for advances in media technology. While the media is a pervasive aspect of life on a day to day basis, a time when it really becomes important is in regards to government and political information. The Internet has become an increasingly important tool for American citizens to not only gain political knowledge, but to engage in the political process itself. Some scholars suggest that this may "revitalize democratic society, enabling citizens to command the political and economic resources needed to become effectively self-governing" (Winner, 2003, p. 167). While it is not the goal of this research to determine if the Internet will eventually lead to a town hall format or direct democracy form of government, it is an interesting idea to suggest. Rather, the focus will be placed on whether or not the Internet, through social networking sites such as Facebook or Myspace are facilitating an increased engagement of citizens in the political process.

## The Impact of Social Networking Sites on Politics

By: Megan Baker

With every advance in technology comes impact on everyday life. This holds true especially for advances in media technology. While the media is a pervasive aspect of life on a day to day basis, a time when it really becomes important is in regards to government and political information. The Internet has become an increasingly important tool for American citizens to not only gain political knowledge, but to engage in the political process itself. Some scholars suggest that this may "revitalize democratic society, enabling citizens to command the political and economic resources needed to become effectively self-governing" (Winner, 2003, p. 167). While it is not the goal of this research to determine if the Internet will eventually lead to a town hall format or direct democracy form of government, it is an interesting idea to suggest. Rather, the focus will be placed on whether or not the Internet, through social networking sites such as Facebook or Myspace are facilitating an increased engagement of citizens in the political process.

The idea that the Internet may create a shift in democracy is not a new one. The revolutions of the newspaper, radio, and television each raised the same questions. According to Winner, in 1924, Herbert Hoover (at the time serving as Secretary of Commerce) said of radio, "For the first time in human history we have available to us the ability to communicate simultaneously with millions of our fellow men . . . widening vision of national problems and national events." The radio made it possible for the public to gain direct information from sources such as the President of the United States (i.e. Roosevelt's infamous Fireside Chats). As for the Internet, it is not only the access to information that should be considered, but on "computer networks and their potential for empowering citizens." Along with this, Andrew Shapiro suggested that such advances could allow everyone to become "not just citizens, but *citizen governors*" (Winner, 2003, p. 171).

Bruce Bimber suggested that the Internet may not have as much political prowess as some scholars would like to believe. He developed a theory which he called "accelerated pluralism" to describe the possible future relationship. This theory states that, "the Net is accelerating the process of issue group formation and action, leaving the structure of political power in the U.S. altered, but not revolutionized or qualitatively transformed into a new epoch or era of democracy. He goes on to say that the expansion of communication and its effect on political participation will depend on the already instilled willingness of a person to participate, meaning that the person would probably have participated even without the addition of the Internet (Bimber, 1998, p. 134). This sentiment is also shared by Benjamin Barber who said that, "For without a will towards a more participatory and robust civic system, why should technologically enhanced politics not produce the same incivility and cynicism that characterize politics on the older technologies, radio and television, for example?" In summation, both Bimber and Barber found that it is not technology that will create more involvement, but a desire to become involved. With this in mind, could the Internet work to facilitate involvement for those who desire to become involved but before felt that they did not have the means to do so?

One way for people to get involved is to engage in Internet-based communication. Internet-based communication may have the potential to create a paradigm shift in regards to political communication in two ways. One is the populist model in which everyone can participate in the political process, and the other is based on a "cyber-salon" setting where "anyone can engage in deliberative discourse directed toward improving public life, with the process guided by clearly specified rules of engagement to produce well-reasoned outcomes" (Rosenberry, 2005, p. 34). The "cyber-salon" setting is exemplified through a social network that was created in Minnesota,

known as the Minnesota E-Democracy. The Minnesota E-Democracy attempted to bring together citizens of Minnesota to discuss issues that affected the state, local regions, or specific issues that citizens were concerned about. Not only that, but the forum also held political debates between candidates for state or local offices. Lincoln Dahlberg (2001) set out to see if this initiative could, in fact, "extend the public sphere through the Internet" (Dahlberg, 2001, p. 1). Dahlberg found that with the help of general rules and guidelines, forums such as these are effective, and that 33% of users who responded to a survey said that the forum affected their thinking in some way, and some changed the way that they voted (Dahlberg, 2001, p. 7). It worked most effectively when participants had political discussions about issues that they all shared interest in, as they had a shared sincerity for a specific topic and that discussion leads to understanding of different views (Dahlberg, 2001, p.9).

