Active Citizenship in a Digital World: Enhancing Engagement Online

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Abstract

In Sociology, a key learning outcome is to encourage students to engage with the community and to recognise their agency to influence social and political issues. Information and communication technologies (ICT) enable those people who are already interested in politics to engage more easily, and with a broader scope. Given the importance of political and social awareness to a well-rounded Sociology program, this paper asks how university educators can better utilise ICT to encourage student involvement. Using results from a questionnaire, we aim to understand how our students use technology. Our students regularly access the internet, but are not very involved with community activities. The focus of this paper is to think about how we can use ICT to encourage agency and civic engagement amongst students in Sociology. Incorporating community engagement through ICT is a low-cost way for Sociology educators to directly facilitate those skills in our students.

Keywords: Information and Communications Technologies (ICT), active citizenship, civic engagement, agency, service learning

Introduction

The internet has been available to the public for two decades, but it is still discussed largely in terms of its potential. As technology continues to advance, and access continues to grow, it is difficult to speak conclusively about the internet. The potential of the internet is discussed in academic and public discourse largely as either extremely positive or extremely negative for human sociality, community structure, and engagement. Predictions have been made that the internet is a harbinger of doom, leading to fragmentation and isolation, or that it will be the dawn of a new utopia, revolutionising and democratising community. Academics are optimistic about the potential of the internet to destabilise traditional top-down power relations, the possibilities for increasing democratisation, and the ability to network and build communities across vast geographic distances (e.g. Juris 2008; Nayar 2011). On the other hand, the internet raises serious concerns amongst some commentators about privacy and safety issues, internet addiction, and isolation and fragmentation (e.g. Nie et al. 2002). Recent political events such as the Arab Spring and the WikiLeaks saga only add fuel to a fiery debate about the possibilities offered by the web.

In reality, it seems that both sides of the argument are true, and both are also false. The internet does offer a host of possibilities for democracy and community. It also poses risks to stability and order. But in most cases, the internet does little besides enhance what occurs offline. As Brundidge and Rice (2008:146) argue, when we look at what is actually happening, the findings are underwhelming: "Any technology, and especially the internet, is shaped not only by its potentially rational uses, but also by the ways in which people actually use it". Wellman (2004:27) concurs: "technology does not determine anything: people take technology and use it (or discard it) in ways its developers never dreamed of". Hampton and Wellman (2000) argue that the internet has lived up to neither its utopic nor its dystopic potentials, but it does enhance existing social contexts.

This paper agrees with the conclusion that the internet enhances offline capacity without changing it drastically either positively or negatively, and suggests that Sociology educators can use technology to enhance community and political engagement amongst our students. In August 2011 we conducted a survey of students at James Cook University, asking about their involvement in political and community groups both online and offline, and about their use of information and communications technologies (ICT). We found that, despite the potential for the internet to increase democracy and political participation, involvement remained low amongst these students. However, we also found that several survey respondents sought to be more involved, and we argue that the internet could be more effectively utilised by universities to encourage active citizenship amongst students.

The Research Project

In August 2011, we invited students enrolled in the Faculty of Arts, Education and Social Science (FAESS) at James Cook University to complete an online questionnaire about the internet and community engagement. FAESS is committed to research which establishes a better life for people in the tropics. Strong communities, with partnerships between our students and the local area are one important means of ensuring quality of life in North Queensland. We hope to educate our students to become engaged citizens, encouraging them to bring their commitment to social justice to the communities where they live, work, and participate. We use the terms citizenship and civic engagement as key concepts throughout this paper. We are especially interested in "digital citizenship"; that is, the way civic engagement takes place in online realms. We do not distinguish between "real life" and "virtual worlds", recognising instead the substantial overlap between online and offline sociality and citizenship for many people (Petray 2011). We take a more specific definition, looking at digital citizenship as not just regular access to the internet, but also the use of the

internet as a tool for engaging in community and challenging power holders. Our usage of these terms differentiates between citizenship as awareness and citizenship as action. Citizenship and the more encompassing "civic engagement" recognise student agency – rather than passively acquiring citizenship just by using the web, they become citizens by acting on the social world, exercising rights and responsibilities, and working towards their own (personal, and diverse) notions of social justice (following Ortner's [2006] discussion of agency).

We asked about student involvement in various community activities when they were in high school, and currently. We broke "involvement" into the following categories: political, volunteer, sporting or recreation, cultural, and interest or hobby. We defined "involvement" and "community" broadly to include any online or offline communities or global networks with which students are involved. Many questions were qualitative in nature, offering students the opportunity to speak freely about why they are involved in certain groups, what they gain from it, their thoughts on social networking, and their opinions on political and/or social issues. 134 students accessed the questionnaire, which included a combination of closed and open-ended questions, allowing students to elaborate on their answers.

