

Changing The Face Of Public Affairs: A Look At How Social Networking Is Impacting The Business Of The Public Sector

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Introduction

Although recently there has been an increased focus on e-government, the government's use of technology in order to perform more efficiently and effectively, there is lack of scholarly research on how social networks are affecting the public sector. Most existing research on the social networking phenomenon lay foundation with early social networking websites and online communities without laying proper foundation. Previous works neglected to consider historically relevant studies on social networking prior to the technology era. This study however will rely on the historical context to aid in explanation of the modern day phenomena and how it has changed the public sector.

Social networks are made up of individuals or organizations that are connected and/or interdependent sharing any number of the following: kinship, friendship, mission, ideas, vision, finances, and values. If graphed this network appears in the shape of a web. Each individual in this network is a node, therefore a social network consisting of many nodes, the individual actors that come together to form the network. Past research on social networks has demonstrated that social networks operate on many levels both simple and complex and play a key role in how organizations operate, solve problems, and accomplish their overall goals. It is critical when observing a social network, to consider the individual ties each node has to the network along with what value or social capital each node brings to the group.

Historically theories related to social networks have prevalent in the works of sociologist, psychologist, linguist and other social sciences. However, today social networks are key in all fields rooted in organizational studies. With new technology revolutions the phenomena of social networks has exploded. Social networking is becoming as much of an integral role in the life of Americans as the World Wide Web. Though the online communities are relatively new, the postulates of social networks have existed since the late 1800's. Ferdinand Tonnies theorized that social groups can exist as personal and direct social ties that connect to individuals who share values and beliefs or impersonal formal, formal, and instrumental social links. In the mid 1900's the term social networking initially used to describe biologically or geographically bound groups such as families and tribes, later encompassed social categories such as race, ethnicity, gender, etc. Georg Simmel, discussed the size of networks and the interaction of the individuals. In the 1950's through the 1970's a host of scholars analyzed social networks ranging from interpersonal work relationships to kinships. Some studies focused on values, norms, and culture while others devalued the aforementioned items. These studies took place all over the world including southern Africa, The United States, and the United Kingdom. The below diagram is an example of the social network of an organization, each circle represent a node (individual) the lines show how each individual connects to each other.

See Figure 1 on Bottom

During the 1990's and the first few years of the 21st century the concepts of social networking has transformed due to the world wide web. With the rapid expansion of internet and internet communities, loose social networks were formed. Now with Web 2.0, these loose networks are transforming a dynamic

cohesive network that is ultimately changing the way the public sector operates. Web 2.0 is both interactivity and interconnectivity versus previous web experiences that just focused on the interconnectivity aspect. Unlike before Web 2.0 about connecting people versus connecting networks (systems). (The sentence above is a little confusing. I'm not sure what is being said.) Web 2.0 is not a reflection of changes in software but rather a change in how developers and users make use of the World Wide Web, which in essence it is user participation. Web 2.0 allows participants to not only retrieve information but it allows each node or individual to become a participant, adding to the collective body of resources and information. With Web 1.0 allowed users had limited interactivity while with Web 2.0 the more user participation, the better the platform. Users of Web 2.0 are contributors therefore taking ownership of the data and information. There is added value with each contribution. Though many features of Web 2.0 are not new, the lack of limitation is innovative. Traditionally site administrators were the sole authority on what was contributed. One chief feature of Web 2.0 that is both necessity and complexity is its continuous evolution and development. Its infrastructure is constantly updated. These updates allow networks the most up to date resources available to the community. Sites that have Web 2.0 features allow participants to search, link, author, tag, extension, and signal. These abilities have allowed users to influence the public sector in education, politics, public administration, and much more.

See Figure 2 on Bottom

As demonstrated in the above chart, the earliest explosion of the social network movement occurred on college campuses throughout the nation in 2003. The two most popular social networking websites, Facebook and Myspace now play an integral role in how universities engage their students. It is used as a recruitment tool for Admission Offices. Departments of Student Affairs market student programs using these sites, and most important, students are building online groups and communities. Even instructors are incorporating online social networking into the classroom utility. What once appeared as a trend amongst college students has exploded to a phenomenon that runs a plethora of different organizations. Notably, Web 2.0 has had a noticeable impact on government.

