

Learning environmental activism through social networking sites?

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Introduction

Environmental movements, like a number of other movements, are increasingly using social networking sites (SNS) to recruit new members, to fundraise, to promote their causes and to facilitate their campaigning activity. SNS therefore enable social movement organisations to engage with a wider body of supporters, and may lead supporters to expect greater involvement in setting policy in this new public sphere or to reuse materials in unexpected ways. Are social networking sites changing the nature of the relationship between social movement organisations and their supporters and are we seeing the emergence of a new public sphere of activism? Are new forms of activist identity beginning to appear as SNS users 'learn in and from' movement activity (see Hall et al 2011)? To explore these questions a study was undertaken of the community of supporters linked through Friends of the Earth Scotland's Facebook group. This study provides an opportunity to examine the potential impact of social media on the relationship between organisations and supporters to ascertain if significant changes are occurring.

A note on SNS

SNS allow users to construct and communicate representations of their identities online and Facebook, the leading global SNS, has grown phenomenally since its launch in 2007, with 31,114,800 accounts registered in the UK by May 2012 (CheckFacebook.com, 2012). They may be contributing, as Coleman and Blumler (2009) argue, to the Internet providing a means for an online 'civic commons': an organised open forum for deliberative democracy, or at least an online manifestation of Habermas' (1989) public sphere in which issues can be discussed freely. Unlike the largely un-idirectional information flow of conventional websites, social networking sites operate through user-generated content which offers the possibility to create a discursive online public sphere.

Loader (2008) notes that interactive media provide channels for social movements to take digital content from supporters and from other sources, which can then be juxtaposed, re-contextualised and distributed. This means that the communications between a movement organisation and its supporters is two-directional, so that while the organisation can publish material offered by supporters, their supporters can do likewise. SNS are more than channels of communication for organisations to mobilise supporters because they may be fundamentally altering the interaction between the two: the collective identity of the movement might be enhanced but equally the movement may be enrolled into a plurality of self-projects, which Facebook movement users develop.

A case study of Friends of the Earth Scotland's Facebook group

Friends of the Earth Scotland (FoES) was established in 1978 and claims to be Scotland's leading environmental campaigning organisation, with over 5000 members. They have a network of supporters and active local groups across Scotland. With their inclusive approach to supporters and members, FoES is a potentially fertile 'testing' ground to assess the impact of Facebook on the relationship between the organisation and users. To gain insights into how the organisation enables members and supporters to participate in environmental activity, and how users perceive their experiences of such activities, a small-scale study was conducted to provide a snapshot into the changing nature of 'activism' and what it potentially means to be an 'activist' in SNS-mediated environmental activities.

Research methods

The study involved a qualitative investigation of 15 individuals who had joined FoES's Facebook group. The interviewees' biographical narratives were recorded, covering family environment, education and employment history, the development of their interest in environmental issues, the kinds of environmental campaigns they had participated in, their usage pattern of computers and their engagement with environmental NGOs online and offline. In order to supplement the qualitative data, FoES's Facebook site was also examined. It was first created in June 2009 and the postings from the beginning up to March 2012 were retrieved and used for retrospective analysis. This enabled us to assess how Facebook was being used by the organisation to achieve its goals and how its Facebook presence linked with its website. This virtual ethnography entailed recording and examining the content of the material generated on Facebook, an analysis of its interactive features and an assessment of the frequency, type and nature of the dialogue and actions that were generated - with permission from Friends of the Earth Scotland. The Facebook users were also informed of our presence and the reason for our study, which we posted on the site when the study began. We draw on part of this data to examine user perceptions of their relationship to environmental activism through Facebook.

Dissemination and combining platforms

It is no surprise that interactive technologies supported and accelerated traditional campaigning practices. Facebook is a means for FoES supporters to extend and accelerate the circulation of information, to mobilise resources, raise awareness, facilitate discussion, organise events and gain public attention. Facebook also helps users develop 'horizontal networks' (Castells, 1999) which can facilitate the internationalising of campaigns so that other campaigners/activists can share experiences, ideas and information. The multi-media capacity of digital technologies also helps by creating user-friendly and flexible forms of communication as, for example, an SNS-mediated video clip on Climate Change/carbon trade demonstrates:

That was really the first time I was aware of what happens in Brazil and I was quite amazed and that's the benefit of the technology; it is a great thing for educating you and giving you access to these things that I would probably never really have known about unless I had been able to get access to these things on the website, so that's why I find the

computer is a great for communication and getting to people and getting stories to people that normally would maybe never hear about them. ...
(Occupation unknown, 60s, male living in a remote place in Scotland)

