

The Revolution is Social

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We live in the 'like' society. A society that has changed dramatically over the last 30 years. The advent of neo-liberalism from the late 1970s has led to a shift from the communal to one where we value individualism. From a culture of community and neighbourliness to one where systems of power and politics privilege economic imperatives above all else. Technological change has not caused this. Political change has. But neither is technology neutral, it has changed beyond recognition, particularly over the last ten years. As we once went from citizens to consumers, we are now becoming fans.

The internet transforms us from passive receivers of goods, services and information to active creators of content. This changes the focus and balance of power in relationships. It causes us to reconstruct what we mean by democracy and politics too. But when over three quarters of us are dissatisfied with the key tenets of our democratic heritage there is clearly a problem of confidence in democracy itself.

Changes in media consumption, the rapid adoption of social media and the rise of smart-mobile have changed the landscape but governments and those inherently bound-up in democratic systems have been slow to embrace this.

The Roles of Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs)

In response, civil society organisations that have sprung up to mediate the chasm between increasingly distant citizens and their perceived as out of touch governments. What has their mediating role been? Are NGOs a solution or simply an environmental response? This large-scale growth is a direct response to neo-liberalism. The NGO sector has become a primary delivery channel for many health and social service functions that governments have privatised in all-but name.

NGOs fill a civic void. Our culture of individualism and concomitant democratic drift makes it harder to identify community stakeholders. It makes it even harder to engage them. The rise of the NGO suits government because they become the brokers of choice. It is easier to identify NGOs and to engage with them rather than identify individuals or informal groups.

Unfortunately this is not true engagement and it leads to tensions. As Castells noted, 'Where there is dominance, there is resistance.'¹

These organisations are not representative of civil society. They are largely undemocratic and almost universally unelected. But if NGOs are a reaction to historical socioeconomic upheaval, what is the societal response to the current crisis? What role can emergent normative tools, such as social media, play in shaping this response? The answer lies in networks of association. A shift from the importance of strong ties to the pre-eminence of

¹ Castells, M. (2000). End of millennium. London: Blackwell. p.382.

weak ties and the untapped potential of latent ties. (Although this doesn't remove the need for and value of strong ties as the glue that holds the network together and who lead action and change).

The relationship of individuals to groups and to each other has changed and become privileged societally, even if this is not recognised by systems. Our relationship to government is changing too. It's no longer legitimate to say that it's 'too hard' to engage the real stakeholders. You just have to go about it a different way.²

Social Media Usage

Social media has led to a rise in the relative importance of trust as a factor in building, managing and mapping social relationships. Mutual trust, established through loose networks of association, matters. Our lives are lived out, recorded and reported on social media so what does this mean for democracy?

Social media use has increased dramatically it has become normative. Two examples stand out in the UK: the 2010 general election and the 2011 summer riots. As this happens, the conditions for use (and misuse) and for control change too. Social media is life as usual, business as usual and we are now reaching a tipping point where it is policy and politics as usual too. People turn to social media for the major events in their life because these are the tools they use in their everyday lives. This is particularly true for young people, who remain disproportionately disconnected from politics and democracy. Social media is changing the construction of our society and will change the nature of constituency for governments and elected representatives.

None of this suggests a digital dualism, where our online lives are lived separately from the 'real world'. Quite the opposite is true³. Online is an integral part of who we are individually, communally and societally. It would be naïve to think that opinion formation and democratic knowledge now only come about through social media. It is an additional channel, not necessarily a substitute, even amongst digital natives and early adopters. The mainstream media is still a pre-eminent source of knowledge and learning. As are friends and families. Although the internet weakens the media's power it does not invalidate it and, as most news organisations now realise, the future lies in convergence. Not in the traditional single-channel.

Mainstream media

Mainstream media has itself become a consumer of social media but one which must also integrate it into its own offerings. The BBC and The Guardian do this exceedingly well – BBC News has around nine million visitors to its website every day. Around the same number watch the 10pm main television news bulletin. The Guardian has led the charge in open data, crowd-sourced analysis and now even opened up its newsroom to greater public scrutiny. The Guardian's Facebook application has increased traffic to The Guardian by one million hits per day.⁴ Above all though, social media shatters the news cycle far beyond the pace ever previously imagined. The Twitter 'buzz' can and does break stories first. Just so long as one still does some good old fashioned fact checking.

Convergence of on- and off-line blurs the boundaries of our neighbourhoods, communities, workplaces and institutions (including those of government). But to leverage this effectively, citizens urgently require new skills in information literacy, we need better knowledge of civic

² Williamson, A. (2009). Revitalising politics from the ground up: The role of digital media in promoting citizen-led democratic renewal. *Representation*, 45(3), 301-311.

³ Jurgenson, N. (2011). Digital Dualism versus Augmented Reality. Retrieved Nov-1-2011 from www.thesocietypages.org/cyborgology/2011/02/24/digital-dualism-versus-augmented-reality.