As an evolving platform of technology Web 2.0 is changing the way the government connects with its constituents. Government officials are using this digital frontier to communicate in a vast number of ways across the nation. Local governments are employing Web 2.0 for reporting items that need city action (potholes, damaged power lines, traffic concerns, etc). Legislators have launched Web 2.0 applications to communicate with its constituency; there are YouTube channels for both the House of Representatives and the Senate. However, the most drastic change occurring is the utilization of social networking for the purpose of elections. Through the utilization of applications like My Space, Facebook, YouTube and various widgets; Web 2.0 has turned into the forefront for the campaign arena for all emerging public officials. Though some public officials still stick to the traditional campaign strategy of walking through the neighborhoods of constituents, attending community events, and local television commercials, the most successful contenders maximized usage of virtual social networking versus the more traditional forms. The traditional on the ground campaigning limits the audience to which the message for the candidate is communicated to a specific state, city and community, whereas the utilization of the web gains candidates national exposure instantly. Web 2.0 is the innovating way to connect with voters and to optimize networks of supporters.

Data and Information Analysis

In the 2008 election cycle Web 2.0 served as the campaign cornerstone for all individuals contending for public office. For example, each presidential candidate used web applications to allow voters to make contribution to the campaign, view videos of their speeches, write blogs and access documentation of planned changes the candidate would implement if elected. Web 2.0 was such a great tool in the past election, because it was easy to use for both the local and state public officials and those running for the presidency. It also made voters feel a connection and with the candidates' campaign but most importantly making them an actual part of the campaign. For example, once you registered on a candidate's website, throughout the election individuals would receive emails messages to them personally from the candidate. Most individuals recognize that the letters sent were generic template sent to all supporters, however still it makes voters feel connected with the candidate. Web 2.0 has changed elections from the top to the

bottom and takes voters into the minds of candidates. The following statistics illustrate just how connected voters wanted to be with the candidates through the use of Web 2.0

See Table 1 on Bottom

Based on the above chart of Internet friends on MySpace and YouTube viewers it looks as if the candidacy for presidency would be between Democratic Barack Obama and Republican Ron Paul. If this Internet report where to select a winner of the race at the view moment is which it was composed it would have been Barack Obama. His 169, 397 MySpace Friends and 11,098,217 YouTube viewers outweighed all of the other candidates. This type of campaigning allows voters to go online not just to read about the candidates, but to also share their views and maybe even sway undecided voters. According to a research conducted by Aaron Smith and Lee Rainie of Pew Internet & American Life Project, "In total 46% of all adults are using the internet, email, phone text messaging for political purposes in this election." Adults are utilizing these sources to get news and information about the campaign, to develop their perceptions and discuss with friends and family. The following statistics illustrate the use of Web 2.0 applications in the Democratic Campaign. Smith and Ranie assert, "Among online Democrats, Obama's supporters are more likely than Clinton's supporters to have made online campaign contributions (17% vs. 8%), to sign online petitions (24% vs. 11%), to have passed along political commentaries in blogs and other forms (23% vs. 13%), and to have watched campaign videos of any kind (64% vs. 43%). Obama's backers are also more likely than McCain's partisans to have engaged in range of online campaign activities."

See Figure 3 on Bottom

Web 2.0 has allowed candidates to reach the current vast number of individuals in a profound way, but like any other form of technology there are advantages and disadvantages. The question of security, the possibility of someone impersonating a candidate and the lack of ability to reach individuals that are not computer savvy all present disadvantages for the use of Web 2.0. The later is a more serious consequence. For example, during the primary season, democratic candidates participated in YouTube debates. This was an innovative way to engage young technological savvy individuals. However, those left out of participating in democracy were individuals who lack resources or technology education. In order to submit questions for the debate, one must have had the technology readily available (internet, computer etc.), individuals also had to know how to use YouTube. In order to watch the election, cable television was required/ thus a great deal of Americans were not privy to participation.

See Figure 4 on Bottom

The above chart shows that Barack Obama has four times as many friends on Facebook as John McCain. Many analysts quickly dismiss this as simply a popularity contest amongst a demographic that lacks voter turnout. However, the utility of Facebook as well as other Web 2.0 platforms allow for online organizing. Once a person (none) connects with its candidate of choice, all the friends in his or her social network are notified. If a friend is not familiar with the candidate it can click on the candidates page and learn more information about the candidate. Supporters of a given candidate can also for "groups" in order to promote their cause. Barack Obama's campaign utilized these platform tools most effectively.