The ability to reformat material using different technological platforms makes for versatile use in public education, as explained by one respondent who organised a showing of the same film in a restaurant where the group met. Moreover, SNS users were not restricting their use to a single platform, so digital information was spread across technical platforms through horizontal networks to a dispersed audience. This viral spiralling outwards through horizontal networks interconnected through different platforms begins to maximize the communicative capacity of the technology (Gillan *et al* 2008)

SNS that create networks of users are potentially new forms of collective distribution and ways of organising and educating in online and offline settings. The combining of imagery, audio and textual resources may not be particularly new to movements but the ability to disseminate these quickly is amplified by SNS. This cross-platform usage allows users to be selective about which SNS is best to use for a particular purpose. For example, some people link their Facebook to Twitter or other social media and appropriate them for specific purposes/interests. The 140 character limit on Twitter reduces the amount of information that can be posted, but the ability to link it with other SNS like Facebook or, if more depth is required by email, can provide a range of complementary platforms which can be selected by users for depth of information, discussion and interest.

Persuasive activism

Loader (2008) noted that online communication is perceived as being a weaker commitment than face-to-face interaction. When interviewees were asked to describe their identification of themselves in relation to their Facebook activity only one described themselves as an environmental 'activist'. They preferred using terms like 'evangelist', 'communicator' and 'campaigner'. This implies that they recognise a continuum of activism, but more significantly that online activity is seen as being something short of full activism, which was usually seen in terms of an embodied engagement in struggles:

My idea of an activist is someone who gets very involved at the coal face, who sits in the way of a bulldozer or who digs himself... or climbs a tree and stays up there, but I think that's a romanticised idea that I have of what I would almost have become. (40s, School teacher, male)

I mean activist to me sounds like somebody's out there, actually lying in the road somewhere stopping it being built or something! ... Which I probably might have done when I were younger and had the freedom to do so but perhaps it isn't the word I would use of myself. (Open University tutor, 50s, male)

The subtext of these comments implies a stereotypical image of 'activism' which is

associated with ‘high stakes’ participation (McAdam *et al*, 2001): an embodied militancy, such as ‘sits in the way of a bulldozer’ or ‘climbs a tree’. In the digital age this idealised construction of activism may be limited as well as limiting. SNS can potentially allow for principles and commitments to be maintained whilst at the same time side-stepping the hazards that a more embodied ‘high stakes’ activism may entail. An embodied presence can restrict people’s activist identity whilst a disembodied one opens up activist identities to a wider range of people and forms of participation.

Online action can be more conducive to a low-key approach that lends itself to a persuasive strategy of engagement rather than a confrontational one. The emphasis on the relationship between concerned, committed and persuasive rather than being hectoring or directly confrontational is emphasised by the respondent below:

I am an activist without seeming to be one. It’s a more subtle approach. I don’t want to turn people off... the word environmentalist is almost a bad word with some people; they talk about ‘all those damned environmentalists’, as though they are some sort of an enemy. That’s unfortunate, that’s because of the militant approach some environmentalists have been using and we won’t get people on our side by antagonising them, so if we are a little more low-key about it and more approachable and less lecturing, then people will listen to us and we’ll be able to influence them a lot more. (Self-employed/ blogger, former high school teacher/social worker, male in his 50s)

We might think of this form of participation as ‘sub-activism’ (see Bakardjieva 2009: 92) which is ‘a kind of politics that unfolds at the level of subjective experience and is submerged in the flow of everyday life. It is constituted by small-scale, often individual decisions and actions that have either a political or ethical frame of reference (or both) and are difficult to capture using the traditional tools with which political participation is measured.’ It refers to a range of primarily personal forms of political engagement that can include a mixture of online and offline activity.

Preaching to the converted?

