

Collaborative Information Seeking in an Online Political Group Environment

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ABSTRACT

In this paper, we present a framework for examination of group formation and information exchange on a Facebook Group, “Join the Coffee Party Movement”, that was created in response to the Tea Party Movement in the US. The stated goals of “Join the Coffee Party Movement” are to establish a place for otherwise disenfranchised individuals to share information and engage in productive dialogue and to develop solutions for problems facing the USA. Similar movements exist in other countries and social networking technology has been utilized to further the ideology and mobilize supporters of various national and international causes. Since its inception in January 2010, over 300,000 Facebook members have become followers of the Coffee Party. The Group’s page has over 155,000 discussion comments to official postings. Preliminary analysis of this dialogue suggests two intertwined avenues for investigation. First, it is clear that the Coffee Party Facebook page represents one virtual group through which many different virtual subgroups emerge from online discourse. Second, the groups that are emerging do so as a consequence of having a shared information need, which is fulfilled to some extent through participation in this group. These groups exhibit a certain type of completely online collaborative information behavior that we think warrants investigation from multiple perspectives. How members of online groups like these collaboratively seek information is of importance for this workshop; but we believe our broader perspective will be of interest.

Keywords

Information sharing, politics, social networking, group identity, group formation, collaborative information seeking, collaborative information behavior.

1. INTRODUCTION

The role of the Internet in political discourse is changing from broadcast oriented models of information dissemination toward

more social, citizen engagement focused models. Ubiquitous access and discussion forum oriented designs allow for significantly richer information exchange, fostering deeper connections within specific, issue focused and organizationally focused political networks. In the past, adoption of Internet enabled information and communication technologies (ICTs) in political campaigns lagged behind the state of the art. New, socially focused ICTs lower the barriers to the creation of a network and facilitate large-scale discourse, which is changing the role of technology in the political process around the world.

The 2008 US Presidential election illustrated that mobilization on social networking sites (SNS) can influence the public’s participation in political discourse. Information is distributed to organization leadership and membership simultaneously, and response and discourse emerge almost immediately. This ability to receive information from campaigns and discuss it among other geographically disparate supporters changes the nature of citizen participation in the political process. For example, instead of having messages tightly managed and controlled from the top down by traditional political party infrastructures, the social web enables citizens to draw attention to and organize around issues, and share information in the tradition of a town square. The resulting, new forms of virtual political organization are not yet well understood; notably, we do not know how these groups differ from political organizations in the preceding era.

The dynamic technical environment in an information and messaging environment as intense as a political campaign has implications for the information seeking and participation strategies of campaign workers, supporters and the citizenry at large. Previous research on the use of technology by political organizations, principally conducted from 1994-2008, has focused on the use of each new technology and its effects on the current election cycle along with the implications for future campaigns (Ancu and Cozma, 2009; Robertson et al., 2010; Sweetser and Weaver Lariscy, 2008). It is a truism that technology is constantly changing, forcing change on political campaigns. Lessons learned about technology as a tool for organizing in one election cycle are not durable.

There are two main gaps we set out to address. First, prior research on the use of social networking sites by political campaigns examines the widespread use of these sites, but is focused on how established political groups use technology and

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not how new groups form using the technology. Second, the literature on technology use in political campaigns does not address how individuals use social media to seek out information pertinent to their viewpoint. For citizens, candidates and candidate supporters, social media diffuses the information search process, introduces dynamic, collaborative information seeking and exchange, and potentially enables new, disruptive forms of virtual political organization.

1.1 2008 sets the stage for social media

All three of the major candidates in the 2008 US Presidential Primary and General Election, Barack Obama, John McCain and Hillary Clinton, depended on social media for mobilization and fundraising. Immediately following the November 2008 election victory, Barack Obama's Facebook page had over 3 million supporters. He also had five million supporters on 15 other social networking sites, including Black Planet, a social network focused on the African American Community (Vargas 2008). At that time Obama was also number 1 in Twitter followers with over 100,000 (twitter.com). In addition to the use of social networking websites, Obama's campaign sent 1 billion messages to a list of 13 million supporters that had been amassed from campaign rallies and other online activity (Borins 2009).