See Figure 5 on Bottom

The above data dictates the high demand on Web 2.0 platforms for election information. Evaluating the youtube usage also shows that many Americans are using this platform as a source of information versus the traditional newspaper, and network news. YouTube has a vital effect on disseminating information both positive and negative. Many Americans were bombarded with emails that included links of Rev. Jeremiah Wright. Throughout the campaign YouTube played a pivilot role in the election.

Ultimately, many candidates acknowledged that there are individuals that are not very computer savvy, which is why it is important to also incorporate television advertisement and bulletins to the campaign. This all present disadvantages, but measures have been put into place to prevent these types of things from happen and if something does occur corrective action is taken immediately. The advantages of Web 2.0 have proven themselves to be a true success for President Barack Obama. Obama and many other candidates' utilized Web 2.0 applications to declared their candidacy, collection campaign contribution, and network with voters. The advantages include the ability to reach a larger number of individuals

across the nation at any time, the ability to contribute to the campaign made easy and the ability to know where the candidate stands on any issue the nation faces. At any time of the day any individuals around the world can access the candidates' website to read blogs, watch videos, and gain insight on the candidate. Voters do not have to worry about their contributions being lost in the mail and never making it to the candidate, because it could all be done online. President Obama raised the most money through online contributions in a single day. The ability to read blogs and watch videos of the candidates provided voters with an illustration of what the candidate will do if elected and of what other voters views and opinion. Web 2.0 was truly utilized in the 2008 elections and the advantages outweighed the disadvantages.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the phenomenon of social networking has now become increasingly observable with online platforms. These platforms allow for individuals to connect and form bonds and common links. These online communities have become integrated with the way the public sector carries out its operations. Social networking is allowing for more efficient teaching, community policing, social activism, and political communication. The epitome of how social networking has transformed the public sector is the 2008 presidential campaign. The ability for candidates to reach populations and create networks and communities demonstrates a transformation of social networking and the proliferation of incorporating technology in the public sector. However, there has been a lack of extensive research on how these social networking platforms play a role in e-government. The trends of online communities and Web 2.0 platforms have proliferated at such a pace that researchers did not foresee the grand role that it would play in the public sector. The 2008 election cycle was an example of how the paradigm has shifted to incorporate social networks. If the trend grows as anticipated social networking will be a quintessential part to the survival of organizations. Barack Obama's presidential campaign epitomizes how Web 2.0 has revolutionized elections; future contenders for public office must incorporate this technology in order to be successful. Barack Obama has already pledged to the American people that they will become active participants in America's Democracy. Thus he is expected to continue to use his well established social networks to engage citizens. Since this is the trend at the executive level, other representatives will likely replicate this call to the people. It is imperative for cross discipline studies to consider the influence of web 2.0 on the public sector. Web 2.0 has the potential to be a tool to help public administrators more effectively connect with their citizens needs. Adequate research is needed in order to optimize these utilities for more effective and efficient business of the public sector. This research must include an intensive introspection of how these processes affect those who lack either the educational or financial resources to participate in such platforms. It also must examine how the lack of formation of online social networks hinders civic participation of such individuals. While this revolution has improved communication for the public sector and most research focuses on this aspect, more research focused on negative aspects should take place. Although the 2009 campaign cycle brought attention to possible security breaches, there have been no intense studies on how these affect the public sector. Since these networks are open, their very nature lends ability to terrorist networks to form. Research should focus on how Web 2.0 can enhance or hinder safety and security. Online social networks are prolific and their effects on the public sector command attention, more research must be done and must scrutinize how it affects all societies.