Ellison and Boyd (2007, 211) claim that ‘[o]n many of the large SNSs, participants are not necessarily “networking” or looking to meet new people; instead, they are primarily communicating with people who are already a part of their extended social network’. This also applied to a number of our interviewees. For example, in relation to his membership with the Facebook group, one participant says:

I was already a member of Friends of the Earth Scotland, so it was just an extension of that and a simple way to ... as opposed to me maybe emailing friends and such like, regarding campaigns and such like, I could do it very easily on Facebook to share it with everyone. (40s, male)

The extensive and instantaneous reach to an online audience is an advantage of SNS campaigns. However, as the following respondent acknowledges, these media may also encourage a degree of insularity as well as seeming to promote digital divisions

between activists:

We are often preaching to the converted, not always easy to reach 'environmentally persuadable people' ... Also, people who are very engaged activists may not use Facebook... and as a result those people can be marginalised from campaigns. (Self-employed/ blogger, former high school teacher/social worker, male in his 50s)

Although SNS-mediated, sub-activism, may not reach a wider public as extensively as mass media such as newspaper or television, those using SNS can acquire a sense of belonging to an imagined environmental community:

ICT has certainly broadened my knowledge of environmental issues and has given me a sense of belonging to a community of activists at least in an abstract way. (Postgraduate student, 20s, male)

SNS activity becomes incorporated into users' construction of their identity, presenting a stage in a developing narrative of engagement with diverse issues. For example, an interviewee commented:

I've tried to take part in a lot of these things because I think, you won't make changes unless you actually take part in these things so I try my best but I participate in them just to see if it does help. ... before that [using computers/the Internet] I would purchase things, environmentally friendly foods and stuff like that, tried to take action in a way by donating to charities, that type. But now we're getting access to a computer, it has made a lot of things so much easier and there is the opportunity to have your voice heard by having these sites at your fingertips through the computer. (Occupation unknown, 60s, male living in rural Scotland)

Facebook is allowing users to become increasingly sophisticated in constructing an identity and acting out an online role. Association with FoES allows these users to be environmentally concerned but not militant, politically engaged but not ideologically driven, participating and active, but without bodily risk.

Is it activism?

The lowering of the barriers to active engagement can disrupt rather than facilitate activism.

I have created the group.... (we) have like five thousand and four hundred members... I have to admit, not everyone has the same commitment on the cause, I mean some people just do it because it's cool... Because it's nice, because it's like ... exhibitionism, you know! ... Suddenly you realise that the quantity is not the important thing. I mean more number of members doesn't mean necessarily a higher level of commitment or stuff like this, so sometimes ... Less useful is that SNS can distract from the serious nature of some environmental causes and

that people may feel ‘they have done their bit’ by joining a Facebook group. (Employee of Environmental SMO, Ghent, Belgium, 20s, male)

If, as argued by Gladwell (2010), online activism is low commitment activism, the growth of ‘social media activism’ may be misleading as it may merely express how individuals are constructing their own identities rather than expressing strong commitments to social movement goals. This use seems, in part at least, to reflect Gillan *et al*’s (2008) distinction between the manifest and latent function of the technology. Although the manifest function of Facebook is to join friends and to promote ‘causes’ it is its latent capacity to facilitate social action that is a critical factor for social movements. However, this amplification of the latent function can be subverted or disrupted as the following comment reveals:

It is not designed for activism stuff ... sometimes you receive a lot of information which can easily make you feel confused ... you know about you have business at the same time you have the pictures of either a whole ... environmental issues plus recipes plus games. I don’t know, you know it’s a lot of information for only one screen. So sometimes you run the risk that maybe the people get confused. (Employee of Environmental NGO, Ghent, Belgium, 20s, male)

The study of the FoES Facebook community has shown that SNS are able to provide multiple and flexible communication environments. They also enable individuals to appear to be engaged with a range of issues, but without necessarily creating the substance of traditional activist engagement. This creates the possibility that participants are enrolling environmental organisations into a plurality of personal identity constructions rather than being galvanised themselves into the projects of the organisation. The social network being formed may be open and expansive, but also be ‘ideologically thin’ (Bennett, 2004), based on using association to communicate identity, like listing one’s favourite band, rather than engagement with the underlying issues that activists normally address.

Conclusion

Facebook provides the facility to articulate a personal identity built from disparate elements and present it to the world. The preferred low-key engagement is facilitated by SNS, which enables users to take part in environmental movements to raise public awareness and potentially shape public opinion as active agents through supporting environmental organisations like FoES.

In the context of developing a culture of democracy that involves critical and self-conscious people, involved in individual and collective actions in civil society, the role of SNS seems to be particularly important. A focus on persuasion and learning is compatible with this type of activist engagement and therefore should be of interest to community educators. We should resist assuming that the low-key engagement emerging through SNS is necessarily superficial, as the intertwining of the campaigns with the supporters’ own identity may imply a high level of commitment to the issues. However, if the ‘self’ that is being shaped diminishes opportunities for focused and

concerted collective action, which involves risk, in 'real' as well as virtual terms, the culture that is being created may fail to significantly challenge vested social interests and structural inequalities of power.

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