

Chapter 10

Social Networks, Civic Participation, and Young People: A Literature Review and Summary of the Educational Challenges

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ABSTRACT

The latest report from the Pew Research Center (2010) shows that 93% of American teenagers and young adults use the Internet, and that 73% of them have their profile on a social network site. In the UK, data from Ofcom (2010) has come up with similar results. Citizen participation has traditionally been determined by demographic and socio-economic factors. Accordingly, the citizens who participate most actively are middle-aged and have a high socio-economic and educational level. By contrast, it is young people of low socio-economic status and educational level who participate the least. Some reports show modest signs that the use of the Internet could be another means to promote participation both online and offline. The main purpose of this chapter is to review the research literature concerning how social networks contribute to social participation.

INTRODUCTION¹

A large number of recent studies have addressed the prevalence of the use of social networks among young (and not so young) people (see, amongst other publications Bringué & Sádaba,

2009; Davies & Cranston, 2008; DCLG, 2008; Ofcom, 2008, 2010; Smith, Schlozman, Verba & Brady, 2009; Sylvester & McGlynn, 2009; Taylor & Keeter, 2010; Wildbit, 2005). Such media are attributed a significant role in fostering socialization and a sense of belonging to a community, although the results of research to date are divided as to whether these social networks

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contribute in a real way to the development of greater civic involvement (see, amongst other studies, Boulianne, 2009; Jenkins, Purushotma, Clinton & Robison, 2009; Jennings & Zetner, 2003; Smith *et al.*, 2009; Ofcom, 2009).

The key issue that arises in the context of these research studies, and which is to be addressed in this chapter, can be framed in terms of the following set of questions: How may the use of social networks affect civic behaviour and attitudes among citizens? Does such use foster real civic participation or, in contrast, does it lead to isolation from the real world as a result of engagement in online activities? Are there generic, quantitative and/or qualitative differences between offline and online social and civic participation? Exactly what types of activities are carried out through social networks? Can such activities be described as involving real civic participation? Do such activities foster participation in real life activities in a verifiable way? What conclusions may be drawn from the use of social networks in encouraging participative behaviours? And last but not least, can networkers be educated in their use of social networks so as to foster greater participation in civic life (or Society), both on- and offline?

Our aim is to respond to these questions by providing a review of the recent literature on this issue, including reports published in the US and the UK, as well as academic studies in the field.

First of all, we will take a look at the concept of civic participation in general, focusing in particular on young people, before considering the use and consumption of social media among young citizens when compared with the habits and behaviour of citizens in other age groups. Thirdly, we will analyze the current influence of social network use on different types of civic participation, both online and offline. Finally, and by way of conclusion, we will try to provide some guidelines on how to encourage participation.

CIVIC PARTICIPATION: A GENERAL FRAMEWORK

Participation is a complex and widely debated concept (Livingstone & Markham, 2008), which also has multiple dimensions that are difficult to assimilate (Norris, 1999; Scheufele & Nisbet, 2002; Pattie, Seyd & Whitele, 2004). Indeed, we may distinguish as many aspects of participation as the realities to which it is applied, and moreover, taking into account the diversity of forms it assumes in function of the spatial-temporal coordinates in which it materializes (Haste, 2004). Furthermore, there is as yet no general agreement regarding the definition of participation, or how to measure it, which makes it an even more complicated issue to address.

Participation is defined in the Cambridge Dictionary as “when you take part or become involved in something”. Etymologically, we can discern its meaning in an active sense in the Latin verb *participare*, “to take part,” and in a causative sense, “to make (someone/something) take part,” which completes the action of giving with that of receiving in terms of participation. As such, another meaning for the term arises, that of “impart, announce, communicate” (Naval & Altarejos, 2000; Redondo, 1999).

Thus, the notion of commonality is implicit in all the definitions of participation as the result of participation is “having something in common”. Hence, if what we call community arises from the union of individuals who have something in common, participation turns out to be an inseparable dimension of community.

Certainly, there is no community without participation and it is precisely participation which makes it possible to constitute a community (Redondo, 1999, 163). A true community is impossible if there is no sharing in something which is common to its members, in other words if there is no participation. For various reasons, participation is an element that is characteristic of all democratic institutions. One of these is its

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