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This Time It's Personal: Social Networks, Viral Politics and Identity Management

1. Social networks and viral politics

Social network sites are a prominent type of the various forms of user-generated social media that sometimes are grouped under the term “Web 2.0”. They are “web-based services that (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.” (boyd & Ellison 2007) By using social network sites, it is possible to maintain off-line connections in an on-line environment, making it possible to communicate with close friends as well as casual acquaintances regardless of where they happen to be situated in time or space.

It is also possible to form more or less contemporary groups, connecting people from different networks on the basis of common interests, membership in “real life” organisations, sharing jokes or promoting political and social causes. Another typical feature of social network sites is the interconnectedness with other types of social and mainstream media. It is easy to upload or link to media content, post it to your personal profile or to a group, or forwarding it to the contacts in your network, as well as integrating your personal profiles in different types of social media.

To take an example: someone sends you a funny video clip of a politician making a fool of her- or himself on television. You “favourite” it on your personal YouTube page, post it on your blog with a comment, tag it (assign a label to it in order to find it easily later) and store it on your del.icious folksonomy page, forward the blog post to your Facebook profile, pass it along to your friends etc. Your friends will in their turn assess whether they think that the clip is worthy of

passing on, forwarding it or not. Someone might edit the original footage, adding music, snippets of other clips, texts, thereby creating a “mash-up”, a new piece of media, which in its turn might be passed around. Different tools allow the interactive audience to discuss and see how other people have interpreted and rated the media content. There are special services available that collect the forms of media content that are most circulated at the time. In the end, the sharing of the media content might in itself be a story worthy of mentioning in mainstream media, thereby creating a feedback loop between the different forms of media. In effect, your social network provides a *media filter* for you, passing on media content that are found to be especially interesting.

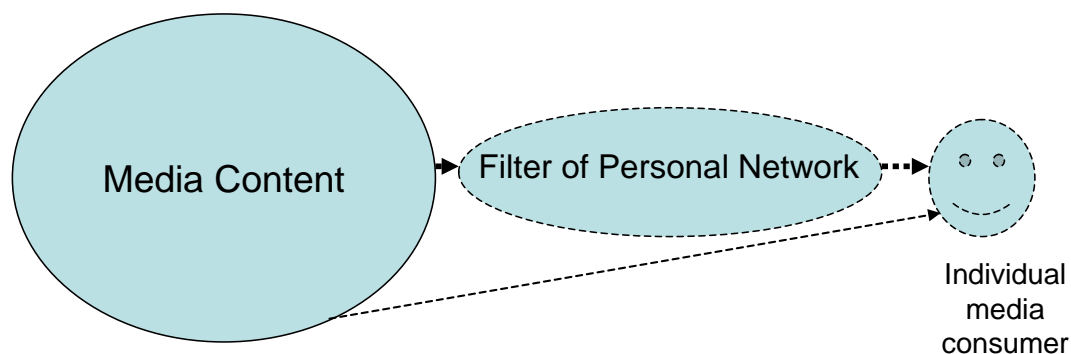


Figure 1: The network as media filter

This is the art of viral sharing, one of the defining characteristics of the ecological media structure. Perhaps most applied to the logic of new marketing techniques (viral marketing), it is also a concept most useful to describe how post-organisational political mobilisation might occur through activist mediation.

Henry Jenkins (2006:206f) defines the core of viral sharing as “getting the right idea into the right heads at the right time.” The features needed for any media content to be truly viral are evocative images and consistency with existing world views in the minds of the audience. In the field of political and social activism, I call this phenomenon *viral politics*.

What effect does the sharing of political media content have on civic engagement and political action, then? Previous research has established a strong connection between *social capital* and civic engagement, in particular, the link between *weak ties* and civic engagement. As Mark S. Granovetter (1973: 1374) put it: “[P]eople rarely *act* on mass-media information unless it is also transmitted through personal ties; otherwise one has no particular reason to think that an advertised product or an organization should be taken seriously.” The relationship has been found in empirical studies, for instance in Teorell (2003), where the main finding, using data acquired through a large 1997 survey in Sweden, was that the more weak ties an individual has, the more likely it is that that individual commits acts of civic engagement.

The importance of the personal dissemination of media content and calls for action is not new. The qualitative difference with social network sites and social media is the efficiency with which information can be spread. I will mention three major differences.

1) Organising weak ties in social network sites allows for an individual to, in a cost-efficient way, stay connected to brief acquaintances also when moving to another geographical area, thereby creating *maintained social capital* (Ellison et al 2007). This offsets the deterioration of social capital in society as a product of increased mobility (ibid). Online relationships are provisional (Silverstone 2007: 117), but off-line relationships in an on-line setting are not.