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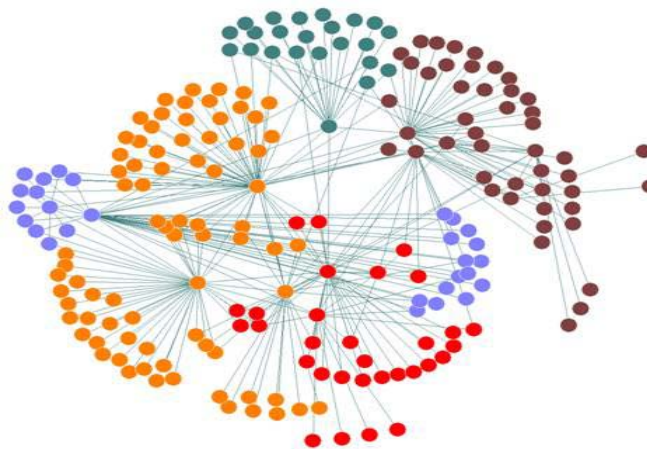
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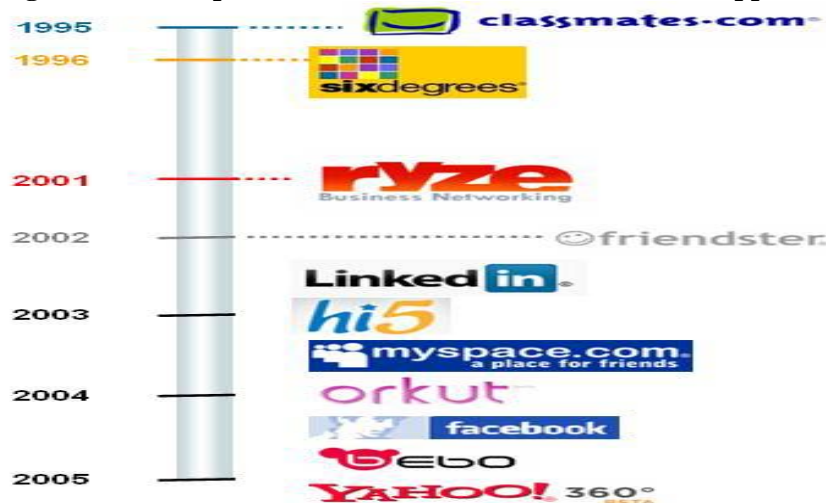
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Figure 1: Cluster Nodal Connectivity for Social Network Organization






<http://www.kudos-dynamics.com/?t=19>




Figure 2: Developmental Trends and Sites with Web 2.0 Applications



http://Inbooks.typepad.com/photos/uncategorized/2008/02/22/social_networking_timeline.jpg

Table 1: Utilizations of Web 2.0 in the 2008 Presidential Primaries

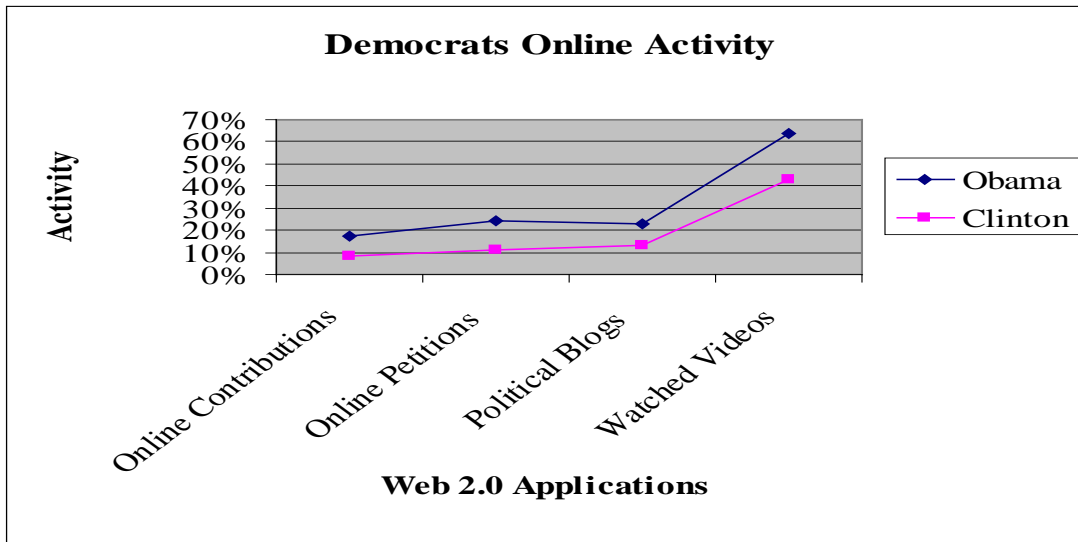
  		
Candidate	Friends	Channel Views
Obama	169,397	11,098,217
Clinton	133,684	849,842
Edwards	47,936	616,160
Kucinich	30,141	481,271
Richardson	20,910	534,450
Biden	14,300	286,112
Gravel	9,353	632,377
Dodd	8,890	414,548

  		
Candidate	Friends	Channel Views
Paul	56,769	3,323,091
McCain	40,948	464,081
Romney	30,992	738,988
Brownback	11,313	484,469
Giuliani	7,434	621,155
Hunter	6,908	360,353
Huckabee	6,053	184,781
Tancredo	3,989	424,132

