Active now: How Web 2.0 Allows for the Formation of Online Communities Capable of Initiating Change through Activism

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ABSTRACT

This multifaceted paper explores how Web 2.0 creates an online environment where individuals can engage in discussion about issues facing society, which in turn promotes the development of online communities around a shared interest or goal. This paper will then argue that by utilising the affordances of social network sites Facebook and Twitter, these online communities are strong enough to bring about change by participating in activism. Within this paper, examples such as the controversial case of Senator Fraser Anning, the School Strike 4 Climate, and the #MeToo movement is used to demonstrate how online communities use hashtags, retweeting, liking, commenting and sharing to raise awareness and prompt real change; ultimately countering the argument of slacktivism.

KEY WORDS: activism, online communities, Web 2.0, slacktivism, social network sites

INTRODUCTION

This paper will argue that Web 2.0, particularly social network sites such as Twitter and Facebook, encourages individuals to participate in discourse around issues that face society, ultimately allowing for the formation of online communities and the initiation of change through activism. Social network sites, which are located at the core of Web 2.0 (O'Reilly, as cited in Straub & Nentwich, 2013, p. 724), form a "mediated public" (boyd, 2007, p. 2) whereby users can gather to publicly discuss and debate the social norms that guide society, can express their own thoughts, attitudes and opinions, and can exchange ideas with others; mirroring Habermas' notion of the public sphere (Straub & Nentwich, 2013, p. 726). Social network sites are further used by online communities to direct attention to the pressing issues that are facing society, which include, but are not limited to, gender and racial inequality, immigration laws and climate change. These online communities are able to develop through the use of Web 2.0, and are then able to initiate activist movements by utilising the affordances of social network sites. Overall, this paper will discuss four main ideas; how Web 2.0 and social network sites have impacted the way information surrounding global issues is shared among users; how Web 2.0 fosters the development of online communities; how these online communities, through the use of social network sites, are capable of initiating activist movements; and how, through the analysis of #MeToo and challenging the idea of slacktivism, these activist movements can achieve results.

THE IMPACT OF WEB 2.0 ON INFORMATION DISSEMINATION

The term "Web 2.0" was coined by Tim O'Reilly in 2004 (O'Reilly, 2007, p. 17) and is used to describe the most recent phase of the World Wide Web (WWW). Unlike its predecessor Web 1.0, the central focus of Web 2.0 is the user, the people who use its tools to participate, collaborate and communicate with others (O'Reilly, 2007, p. 19). Web 2.0 creates an online environment that encourages user contribution, the reusing and remixing of content, promotes a feeling of belonging to a community and a sense of empowerment (Arya & Mishra, 2012, p. 29). Web 2.0 is comprised of a multitude of applications including blogs, wikis and social network sites (Arya & Mishra, 2012, p. 30). Social network sites, such as Facebook and Twitter, are "online environments in which people create a self-descriptive profile and then make links to other people they know on the site, creating a network of personal communities" (Donath & boyd, 2004, p. 2).

However, it is important to note that on Twitter and Facebook, users are able to follow those who they do not know personally and thus, can build a network of "sources" (Grudz, Wellman & Takhteyev, 2011, p. 1296). It is necessary to make this distinction as it allows for the understanding of how information on social network sites spreads. For example, after the 2019 Christchurch mosque terror attack whereby 49 people were killed, an Australian politician Senator Fraser Anning released a statement which placed the reasoning for the attack on "the immigration program which allowed Muslim fanatics to migrate to New Zealand in the first place" (Anning, as cited in Kirby, para. 4). The statement was circulated via social media within minutes through the use of sharing, retweeting and commenting, and received widespread public outcry. British journalist Piers Morgan retweeted the statement condemning the opinions and attitudes Anning expressed. Morgan's retweet, which contained the original statement, was then retweeted by his sources or "weak ties" 16,000 times and was liked 30, 776 times (Morgan, 2019). The term "weak ties" is used to label those relations that act as a link between groups and as a result, are influential on Web 2.0 as they allow for the transmission of information across "greater social distance" (Granovetter, 1973, p. 1366), between platforms and between users.