While discussion takes place in forums such as these, it may not translate into political action. Matthew Nisbet and Dietram Scheufele (2004) agree that people who actively discuss political issues will have a greater understanding of politics, but that may not mean that people will immerse themselves in the political process. In fact, use of the Internet may actually lead people to believe that they are involved when in actuality they may have a "false sense of efficacy" (Nisbet & Scheufele, 2004, p. 880). Along with Dahlberg, Nisbet and Scheufele agree that political discussion is the key to understanding, and in some cases, involvement. "The assumption is that the impact of mass mediated information on a person's understanding of politics and participatory behavior should be highest if this person exposes him or herself to relevant information in mass media and also talks about it to other people . . ." (Nisbet & Scheufele, 2004, p. 880).

The development of modern social networking sites such as Facebook and Myspace have allowed for great amounts of discussion during the presidential election, only it is not only voters who are logging in. During the primary season of 2004, Howard Dean, an unlikely candidate, was able to use the Internet

to both achieve small donations on a grand scale (adding up to around \$50 million) and to pump up his base (Rawlinson, 2007). Needless to say, people took notice. Mitt Romney, who ran for the Republican bid for the 2008 election, was the first candidate to set up a Facebook account. He was quickly followed by several other candidates who also set up Myspace accounts. What the candidates realized was that, "In order to recruit voters online, candidates must appear to engage with potential supporters on a far more personal level, on their terms, in their environment" (Rawlinson, 2007).

Myspace founder Tom Anderson recognized the potential power of social networking sites as he said, "Myspace has a method of reaching people who are historically not interested in voting. A Myspace profile could excite their interests in ways they are used to. In the same way they learn about their friends, they could learn about a candidate." The Barack Obama campaign also noticed the importance, as Jen Psaki, spokeswoman for the campaign said, "Myspace is definitely one of the tools we'll be using to engage Internet users and we're well aware that young people are the ones who are engaging the campaign through the Internet, more so than other age brackets" (Williams, 2007). As more and more young people log into these sites on a daily basis, these sites have the potential to be great tools.

According to the Pew Research Center, nearly one quarter (24%) of Americans say that they regularly learn something about the campaign or the candidates on the Internet, with many young people pointing to Facebook and Myspace as sources of information. One in five Americans (22%) uses an Internet social networking site, and two-thirds of Americans ages 18-29 are users. Of the young users, 27% say that they have gotten information on these sites and nearly one in ten people have "friended" a candidate. According to the Pew Center, these numbers are even higher among young registered voters (Pew Center, 2008). Research shows that there is obviously an astronomical amount of people logging into these sites, but how much political participation comes out of it is still unclear.

There have been specific incidences of Facebook facilitating grassroots rallies. A Facebook group known as "Students for Obama" was created soon after Obama announced his candidacy. After less than a year, it had 62,000 members and chapters at eighty different colleges. One of the groups at George Mason University held a rally that drew 3,000 students, and another one at Iowa State was attended by more than 5,000 students (Vargas, 2007). Facebook has attributed to a powerful grassroots effort that has never been seen at such a scale, which some call "the Facebook Effect." According to Todd Ziegler of the Bivings Group, a D.C. based Internet communications firm, "The key point here is that the support for Obama on these social-networking sites is not being driven by the campaign itself. It is something spontaneous as opposed to something the campaign itself is orchestrating" (Vargas, 2007). With events such as these, it definitely makes one seriously consider the idea that social networking sites could have the potential to get more people involved in the political process.

After looking through all of this research, there are bits and pieces that can be taken from each one to create one master idea. People who are interested in issues are going to get involved, and the Internet is an easy way for both the voter and the candidate to communicate with others and potentially engage in the political process. However, becoming "friends" with a candidate does not translate to action. Yes, a lot of people are involved on the Internet, but that involvement may be creating a sense of "false efficacy" as mentioned by Nisbet and Scheufele. This may depend on one's definition of involvement. If involvement means attending a rally, then most are probably not doing that. If it means getting out there and voting for the candidate, this is vastly more likely. One thing has become clear; the Internet is an amazing place for candidates to raise money, as seen in the Howard Dean bid and in the presidential election of 2008. I do not think that social networking sites will create a "new era of democracy," but I do think that it has helped the candidates reach out to supporters, mostly people who supported them already, but also

some who were uncertain in their choice. These sites will become more and more influential as more and more people log on and make it a part of their daily lives.

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