

Chapter 3

Civic Engagement and Communication Technology Networks

Philip J. Salem
Texas State University, USA

ABSTRACT

Individuals address public issues by becoming involved with civic groups and performing civic activities such as charity and political work. Changes in communication technology have led to changes in civic engagement, and it is now possible to perform civic activities digitally. Actors develop social networks as they use various communication technologies, and the resultant networks act as passive constraints on individual activities. This chapter reports the results and implications of one study exploring the relationships between civic engagement and communication technology networks.

The researcher investigated face-to-face, telephone, email, private electronic, and public electronic communication networks. Private electronic communication networks develop through text messaging, instant messaging, and private chat, and public electronic communication networks emerge through the exchange of messages over blogs, social network sites, and Twitter. Results indicate individuals used different technology to develop different networks to assist them in different ways. Public electronic communication was unrelated to civic engagement.

DOI: 10.4018/978-1-61350-444-4.ch003

CIVIC ENGAGEMENT AND COMMUNICATION TECHNOLOGY NETWORKS

Civic engagement (CE) involves those individual and collective actions designed to identify and address issues of public concern (APA, 2010). CE includes participation in social groups, charitable groups, and political groups. The construct involves all forms of service learning and community service, and public figures often call for greater involvement of the public in common concerns (The White House, 2010). The *Journal of Civic Commitment* is a biannual publication devoted to research in this area.

Putnam (1995, 2000) is one source of the current scholarly interest in CE. Individuals obtain various resources through their connections to others, and social capital refers to those resources that would otherwise not be available outside a social network. Putnam argues that there was another type of social capital - resources shared by all by virtue of being connected in the same community. He contended that Americans are connected less to each other and are losing that common social capital. Individuals are more socially isolated and less involved with each other for a common good. There is less social engagement. Others echo these concerns (McPherson, Smith-Lovin, & Brashears, 2006; Pew Research Center, 2010).

Three factors challenge these arguments. First, the nature of community is changing. Wellman and his colleagues argue that individuals construct their own communities, and personal networks are the locus of CE (Chua, Madej, & Wellman, 2011). Communities are changing from places such as neighborhoods or collections of people with shared interests, to the set of people connected to a person – a personal community. This argument suggests the next challenge by noting that communication has evolved from door-to-door, to place-to-place, to person-to-person. Technology leads to the blending of local and global.

A second factor is the nature of communication technology. Communication is a social process in which individuals in a relationship construct messages as part of ongoing episodes (Salem, 2009). Communication technology refers to the way people communicate with each other. Contemporary technologies include e-mail, private electronic technology such as text messaging or instant messaging, and public electronic communication such as exchanging messages on a blog or through social networking sites, as well as telephone and face-to-face methods. The nature of this technology means that individuals may engage in CE in many ways. People may discuss issues, exchange opinions, and contribute actual civic behavior and funds electronically as well as in traditional ways. A recent report suggests that greater Internet involvement related strongly to greater overall CE (Smith, Lehman Scholzman, Verba, & Brady, 2009).

Finally, the emerging structures of networks act as passive constraints to individual action (Salem, 2008, 2009). As individuals communicate with each other, they develop a pattern of interactions forming a network. A network constrains the interactions of an individual, making some interactions more likely than others and some resources easier to obtain than others. Although an individual has direct control over his or her own messages and some control over the interactions with direct contacts - alters, individuals have less and less influence on the interactions between alters or between the alters of alters. No one individual or group of individuals controls a network, but a network emerges through the accumulation of individual local actions. A network is a passive constraint on local actions, including CE. People communicate in different ways, developing separate communication technology networks and different passive constraints.

The purpose of this chapter is to report on an investigation of the relationships between communication technology personal networks and civic engagement. I review current research on civic

14 more pages are available in the full version of this document, which may be purchased using the "Add to Cart" button on the publisher's webpage:
www.igi-global.com/chapter/civic-engagement-communication-technology-networks/61666

Related Content

Social Media Activism From an Information Warfare and Security Perspective

Brett van Niekerk (2018). *Exploring the Role of Social Media in Transnational Advocacy* (pp. 1-16).

www.irma-international.org/chapter/social-media-activism-information-warfare/202301

Construction of the Political Other in Citizens' Comments on Politicians' Facebook Pages

Oyewole Adekunle Oladapo (2017). *International Journal of E-Politics* (pp. 17-29).

www.irma-international.org/article/construction-of-the-political-other-in-citizens-comments-on-politicians-facebook-pages/180335

Using Social Networks to Solve Crimes: A Case Study

Alexiei Dingli (2012). *International Journal of Virtual Communities and Social Networking* (pp. 18-29).

www.irma-international.org/article/using-social-networks-solve-crimes/73008

Socio-Technical Theory and Work Systems in the Information Age

Ken Eason and José Abdelnour-Nocera (2009). *Handbook of Research on Socio-Technical Design and Social Networking Systems* (pp. 65-77).

www.irma-international.org/chapter/socio-technical-theory-work-systems/21397

Social Media and Civil Society Organizations (CSOS): Transformed Challenges for Governance

Kari Steen-Johnsen and Bernard Enjolras (2015). *Cases on Strategic Social Media Utilization in the Nonprofit Sector* (pp. 237-260).

www.irma-international.org/chapter/social-media-and-civil-society-organizations-csos/125011