Student Involvement Levels

Overall, few students are currently involved in any activities (Table 1).

Table 1. Involvement levels amongst students.

|	**Percentage Involved**
Political groups	15.1%
Volunteer work	23.2%
Sport or recreation groups	20.0%
Cultural groups	8.9%
Interest groups	10.5%

More than 40% of the sample are not involved in any community activities of any kind, according to their responses to these questions. It seems that students become less active when they enrol in university, instead of becoming more engaged – which challenges the strategic intentions stated by the University. This paper is particularly interested in the political and volunteer work of students, as these are the most directly linked to the strategic goals of the university, as well as to the important notion within sociology that students be committed to social justice.

Groups and organisations identified by students as 'political' include community groups, such as Rotary, Lions, Zonta, and Amnesty International. Thus, our students are part of the shift in local civil society, and the rise in global civil society, which Castells (2008) suggests is a shift in debates which goes hand-in-hand with the rise of internet communications. Students have also included 'leadership' positions as political, such as debate team, Model UN, and leadership awards. Several students considered the religious organisations with which they are involved to be political. When reporting on their *current* political involvement, though, students listed groups and organisations which are more recognisably political: environmental and animal rights groups, unions, and political parties such as Labor, the Queensland Party, and the Young Liberals. Students reporting on their current involvement also included several online social movements, like GetUp!, Collective Shout, and Care2. Volunteer activities include active participation in structured groups, like the State Emergency Services, RSPCA, and schools and church organisations. Students also reported involvement in fundraising activities for groups like CanTeen and the Leukemia Foundation. Several students are also active in unstructured activities, such as "cleaning house for a couple of elderly ladies who cant do it themselves". Even those students who are not involved in community activities, though, indicated in qualitative responses that they are aware of current events, social and political issues. If our students are so politically aware,

though, why are they not more involved? And what can we do to encourage active engagement with these issues, rather than simple awareness?

Students were asked about their level of involvement with various ICT, including email, Facebook, Myspace, Twitter, blogs, instant messengers, community sites, games, and other (Figure 1). This chart shows the percentage of students who use each platform either occasionally or often. "Other" responses included mobile phones/texting, Tumblr, MyVoice, Modlife, educational platforms, and Google+. This chart compares the use of different platforms between the sample as a whole (n=134), the students who identified themselves as currently politically active (n=19), and the students who are involved in volunteer activity (n=29).

Figure 1. Usage of different online platforms
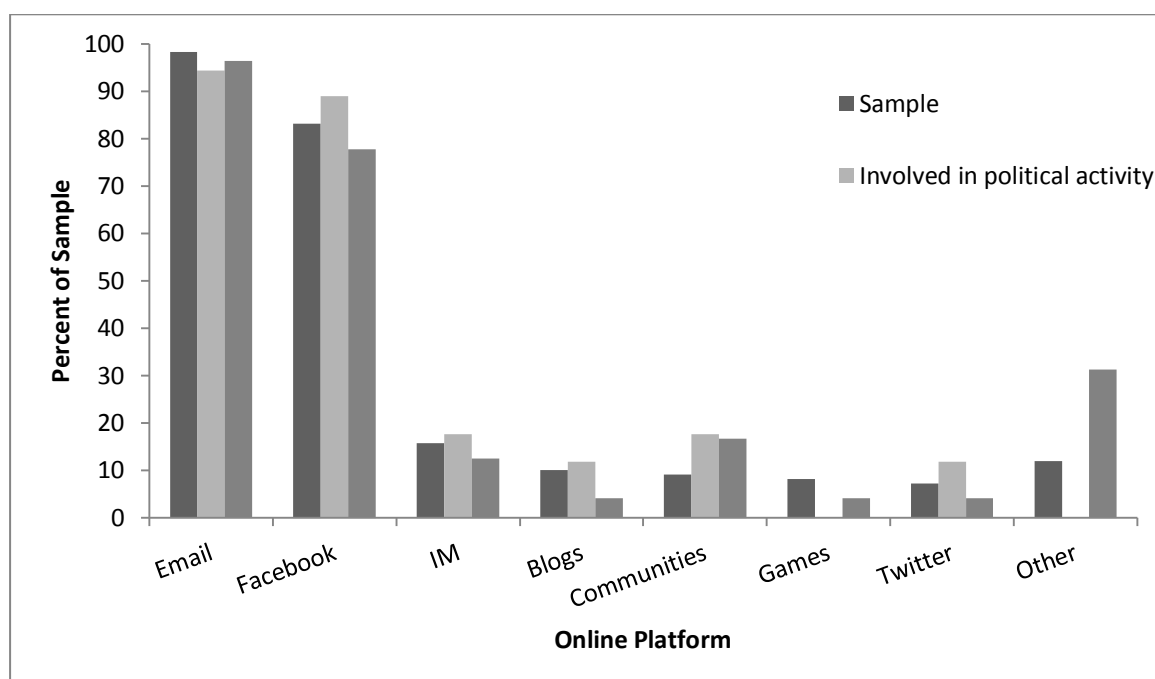
A follow-up question asked about the purpose of internet use. We asked whether social networking is purely about socialising, or whether students utilise these platforms for discussing or organising around political and social issues. Figure 2 compares the purpose of internet use between the sample as a whole (n=122), the students who identified themselves