Read/WriteWeb Graphic *Accessed: 08/23/07*

http://www.readwriteweb.com/archives/web_20_election.php

Figure 3: 2008 Democratic Presidential Primary Web 2.0 Application Activities

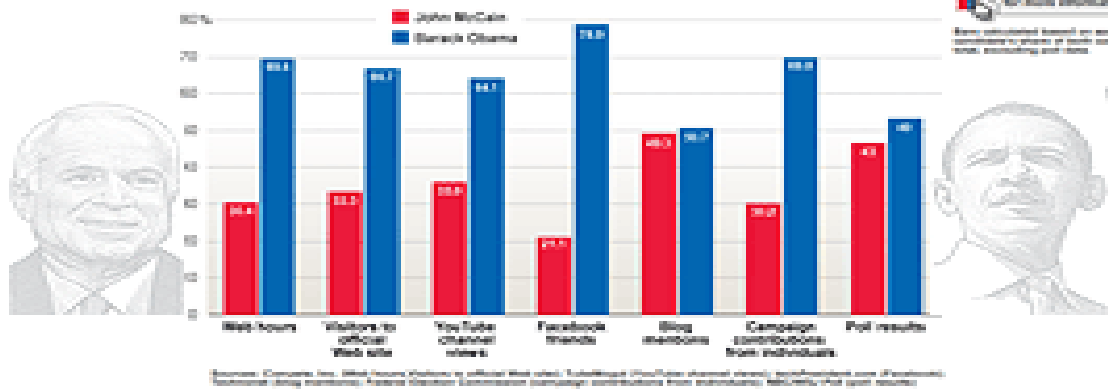


http://www.pewinternet.org/pdfs/PIP_2008_election.pdf

Figure 4

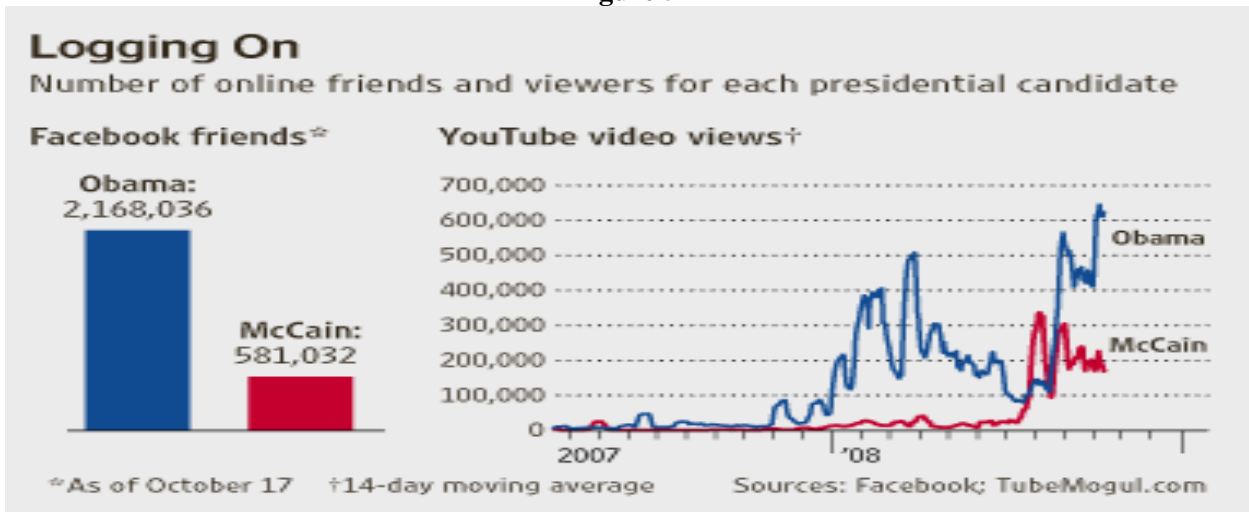
Measuring an "Internet Election"

This campaign season has produced an explosion of real-time statistics indicating candidates' popularity and prominence on blogs and on sites such as Facebook and YouTube (but the usefulness of these measures is only just beginning to be understood by political junkies more used to relying on traditional measures of campaign success, such as polling and fundraising. (See related article.)



<http://online.wsj.com/article/SB122428213573345971.html>

Figure 5



<http://online.wsj.com/article/SB122428213573345971.html>