⁴ Marshall, S. (2011). Guardian's Facebook app delivering 1m extra hits a day. *Journalism.co.uk*. Retrieved Nov-30-2011 from blogs.journalism.co.uk/2011/11/30/guardians-facebook-app-delivering-1m-extra-hits-a-day

and democratic structures; the ability to put names to power. We are ignoring the provision of these at our future peril (and, largely, we are ignoring them).

Digital Inclusion

Being online matters. Not just for democracy and greater involvement in a revitalised civic life but for the bottom line: A 2010 PriceWaterhouseCoopers report⁵ estimates that 10 million people in Britain had never used the internet. Four million of them were socially disadvantaged (39% unemployed, 19% are families with children). If this is to change and we get everyone online, the overall benefit to the UK alone would be £22 billion. Just by shopping and paying bills online the economic benefits for the average UK household is £560 per year. Across Britain that amounts to £1bn in missed savings. And if all the digitally excluded adults made just one online contact with government it would save £900 million per year. Of course, it goes well beyond getting connected, these citizens must also be trained, motivated and supported to use ICTs effectively. It's not simply a numbers game.

Digital matters. But we are not there yet when it comes to getting everyone online. The government tactic of 'Digital by Default' for service delivery is one attempt to solve this. It focuses on providing access at all levels and therefore gives government a mandate to resolve digital exclusion, which is important. But exclusion isn't just about physical access. The primary reason not to be online is cost. The second is perceived value. Thankfully the UK seems to be moving on from some of the older digital inclusion strategies. As the targets become smaller but harder to connect with, new solutions emerge looking at local partnerships between government, community, social housing providers and SMEs.

The Role of Government

Governments are playing catch-up. Even in the UK, considered a leader in e-government. We have seen a number of e-participation initiatives, most recently the re-launch of e-petitions, shifting from 10 Downing Street to the centre of government at DirectGov and the Beta gov.uk pilot. E-petitions have low barriers to adoption and can act as a bell-weather for politicians but without effective processes behind them they offer little real value and can leave the public feeling disillusioned. So far the new UK Government system is struggling to appear effective but this is as much to do with opaque and messy processes behind the scenes as anything else. Digital is used to re-shape the policy process too. Where traditional consultation often comes at the end of the policy cycle it can now be done earlier on, more often and with more people. This way it can be used to shape policy rather than select from pre-determined outcomes. However, engagement remains limited and to a large extent elitist; the barriers to access aren't simply technological and little if anything is being done to overcome this. Successful digital engagement requires a shift in both government thinking and amongst the public. To be effective it requires new skills and a different culture and only works if there is high level buy-in.

Open Data and Transparency

Open data is a critical enabler of enhanced democracy. In many ways it represents the 'flip-side' to digital engagement. Transparency is simply more democratic. Certainly it is more democratic than the legendary opacity of traditional government. Opening up public data allows citizens to better hold governments to account, to be better informed. Despite the risk of micro-interfering 'armchair' auditors, it can help level the policy playing field. It gives communities the knowledge to act more effectively when they want to challenge central and local government. However, open data requires new skills, new knowledge, to use effectively and so we have to ensure that we have the agents, advocates and intermediaries in place to

⁵ PriceWaterhouseCoopers (2010). Champion for Digital Inclusion: The Economic Case for Digital Inclusion. London: PWC.

do this. And there is an economic as well as social value to open data, through application development.

It is vital that access to open data becomes enshrined and secured as a public good, not corporatized and locked down. Open data is still framed as a 'product' to be 'consumed', not as a democratic benefit, although for the time being at least it would appear that citizens' rights to free access is to be protected.⁶ Commercialisation and charging for government data is a trend that civil society must resist.

Conclusion

Social media can and does facilitate and mediate the creation of digital public spheres. E-participation is a formal relationship between citizens and government. Social media creates new informal relationships amongst and between citizens and between citizens and government. Done well, this creates the space for us to 'do with' government. But this requires new thinking, new ways of engaging. Otherwise the old-world 'doing to' mind set persists. Although true engagement is never simple, social media creates new opportunities for it; new democratic as well as social spaces. What matters in this new space is trust and this is earned through our actions, not assumed or pre-ordained through traditional hegemonies. Top down is not an effective model for engagement. Nor is it an effective model for building trust.

Social media and the digital opportunities now in front of us can support transformation into a more citizen-centric, two-way society. But only if civil society is an active participant. We need to become active partners in our own future. The internet has rebuilt itself around people and their networks, what we will see next is people rebuild their networks and communities around this digital and social convergence.

⁶ Cabinet Office. (2011). Open Data measures in the Autumn Statement. Retrieved Nov 29 2011 from www.cabinetoffice.gov.uk/news/open-data-measures-autumn-statement.

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