This example highlights how Web 2.0 facilitates the creation and spread of content (McCaughey, 2014, p. 2), lowers the barrier to communication (Ellison et al., as cited in Ellison & boyd, 2013, p. 11) for people can express opinions without having to challenge gatekeeping regimes (Harlow, 2011, p. 230), and permits like-minded individuals the ability to "easily discern their common ground, thus helping users cultivate socially relevant interactions" (Ellison et al., as cited in Ellison & boyd, 2013, p. 11). As a result, Web 2.0, more specifically social network sites, encourages individuals to engage in debates around issues facing society. This level of interaction, participation and contribution ultimately allows for the formation of online communities on social network sites.

THE DEVELOPMENT OF ONLINE COMMUNITIES ON WEB 2.0

The notion of "community" is heavily debated in scholarly discourse (Katz, Rice, Acord, Dasgupta, & David, 2004; Wellman & Gulia, 1999). The rise of Web 2.0, social network sites and online gaming has contributed to and prompted the discussion of what constitutes as a community. Traditional definitions are predominantly central to the notion of "physical colocation" (Katz, et al., 2004, p. 324) whereby those who exist in geographical proximity experience a sense of solidarity (Schmalenbach, as cited in Katz et al., 2004, p. 324). In this traditional sense, the basic characteristics of a community includes face to face communication, common backgrounds such as identity and values, and the involuntary recruitment and participation of members (Katz et al., 2004, p. 325). Ultimately, physical 'traditional' communities "are based on shared social and physical boundaries" (Katz et al., 2004, p. 326). As mentioned, social network sites warrant a review of these definitions. At the basic level, virtual and online communities can be defined by "an aggregation of individuals" that are "mediated by technology" (Porter, as cited in Porter, 2016, p. 161) and are "geographically and socially dispersed" (Porter, 2016, p. 166). Online communities form voluntarily, typically around a shared interest or goal (Porter, 2016, p. 166). The characteristics that are vital to the formation of a community, regardless of whether online or offline, includes a sense of belonging, reciprocity, and the exchange of information (Porter, 2016, p. 161; Katz et al., 2004).

Web 2.0 and social network sites are able to develop and foster online communities for several reasons. As Constance Porter (2016) states, communities develop predominantly from the interaction around a shared interest or goal (p. 162). The most influential affordance of social network sites is the publication of personal expression (Aguiton & Cardon, 2007, p. 55). The ability for a user to contribute to a "mediated public space" (boyd, 2007, p. 2) means that personal thoughts and ideas are capable of becoming public opinion. By merely posting about an issue online, a user is able to interact with weak ties, followers or sources that share the same values and interests through commenting and retweeting.

In line with this information, it can further be argued that social network sites also allow for the formation of an online community around a shared interest through the use of hashtags. Hashtags (#) are a form of metadata that are used to categorise and label discourse on social network sites (Zappavigna, 2015, p. 374). For example, if a common interest of climate change was being debated on Twitter, a user is able to add #climatechange to their post in order to be found by other users. Reciprocity can be found on online communities through members retweeting, sharing, liking or favouriting other member's posts as "the accumulation of small, individual acts of assistance can sustain a large community" as each act can "help to perpetuate an image of generalised reciprocity and mutual aid" (Wellman & Gulia, 1999, p. 9). As online communities surrounding global issues are able to develop on Web 2.0, they are also able to initiate activist movements and elicit change through the use of Web 2.0. Therefore, Web 2.0, and social network sites in particular, encourages individuals to participate in debate around global issues.

