

USING SOCIAL NETWORKING TOOLS TO PROMOTE EPARTICIPATION INITIATIVES

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This paper describes the context and background of the conference workshop “Social networking tools and widgets to promote or expand eParticipation initiatives”. Social networking tools form many people’s main Internet destination and communication method and appear to be largely “free” to use. EParticipation initiatives are increasingly applying these tools in their promotion strategies to encourage more people to get involved. Further, some eParticipation initiatives are piloting the use of social networking tools and sites at the interactive core of their participation processes. This paper looks at these objectives in more detail. It begins to identify characteristics of individual projects and types of social networking tools that will need to be explored by practitioners, in order to successfully promote their projects this way. This identification process began before the workshop, by using a simple matrix to gather information about projects’ use of social networking tools.

1. Workshop Context

1.1. Use of Social Networking Tools

Social software supports and facilitates computer-mediated communication and collaboration between participants. The term, which is often used interchangeably with Web 2.0 or the Social Web, refers to applications such as wikis, blogs, Internet-based networks, websites for sharing multimedia content, group radio and instant messaging, as well as older forms of online collaboration [22]. Social networking (SN) sites are a subgroup which put special emphasis on relational ties between individuals. Boyd and Ellison [1] define SN sites as *web-based services that allow individuals to (1) construct a public or semi-public profile within a bounded system, (2) articulate a list of other users with whom they share a connection, and (3) view and traverse their list of connections and those made by others within the system. The nature and nomenclature of these connections may vary from site to site.* Boyd and Ellison’s description, history and timeline provide a good introduction to social networking concepts.

Though Boyd and Ellison’s definition seems to put blogs into a grey area, we have included blogs, including the micro-blogging tool “Twitter”², in our category of SN tools for the purposes of the workshop. Blogs have the potential to support the formation of social connections through the *blog-roll* facility and they share many other functions of classic SN sites, such as the facility for visitors to comment on the owners’ posts.

The use of SN sites has exploded over the last few years. According to Hitwise, Facebook is currently (March 2009) the most searched for brand in the UK, and Twitter traffic has increased 22-

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² <http://twitter.com>

fold over the last twelve months (to June 2009). They also note that Twitter has become a key source of traffic to other websites, with over half of this traffic sent to content-driven online media sites, such as social networks, blogs, and news and entertainment websites [8].

1.2. Young People and Social Networks

Ofcom's 2008 UK research indicates that 22% of adult internet users (aged 16+) and almost half (49%) of children aged 8-17 who use the Internet, have set up their own profile on a SN site [16]. In Germany, similar trends can be observed. According to data generated in the ARD/ZDF-Onlinestudie 2008, up to 60% of all Internet users visit online communities and use their communication and networking facilities [6]. The representative JIM-Study of 2008, which analyses the media usage patterns of children and youth, shows that 84% of Germans under the age of 19 are users of Web 2.0 applications, and 62% of this group visits and uses these websites several times a week. Within the realm of social software or Web 2.0, online communities are clearly the most important application for young people [15]. To date, the most popular SN sites among all German users are StudiVZ, XING, Wer-kennt-wen and Facebook. Young Germans predominantly have their profiles on StudiVZ and SchülerVZ, followed by MySpace, Netlog and Facebook.³

These broad trends have been affirmed in workshops and focus groups with young people in Estonia, the Republic of Ireland and the UK, which have been conducted in the context of the HUWY-project (see below). Most of the young people attending HUWY development workshops have profiles on SN sites and identified them as their main (or only) destination on the Internet. These young people usually had email accounts, but mainly communicated online through their SN sites' comments and messaging systems or Instant Messenger. A more detailed exploration of young people's use of SN sites is provided by Davies and Cranston [4] for the situation in the UK and by Schmidt et al. [20] and the MPFS [15] for German youth.