as currently politically active (n=19), and the students who are involved in volunteer activities (n=29). In this question, there were substantial differences between students who are currently involved in the community and those who are not. Students who identify themselves as currently politically active are three times as likely as their non-political counterparts to use the internet to discuss political issues. This supports the argument that the internet enhances but does not encourage citizenship, channelling motivation that students already possess (Shirky 2008:17).

Figure 2. Purpose of Internet use
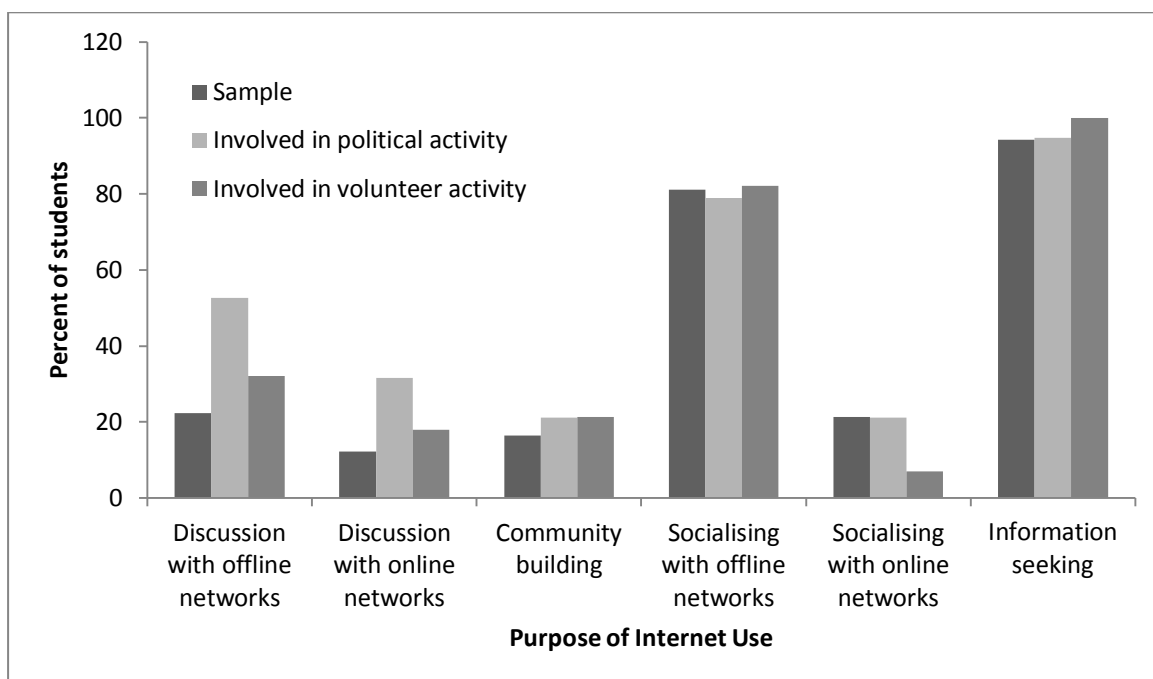
Encouraging Engagement through Teaching

Hironimus-Wendt and Wallace (2009) argue that a sociological education should include the teaching of social responsibility. We concur, and extend that mandate to disciplines beyond just sociology; we agree in particular with their assertion that this teaching is best made deliberate, rather than left to the 'informal curriculum'. The results from our questionnaire show that the majority of students are interested in political and social issues, despite their lack of involvement. Therefore, we should not think of them as apathetic, or

lacking "interest or concern regarding the wellbeing of the society" (Johnson 2005:45). Johnson (2005) suggests that civic education is one way to encourage engagement among students. Active citizenship is made up of empathy for others in the community in conjunction with a sense of responsibility to others (Hironimus-Wendt & Wallace 2009:78). It seems that in our research, students are aware of issues and have empathy for others but lack the motivation necessary to turn attitudes into action. However, this does not appear to be the result of cynicism, as no students indicated that the problems of the world are too large or intractable. While there may be latent cynicism amongst these students, the ability to overcome the motivation gap seems promising.