THE POWER OF ONLINE COMMUNITIES IN INITIATING CHANGE

Online communities that have formed around the shared interest of global issues on Web 2.0 also have the potential to initiate activist movements. Activism can be defined as "the actions of a group of like-minded individuals coming together to change the status quo, advocating for a cause, whether local or global, and whether progressive or not" (Harlow, 2011, p. 228). By utilising Web 2.0, online communities members are able to communicate, share information, and arrange and organise protests easily (Sandoval-Almazan & Gil-Garcia, 2014, p. 365), lowering the barrier to participation in activism (Tartarchevskiy, 2011, p. 297). Online activism includes raising awareness about an issue or advocating for a cause, and also the organisation and mobilisation of movements (Vegh, as cited in Harlow, 2011, p. 230). Activism is achieved on social network sites through the use of hashtags, the creation of Facebook pages and events, and the circulation of petitions. For example, a series of online petitions recently circulated on the social network sites Facebook and Twitter calling for the removal of the aforementioned Senator Anning from parliament. One of the petitions, having been posted on Change.org, received 1.4 million signatures. The petition was presented in parliament and ultimately, with the support of major political parties, led to the condemnation of, and expression of dissatisfaction with, Senator Fraser Anning (Ahmed, 2019, para. 1). Moreover, the use of Facebook pages for organising activist events is demonstrated by the Facebook page "School Strike 4 Climate" which listed several events students could attend to protest and call for government action in climate change, one of which was attended by 25,000 teenagers (Brook, 2019, para. 3).

CHALLENGING SLACKTIVISM THROUGH #METOO

Due to the way social network sites allow users to effortlessly "like" a Facebook page, share a petition or simply tweet a relevant hashtag, several scholars have argued that online activism is increasingly becoming meaningless to such an extent that it can only be classified as "slacktivism" (Morozov., & Van de Donk et al., as cited in Harlow, 2011, p. 230). As Dennis McCafferty (2011) explains, slacktivism assumes that there is no emotional drive, community or connection behind most forms of online activism, which suggests that they rarely have a significant impact or elicit any meaningful change (p. 18). However, this argument is challenged by the Web 2.0 communities involved in the #MeToo movement.

#MeToo is a prime example of how online communities formed on Web 2.0 can initiate activist movements that are conducive to change. The #MeToo movement was initially established in 2006 and revolved around the global issue of gender inequality and harassment. The movement was brought back to fruition by online communities on Web 2.0 after allegations against Hollywood producer Harvey Weinstein emerged in 2017 (North, 2018; Chiwaya, 2018). A large online community of women who had a shared

interest in challenging workplace harassment divulged personal experiences with sexual harassment via Twitter with the hashtag #MeToo. The hashtag was used approximately 19 million times (Brown, 2018). As discussed, the use of hashtags allow social network users to find discourse surrounding a particular issue or topic (Zappavigna, 2015, p. 374). As the use of #MeToo made stories of sexual harassment experiences visible, the online community was able to raise awareness around the issue, which Sandor Vegh (as cited in Harlow, 2011, p. 230) claims is a form of online activism. In the case of #MeToo, the argument of slacktivism does not hold ground for the initiation of change was illustrated by several Hollywood stars, including Kevin Spacey, being investigated for sexual assault after allegations against them surfaced during the #MeToo movement (Romano, 2018). Within a month of the movement resurfacing, there was also a significant increase in traffic to the U.S Equal Employment Opportunity Commission website by approximately 45,000 visits (Chiwaya, 2018). The #MeToo movement ultimately demonstrates how Web 2.0, particularly social network sites such as Facebook and Twitter, allows for the formation of online communities and the initiation of change through activism.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, Web 2.0, and social network sites such as Facebook and Twitter in particular, encourages individuals to engage in debates around important issues that face society such as climate change, gender inequality, and racism. Web 2.0 has allowed for the rapid dissemination of information which can be used to enhance and inform the discourse surrounding these issues. In this sense, the social network sites of Web 2.0 have begun to resemble a "mediated public space" (boyd, 2007, p. 2) or a kind of public sphere, as demonstrated with the rapid distribution of Senator Anning's statement which caused widespread outcry, and encouraged the criticism of a political figure to circulate on social network sites. Web 2.0 also allows for the formation of online communities around shared interests, values and attitudes, primarily through the use of hashtags, retweeting, following and liking. These online communities are then strong enough to initiate changes through activist movements, as seen with the #MeToo movement which saw a rise in awareness of sexual harassment in the workplace and the investigation of leading Hollywood actors. Therefore, Web 2.0, particularly social network sites such as Twitter and Facebook, encourages individuals to participate in discourse around issues that face society, ultimately allowing for the formation of online communities and the initiation of change through activism.

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