Obama placed the Internet at the center of his campaign's information, communication and coordination infrastructure. In the 2008 election, at least 46 percent of Americans used the Internet to get a significant amount of election news during the primary season (Smith and Rainie 2008). Further, 40% of Internet users with profiles on social networking sites used the website to receive or partake in political activity and more specifically half of those under 30 used their social networking accounts for political activity. Most of the political activity included attempting to mobilize support and sharing or seeking out information from individuals on the site (Smith and Rainie 2008). Obama's election is often attributed to his community organizing experience, but his campaign's skillful use of social media enabled him to build up grassroots support more rapidly than what was witnessed in previous campaigns (McGirt 2009).

1.2 Coffee Party: Virtual Politics

Our work examines the group formation and collaborative information behavior of a single virtual political organization: "Support the Coffee Party Movement". The proposed study examines the formation and evolution of the nascent political organization, the Coffee Party. The Coffee Party began as a Facebook group after documentary filmmaker Annabel Park became frustrated with the direction she believed the country was heading and as a response to the Tea Party movement (coffee and tea often served side by side in the US). She took to Facebook and as an experiment setup a group entitled "Join the Coffee Party Movement" with her colleague Eric Byler (Zak 2010). The Coffee Party was created with the belief that the way to foster the will of the people was to create a public space for civil dialogue to deliberate on facts with the intent of arriving at a decision (Park 2010). Park believed that Facebook provided the best avenue for achieving these goals. Previous literature on the use of SNS' for political campaigns support this premise (Robertson et. al. 2009, Ancu and Cozma 2009).

As of November 9, 2010, the Facebook group "Join the Coffee Party Movement" had over 305,000 followers dating from its inception in January 2010. These followers posted over 155,000 comments in direct response to official coffee party posts and also registered over 530,000 likes to these same posts. Facebook followers of the Coffee Party movement have also been responsible for setting up 174 local groups of coffee party followers, many of which have used the online group to facilitate offline meetings. The National Coffee Party held its first convention in Louisville, Kentucky in September 2010. The Coffee party has also orchestrated numerous National meeting days encouraging local chapters to meet at coffeehouses in their geographic area.

The Coffee Party illustrates a new form of political organizing in the contemporary US; one that is rooted online, and directed at action in the physical world. Such organizations appear to lower the barriers to entry for political organizers. Lacking a political party affiliation, the group evolves in a different manner. The platform and unique evolution of the Coffee Party contributes to its popularity. The information that is being shared and created through the discourse on the Facebook Group page has transferred over to the mainstream media and into traditional political discourse.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

The past decade has seen the Internet evolve from a collection of websites providing information to visitors to a dynamically changing corpus of information created by the users, not the organizations once responsible for providing information to the public. The introduction of social media to the Internet has resulted in the greatest transformation from a broadcast oriented information model to a citizen engagement and collective information-sharing model.

Research on social networking sites describes Facebook and its effects on traditional conceptualizations of social capital (Coleman 1988, Putnam 2001). Facebook has been strongly correlated with the maintenance of social relationships originally established outside of the social network in the physical world, especially among populations of university students (Lampe et. al. 2006; Ellison et. al. 2007). This research has been extended to other samples after Facebook opened up membership in 2006 with findings indicating a similar effect on social relationships (Skoric et. al. 2009).

Other research indicates that unlike other online forms of self-representation, Facebook profiles tend to represent an individual more honestly and that the more comprehensive a profile is filled out the more likely it is that the individual has a greater number of links on the social network (Lampe et. al. 2007). This tendency for more honesty on social networking profiles is likely attributable to the strong connection the online network has to the physical world and the potential for verification of information contained on the profile (Donath and Boyd 2004).

2.1 Advocacy and Civic Engagement Online

Early research on the Internet's ability to effectively contribute to activist organizations illustrated that many organization were not fully utilizing all aspects of the current technology (Taylor et. al.

2001). This may have been more a case of lack of maturity of the technology and usage by the public than an ignorance to design concepts. Recent research has provided a framework and case studies of youth advocacy on the Internet including limitations such as the possibility that their efforts would be lost in the masses (Thackeray and Hunter 2010).

The usage of Facebook Groups has been positively associated with a greater level civic and political engagement among college students (Valenzuela et. al. 2009). The Internet and social networking sites have been used to organize and mobilize individuals in countries with limited media freedom such as Egypt, Ukraine and Iran (Faris 2008; Stelter and Stone 2009; Kyj 2006). Social networking tools have also been victims of their own success as Facebook has been effectively utilized by its own members to protest changes to the website and to the terms of service (Sanchez 2009).