Despite the well-grounded arguments for activities such as service-learning, Hironimus-Wendt and Wallace (2009) point out that these teaching techniques are the exception, rather than the rule. They are time-consuming for students and staff alike, and they require significant contributions from often over-burdened community organisations (Lewis 2004; Hironimus-Wendt and Wallace 2009). How, then, should we proceed? We argue that the benefits of ICT are promising in this arena. Community engagement online can be quick, inexpensive, and happen in the students' own timeframes. Almost all of our students regularly use email and Facebook, and likewise most are well-versed in using the internet to search for information. They have regular access to the internet (at least once a week, or more often) using a variety of devices. Thus, encouraging engagement in an online environment would not be too foreign or challenging for most of our students. Using the internet to facilitate social engagement is more than simply convenient, however. ICT also have the capacity to encourage our students to think about the global, as well as the local, and more importantly, to think about the connections between the two (Wellman 2004).

Carafano (2009:9-10) offers the following suggestions for the integration of new technology: it should be well established, should seem simple to use and understand, and

should benefit the user in some way. Using ICT that are well established and familiar to students suggests the highest chances of success. Online networks around activism, such as GetUp! in Australia, but also smaller, single-issue focused discussion forum sites, have the potential to embed students in a politically engaged mindset. Then, when these activist networks move between online and offline, students may be more likely to become involved in the physical, as well as virtual, community. This is especially promising as we should avoid encouraging "push button activism" in our students, in which they indicate support for a movement with no real engagement in activities (Petray 2011). Another option is for educators to identify active Facebook groups in the local area which are involved in both online and offline campaigns. As almost all of our students are already on Facebook, they are more likely to integrate this into their lives rather than simply viewing it as a piece of assessment.

Both authors have begun engaging in this integration of ICT in an effort to encourage community involvement and awareness amongst students. Simple steps such as creating Facebook groups for students enrolled in a sociology subject allows for the proliferation of a learning community outside of the classroom, which takes place in each student's preferred time and place. Many feel that the vibrancy of on-campus culture has suffered in recent years, perhaps as a result of Voluntary Student Unionism fees, but also because of increasing numbers of students with off-campus obligations to work and family. Online learning communities do not suffer the same fate, and allow for students to make crucial links between subject materials and current events, their own lives, and the communities around them. These groups also become spaces for students to advertise their own events to classmates, thus creating the potential for more linkages between students and the community.

Further, we are currently undertaking several forms of research to further this line of thinking. First, we have run an online focus group of students to delve deeper into issues of

community and involvement. Students have indicated that degree- and subject-specific Facebook groups have been highly beneficial to their identity as a JCU community member. Second, we are working to embed community engagement into various forms of assessment. Assessable items indicate importance of content to our students, so if we are serious about ensuring civic engagement our subjects should reflect this. However, good sociology requires students to critically reflect on their experiences, so rather than being assessed directly on their activities, we are assessing their ability to critique power relations and agency within their experiences. Butin (2006) presents a framework for service learning which focuses on praxis, ensuring that students reflect on their own knowledge, their skills as a learner, their identity as active citizens, and their capacity to act as agents of social change. Johnson (2005: 53) suggests that students' actions must be sociologically informed and linked to structural solutions. Lewis (2004) argues for the importance of moving from concepts like "charity" towards "collaboration" and "social justice"; that is, to focus on learning through service, rather than service as an end in itself. It is especially important to ensure that students are critically engaging with the involvement, rather than simply going through the motions. A risk of political engagement with the "other" is an uncritical acceptance of ideas and activities, rather than in-depth involvement based on solidarity (Petray 2010). This will also help to maximise the benefits of curriculum-based community engagement for those individuals and groups our students engage *with* (Lawler 2011). These experiments are currently ongoing and we look forward to sharing the results as they become available.

Conclusion

This research has shown that, apart from a few vocal exceptions, students are interested in technology and in some cases have begun to incorporate their online and offline civic engagement. This is in its earliest stages, though, and must be nurtured and made

explicit by Sociology educators to ensure that students who come through our programs are made aware of the importance of active citizenship, and the possibilities for digital citizenship. As our findings demonstrate, students are socially and politically aware, and they are interested in the idea of civic engagement, but few of them follow through. This is despite very specific strategic statements made by the University and the Faculty that our students should be engaged with community, should work for social justice, and should enhance the communities in which they live. To effectively embed digital citizenship into Sociology programs, we should encourage students to take the lead, directing their engagement in issues which interest them, using methods with which they are comfortable. This will encourage students to reflect on their own agency, thus making it more likely that they will continue to be active citizens outside of their degree.

It is important to keep in mind that the internet is merely a platform, with no agency of its own: "Social tools don't create collective action – they merely remove the obstacles to it" (Shirky 2008:159). However, this removal of obstacles is potentially very useful to Sociology educators who seek to embed political engagement into the lives of our students. By utilising low-cost platforms with which our students are comfortable, we can encourage them to use these tools in different ways. In this way, Sociology educators can encourage meaningful praxis which makes students aware of their own agency.

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