These empirical data underline young people's particular role in the growth of traffic on SN sites. Moreover, there also seems to be a qualitative change in the way young people approach and use the Internet, and how they behave within the digital media environment, compared to other age groups. SN sites have become an important part of their lifeworlds, particularly for those cohorts whose secondary socialisation and socially formative years concurred with the broad availability of new media technologies (i.e. people born since the early 1980s). The reason for the attractiveness of SN sites is that adolescents are especially interested in synchronising and intensifying communication with their peers, and many new media, particularly SN sites, facilitate this extremely well [23]. In this sense, the majority of young people have integrated the Internet in general, and SN sites in particular, into mainstream day-to-day activities that strengthen their connections within their real-world communities and enrich their social interactions with peers [14].

Within the media research community, the extent to which the observed Internet usage of young people justifies labelling this cohort as *digital natives* [19] or the *Net generation* [17], in order to signify pronounced behavioural, attitudinal and even physical differences to previous generations, is highly controversial [12] [21]. Regardless of these far-reaching and mostly unproven claims, it seems that the boundaries between the virtual and the real world have become more fluid and permeable for younger users. Online and offline activities are increasingly interrelated: self-

³ <http://www.studivz.net>; <http://www.xing.com>; <http://www.wer-kennt-wen.de>; <http://de-de.facebook.com>; <http://www.schuelervz.net>; <http://www.myspace.com>; <http://de.netlog.com>. Ranking based on Fittkau & Maaß Consulting (<http://www.w3b.org>) and Schmidt et al. [20].

representation and identities are formed and tested in both realms, and both influence each other. Similarly, networks of contacts and friendships are increasingly initiated, organised and strengthened through the use of web-based communication.

1.3. Reasons for Using SN Tools to Promote eParticipation Initiatives

In view of the impressive growth of SN sites in recent years and the sites' ability to strengthen relational ties, SN sites quickly caught the attention of eParticipation practitioners. The main drivers for using SN tools to promote eParticipation initiatives are:

- to reach more people in the target group to encourage them to get involved,
- to facilitate viral marketing of the project,
- and to keep people interested, through regular updates and the chance to establish comparatively sustainable computer-mediated relationships.

Many SN tools are also free to use. However, keeping SN sites up to date and creating messages requires staff time to perform these tasks and this needs to be factored into any estimates of resource consumption in using these tools. Investigating efficient processes for updates and messages and collecting information about the time spent on these per project is an important strand of this workshop. These details may also inform the online dissemination plans of applied eParticipation projects.

1.4. Ethical Issues

There are also a number of ethical issues associated with eParticipation projects using SN sites, especially commercial sites. As Larson [13] notes, different people have different perspectives and objectives in their use of SN sites, however connections simplified as *friend* bluntly traverse contexts and may inadvertently facilitate links between public and personal content [4]. The Ofcom report's definition of a social network friend is "*Anyone who either accepts an invitation from another social networking site user to be friends, or who accepts an invitation from another user. When a user adds someone as a friend, their connection is displayed on the user's friend list. On social networking sites a friend can be an offline friend, a family member, an acquaintance, a friend of a friend, or someone who you have never met before.*" [16] Connections between eParticipation projects and people's personal pages, especially through the designation *friend*, require consideration of the contents of personal pages, e.g. pages with photos that seem sexually provocative or display drunkenness.

There is widespread concern about security issues (both on and offline), e.g. details from profiles could be used in identity theft [9]; contact established through SN sites could ultimately be abusive [3].

SN sites owned by commercial organisations have commercial objectives which may conflict with democratic objectives or certain ethical standards: e.g. unsuitable adverts may be displayed on eParticipation projects' pages; freedom of speech could be limited in order to accord with advertisers' preferences [4].

While it is acknowledged that these risks are accompanied by opportunities [2] and capably managed by many SN users, we need to be aware of specific ethical or security issues that should influence our choice of interaction with these sites.

1.5. HUWY Project Context

The workshop is being run by consortium partners in the EU-sponsored eParticipation project, HUWY: Hub Websites for Youth Participation⁴. HUWY aims to involve young people in making policies and laws which affect the Internet. HUWY pilots will run in four countries: Estonia, Germany, Republic of Ireland and UK, live throughout 2010. The project pilots a *distributed discussion* method in which youth groups (or groups of young people) explore the topics in *their own online spaces*: youth group forums, social networking spaces, blog pages etc. HUWY provides supporting information and structured space for results and ideas on *Hub* websites and HUWY partners help youth groups through workshops (offline).