2) Another qualitative difference is the size of networks. The *Small World Pattern* explains the expression “It’s a small world” exclaimed by “newly introduced individuals upon finding that they have common acquaintances” (Granovetter 1973: 1368). Small World networks are composed *both* of small groups of people dense ties *and* of larger groups with weaker ties. Important for networks to grow extremely large is the existence of individuals with a wildly disproportionate amount of connections, being able to connect a large number of smaller dense groups with one another: “In fact, social networks are not held together by the

bulk of people with hundreds of connections but by the few people with tens of thousands.” New communication technology can enhance the stability of these networks, making it easier to connect to other social networks through the *Connectors*.

3) Finally, the sheer velocity of viral sharing implies that millions of people can be reached through word of mouth in a matter of days. Whereas meeting in person, phone chains, or other older methods of spreading rumours or information, took days and months to pass on media content to a larger group of people, social media reduces this time to a matter of minutes. Spreading a message through your personal network through social media will, by the logics of maintained social capital and the small world pattern, through viral sharing reach a global crowd at short notice (provided that the message *is* attractive enough to be virally shared).

In spreading media content to their personal network, individuals manifest their commitment to their existing beliefs and move closer to political action. They also invest their personal status as an acquaintance – their *ethos* – in forwarding a message through their social network. By finally reaching into mainstream media, the content will reach people who already does not share that commitment. This might be called “networked individualism” (Wellman cit. in Chadwick 2006:27). Through the electronic organising of social networks, the “personal” information flow increases and the threshold for civic engagement is lowered.

2. Temporal elites

I now move to elaborate on where the sources of viral politics are to be found. In my model of viral politics, *political entrepreneurs* play a major part. The advancement of a social or political cause does not take place out of nowhere. In order to start a successful campaign, someone must start it.

Consider the figure below. Viral politics emanates from political entrepreneurs, that most often will be directly affected people of a certain event or phenomenon (the “victims”) and/or groups and organisations, both NGOs and political parties

devoted to this particular cause (Burma action committee, Doctors without borders, Amnesty International, United Nations, Oxfam, political parties or politicians). These individuals spread information and media content by word of mouth to wider groups of people through personal interconnectedness. If successful, the content/information will catch on and spread rapidly through the mechanism of viral politics, influencing the formal political system directly through personal contacts with political representatives and indirect through the feedback loop provided by mainstream media.

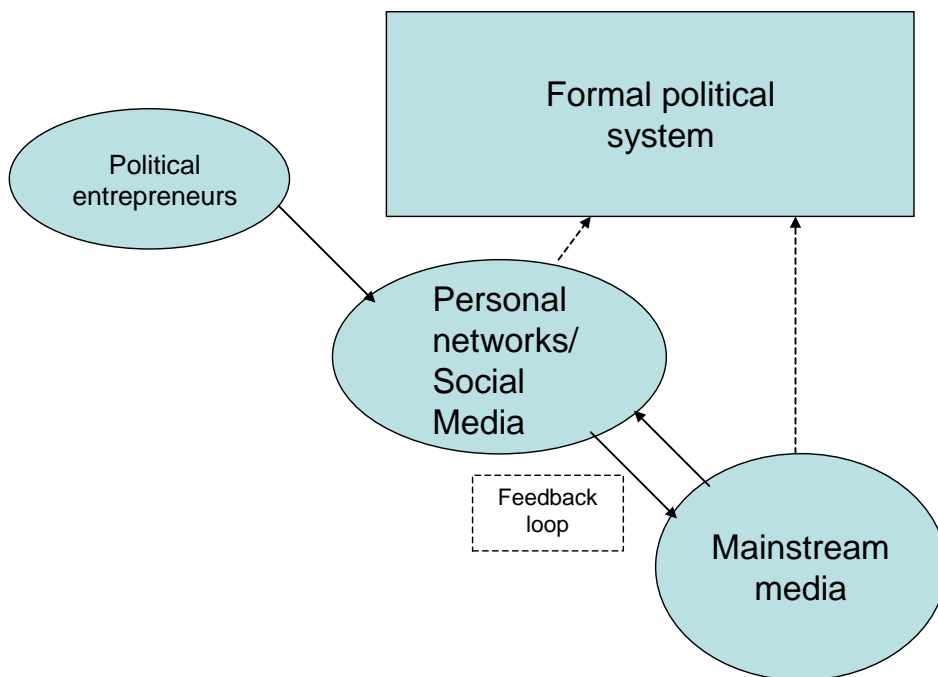


Figure 2: A model of viral politics

The political entrepreneurs of a successful campaign of viral politics form, together with temporary supporters of the cause to be found in interconnected social networks, a *temporal elite*, having the necessary knowledge, skills and (perhaps above all) the motivation to promote the cause.