2.2 Political Candidate Usage of SNS groups

Early research on Facebook walls focused on 67 Democratic and Republican candidates in the 2006 midterm election. The researchers found that supporters participated in the walls of candidates to attempt to establish a relationship with the candidate and also with other supporters. Comments were either shallow or neutral and only a limited set of comments were complex. The limited amount of complex discourse may have been a factor of limited use of the wall by supporters (Sweetser and Weaver Lariscy 2008). The study of the Coffee Party does use a similar methodology, but extends on it to include the individuals posting as a unit of analysis to establish the formation of emergent groups and using quantitative analysis to determine content of posts and the collective information behavior of individuals participating in the group.

Analysis of the contents of the Facebook wall's of the 2008 Presidential Candidates built upon this prior study by illustrating characteristics of the specific posts and patterns of participation among those posting on the walls of candidates (Robertson et. al. 2010). This research illustrates how SNS's are the closest socio-technical representation of Habermas' (1984) public sphere and they offer unique avenues of political discourse. Although the researchers focused on the capabilities of the SNS there was no focus on the network of individuals that were involved in the political discourse and how this network evolved and grew over time as a result of group awareness and an increasing shared group identity. The researchers also focused very little on the content of the post and the information exchanged between individuals.

Other research on the 2008 Presidential Primary candidates illustrated that users of social networks utilize social networks to friend candidates to fulfill basic needs to interact socially with others who share their viewpoint. This is in contrast to their use of blogs to find out information about a candidate. This study was limited in scope and timeframe and focused on the reasons that individuals joined a profile and not their activity once involved in the group (Ancu and Cozma 2009). Kushin and Kitchener (2009) do illustrate that even divisive Facebook Groups contain mostly posts that contribute to the conversation as opposed to just negating viewpoints that individuals do not agree with. The limited nature of their research was not generalizable, but does

illustrate the availability of socio-technical tools that are able to facilitate real conversational needs.

3. RESEARCH QUESTIONS

Our research seeks to build understanding of the structure and dynamics of online political discourse and online group formation. To do so, the collaborative information behaviors and collaborative information seeking behaviors that emerge around the technical spaces where these completely online groups form is of particular interest.

Our work addresses the following research questions during the course of the study:

1. What is the composition of the network of individuals who are most active on the Coffee Party Facebook Group?
2. To what extent, do the most active individuals in the coffee party take part in identifiable action outside of the national coffee party group structure?
3. How do members collaboratively seek information using the Coffee Party's Facebook site?
4. What categories of discussion emerge as dominant in virtual political organizations. For example, what types of coordination, information sharing, information seeking or other technologically mediated collaborative behavior emerge in these groups?

4. DISCUSSION

The nature and effects of a virtual political party, formed through completely online means are not well known and little studied. Such organizations represent a unique grounds for the study of completely online collaborative information behavior and more specifically, collaborative information seeking. The growing level of interest in both the number of followers and the number of comments and "likes" on the group page may indicate a momentum that will move virtual forms of political organization to positions of greater influence in future elections, and public interest oriented information behavior. The social nature of technology like Facebook and virtual forms of political organization like the Coffee Party pushes collaborative, technologically mediated information seeking and behavior to a position of greater importance.

The purposes for the Coffee Party Facebook group page will be the most significant find of the proposed study. The function of political parties is to allow for a structured expression of a variety of viewpoints and to help foster opposition to those currently in power. Parties also act as intermediaries between the individual and the government. Parties also serve the function of acquiring disseminating appropriate information to its members about the government and societal issues (Sandman 1984). The citizen engagement model of information acquisition and dissemination that is taking place on social networking sites will continue to affect the political system in upcoming elections as it did in 2008. The establishment of an organization such as the Coffee Party in a strictly technologically mediated forum will allow for an increased and possibly more effective collaborative information exchange by active members.

The use of groups on the Internet focused on political issues would signify a shift in use of social networks from candidate based to information-centered discussion. This may be indicative of the maturation of social networks in providing information to

users and also a level of comfort in using social networks to seek out reliable information from individuals they have an already established relationship with.

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