We are currently working with young people to identify design and online promotional preferences, choose the first topics and put together useful information to inspire and support discussions. We are also working with people involved in Internet policies (e.g. government departments and elected representatives) who will pass these ideas to Members of Parliament (and EU Parliament) making relevant laws and regulations. The Hubs provide space for feedback from these policy-makers and tools to track outcomes.

As we are working with young people, SN tools are likely to be a focus of online promotion. However, the project also uses SN tools to expand participation, as young people can host discussions on their SN pages.

2. Workshop Objectives

Young people tend to be sensitive to ill-conceived marketing strategies, and a misdirected message can have a negative impact [7], so the workshop will explore the best use of SN tools for the purpose of encouraging eParticipation. Additionally, as the HUWY project is a small pilot, we do not want to waste resources (specifically staff time) by adopting a *scatter gun* approach to promoting the project through SN sites. One strand of our investigation involves working with young people in the pilot countries, through workshops and focus groups (see 1.2 above), to discover their Internet preferences in terms of information provision and communication. The other strand consists of inviting other people to share their experience of using SN tools for similar purposes.

The aim of the workshop is to share information about how people running eParticipation and eGovernment initiatives are using SN tools to encourage people to get involved in these projects. One example would be maintaining a Facebook page to market a project and encourage people to visit the project website. Another would be the use of a blog, Twitter or RSS to keep people up to date on progress. We want to find out *who* is using *what* to get *what kind of messages* to *whom*. How *successful* is this? And *how is success measured*?

3. Pre-workshop Data Collection

In order to gather basic and comparable information in advance of the workshop, we devised a simple framework and asked workshop participants to complete it. The framework takes the form of a table using the fields:

⁴ <http://www.huwy.euEP-08-01-011>

- Project name & URL
- Tool/ widget name
- Tool/ widget description
- SN websites targeted (names & URLs)
- Target audience
- Dissemination purpose
- How often is the information updated?
- Who updates it?
- How do you measure its impact?

We received a small but diverse response. Comuno [11] use SN sites as both a resource for inputs into participatory democracy and as destinations for promotional or mobilisation messages. Comuno tools help to integrate various SN tools to collate information and streamline the dispersal of messages. They also facilitate remote collaboration.

Breda Morgen, from Dijksman [5], is also primarily a collaborative space. It uses SN tools and encourages citizens to post ideas and photos and comment on or rate each other's posts. It is also integrated with other media (online and offline) to draw more people into the process and keep hold of their interest over time.

Virtual Town Hall [10] is a flexible widget, based on its own online space that aims to integrate SN and other Web 2.0 technologies with more formal online democratic tools. Its initial focus is engaging citizens to debate and engage with the implementation of EU environmental legislation at the local level.

The Shepherding Change [18] project arises out of an Action Learning Set run by the Children's Services Network of the Local Government Information Unit (LGIU, England⁵). The Action Learning Set intends to promote positive use of SN sites for youth participation. Shepherding Change aims to develop an application based on a *virtual pet*, which can be downloaded onto young people's SN pages. The pet provides an active link between a consulting organisation (e.g. local authority) and its owner (e.g. young person with Facebook profile).

Comuno, Breda Morgen and Virtual Town Hall are currently piloting their applications. Each development group is also working on other various projects involving SN tools for eParticipation. Shepherding Change, like HUWY, is in the design phase. It is hoped that several innovative SN projects for young people will emerge from the Action Learning Set of which Shepherding Change is one pilot.

4. Conclusions

At this point, researchers and practitioners are just beginning to gather empirical evidence and collate substantiated knowledge about how to effectively take advantage of the manifold functionalities SN tools may provide. Some are beginning to focus on using SN tools to promote initiatives and some are focused on using social networking to facilitate eParticipation activities. This workshop brings together initial experiences from European practitioners, intending to make an important early contribution by compiling and aggregating practical knowledge in this dynamic field.

⁵ <http://www.lgiu.gov.uk/>

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