Most often, the concept of elite is put in opposition to the concept of democracy. It can however also be seen as an important part of well-functioning democ-

racy, as in the tradition associated with competitive democracy, where the electorate is seen as passive, choosing between political alternatives depending on track record or promises, legitimating political representatives to rule between elections: “a small group of political leaders [...] with perhaps an intermediate section of more active citizens, who transmit demands and information between the mass and the leadership” (Miller 1983: 134). In this section, I develop the concept of elites based on voluntary engagement, bringing it more in line with the “intermediate section” of the model of competitive democracy.

That I choose to develop a new concept of elites does not mean that classic elites are not important; on the contrary. Financial and political elites are becoming increasingly powerful in an era of multilevel governance, ruling through networks, hiding behind markets, making power invisible where there used to be a throne, although it is also true that power elites are not as stable as before (Bjereld & Demker 2006: 501). The temporal elites might instead be seen as a potential counter-force, or at least complementing traditional elites in democracy.

I will start out with pointing to a sociological phenomenon labelled *the power law distribution*. When analysing, for example, the contributions to a Wikipedia page, one of the most characteristic features is the huge difference between contributors in the number of contributions made and the size of each individual contribution. Some individuals contribute substantially more than others, and the “normal” contribution is typically very small in size (compare with the discussion above on small world networks). There is no point in analysing average contributions, because the number and size of contributions among contributors is not normally distributed. Instead, the n th position has $1/n$ th of the first person’s rank. (Shirky 2008: 122ff).

The figure below depicts a typical power distribution.

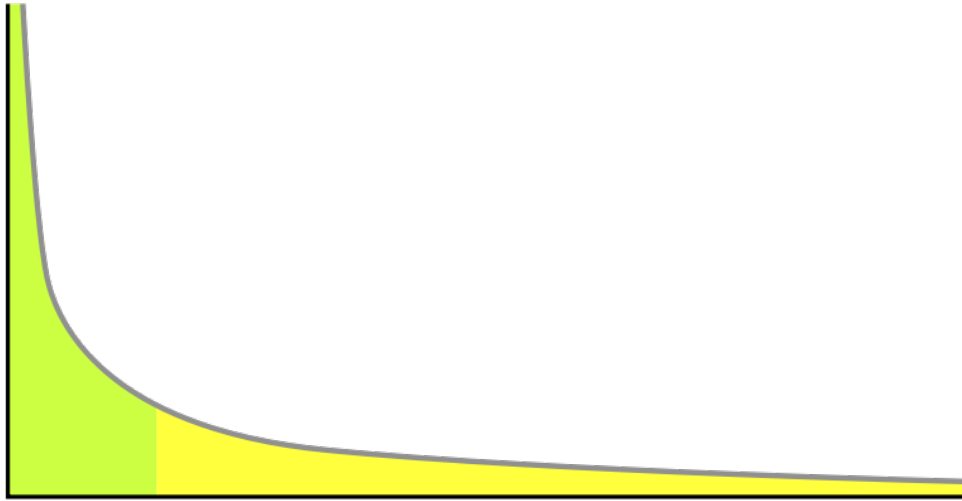


Figure 3: Power law distribution (Picture by Hay Kranen / PD)

The same is true for civic engagement in the setting of the post-organisational viral politics of social networks. A few individuals (political entrepreneurs) invest a very large amount of time in a political or social cause. These individuals constitute the inner core of the temporal elite associated with the cause in question. As they spread information about the cause in their social networks, some people will feel encouraged to invest an equal amount of time and join a temporal elite, some people will invest less, and most people will do little or nothing. The possibility of flexible engagement (cf. Joyce 2007) makes it attractive to more people to engage, as they can easily adapt the work effort put down to their personal priorities.

The total sum of engagement may be equal or even higher than before, despite decreasing levels of membership in formal organisations devoted to social and political causes.

3. Identity Management and Annoyed Participation

In a pilot study, a small number of Swedish Facebook users were interviewed, using virtual focus groups, about their attitudes towards political content and

mobilisation on the social network site, The study is reported in Gustafsson & Wahlström 2008.

I will cite a few of the results in order to put some light on how complicated motives and actions of participants in viral politics are, and how further research must take that into account.

The participants in the focus groups had a sceptical view towards political campaigns in Facebook. Many of them maintained the notion that participating in political campaigns online in various forms filled mainly two functions: building your public or semi-public identity by expressing political views and concerns; and being an excuse not for taking a more active part in a campaign. Off-line activity was viewed in general as being more important or real.

The respondents also complained about the large number of requests for support from political campaigns, among an enormous number of other types of requests and invitations, leading to Facebook fatigue and a general reluctance toward any type of action.

However, most participants reported that they had actually taken part in off-line activities as a direct result of mobilisation using Facebook. They also reported, without exceptions, that they were indeed members of various groups on Facebook supporting political and social causes. One participant described this seemingly paradoxical behaviour as "annoyed participation" (ibid: 12).

This might be an indicator for people engaging in viral politics might not be aware of their own importance for a successful campaign and that empirical evaluation of the proposed model must be aware of this.

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