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The Influence of Online Social Networks and Web 2.0 Applications on the Political Environment

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Abstract

This paper outlines the impact of the internet applications of second generation (Web 2.0) on the political environment. After a brief examination of the peculiar features of the most known and widely used applications, such as Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, Wiki and Weblogs, follows a discussion on some of the roles that these online tools can play in the political field. Social network sites can have a mobilization effect on the voters, can influence the political debate and can be used as an effective propaganda tool during elections campaign.
The paper examines, finally, the impact that web 2.0 applications have had on politics in two countries: The United States of America and Australia.

KeyWords

Web 2.0, Social Networks, Politics, Elections

Introduction

Political parties candidates and activists have used Internet as a playing field to attract the attention of the voters since at least the last decade of the last century. The passage from the first generation of web applications ("static" and not interactive web sites and the electronic mail) to the so called Web 2.0, with the advent and popularization of online social networking, has increased exponentially this interest. Internet, in the process has become a rich political environment. During the 2008 US election, many political commentators (Jordan 2008, for example) noted that Facebook, Youtube, Twitter and the blogosphere made a huge impact on the way candidates approach voters, changing irreversibly the dynamics of an election campaign.

Web 2.0 applications are all characterized by one common trait: they operate as a platform for social participation and interaction (O'Reilly 2005). Users are encouraged to create and broaden online social networks, to share their experiences and points of view, and to access those of other users. This of course has facilitated the employment of Web 2.0 for political purposes. Another important characteristic is the extreme ease of use of these Web 2.0 applications, which allow its use by users with even limited technical knowledge.

Web 2.0 political users are at least till now, predominantly college educated and socio-economically affluent. This situation, though, is rapidly changing, as online access becomes more affordable and widespread. According to Smith and Rainie (2008), the ratio of American adults accessing internet to look for news increased in four years from 32% to 40%, and the ratio of these internet users with an income of less than $30,000 grew from 18% to 22%. This rapid change in demographics is likely to make social networking web sites more and more attractive for politicians. This paper will examine the peculiarities of the online social networking applications, their various possible roles in the political environment, and their presence during recent election campaigns in two countries.

Peculiarities of the Online Social Network Applications

Weblogs

A weblog (Drezner and Farrell 2007) is a web page, usually run by just one person or by a small number of people, where the author/s publishes online his/her opinions, or brings to attention facts and information available elsewhere on the net.

Usually the structure of a blog is predetermined by the fact that most of the users employ online blog platforms. A typical blogger publishes posts with variable frequency, often indicating links to other sites or appending videos. There is also a section, named "blogroll", containing links to other blogs or other recommended websites.

McKenna and Pole (2008) have researched the *modus operandi* of the average political bloggers, to ascertain which type of activities they are more inclined to perform while blogging. They discovered that their main activity is to inform their readers about political issues, by providing links to or reproducing newspaper articles, posts on other blogs or even information provided by political parties or candidates. In doing so, they act as a sort of news and information synthesizers, giving their readers an outline of what they ought to know about the political situation. The great majority of bloggers (over 80%) acts also as media watchdog, signaling instances of perceived bias or omissions by the traditional media on political issues. Bloggers are also political motivators, encouraging their readers to vote and to take part at political activities, even if this encouragement is not always aimed towards the support at a particular political persuasion. According to the authors, finally, bloggers rarely engage in charitable activities, such as fundraising to a relief effort.

An important feature regarding weblogs is the bloggers' ability to intervene promptly offering their point of view on the political issues as soon as they arise, and often contributing to bring new issues to the attention of the mainstream media and the politicians. Farrell and Drezner (2007) analysed in detail this aspect – called by the "first-move advantage" and the way the so called "blogosphere" influences politics.

Journalists often find useful to have available on internet a source of information which can give them a reliable picture of the political situation, or a tip-off on the next "issue of the day" likely to dominate the political comments and the first pages of the newspapers. That is the reason why bloggers can be very influential in dictating the direction of the political debate. Dautrich and Barnes (2005) have confirmed empirically this influence. Their survey on a representative sample of media operators reveals that 83% of them used blogs as a means of gather information or in their private time, and one third of them considered the weblogs as a source of news. It must be noted that this survey was made in 2005, before the US midterm elections where the Web 2.0 media became for the first time a significant media player during the campaign.

It must be noted that despite the large number of political blogs born in the last few years, only a few of them have a considerable amount of followers and can exert some political influence (Farrell and Drezner 2007). The blogosphere is a networked phenomenon based on a referential mechanism based on hyperlinks. The new - and therefore less known - bloggers usually link their blog to existing well known blogs, through their blogroll or through hyperlinks within posts. This mechanism has the effect to consolidate even more the advantage in terms of followers and influence of a small number of already well established blogs. This creates a "trawl net effect", where the small bloggers feed important or interesting facts or opinions they happen to know to the bigger and more influential bloggers, who in turn become even more influential. Blogosphere, therefore, has a pyramidal structure: at the top a small number – not more than 10 – of highly popular bloggers who can count on a huge number of online contacts and are likely to influence a growing number of media and political operators. At the bottom of the pyramid, on the contrary, there are many thousands of bloggers with limited online traffic and political influence.

Facebook

Facebook (and the same applies to its direct competitor MySpace) is a social networking web site that provides its users with the possibility to create and manage their profiles, which often contain photos, personal information and lists of personal interests. These data can be viewed by usually only by "friends" – other users whose online friendship requests has been accepted or reciprocated. Facebook users can choose to join groups based on their interests or organized by school, workplace, town or political orientation. It is also possible to chat, send and receive messages and write on the "wall" (notice board) of other "friends".

Kushin and Kitchener (2009) have examined the dynamics of the online discussion within a Facebook political group. It is particularly important the fact that the group participants are not really anonymous: everyone taking part to the discussion know or can have access to the profile of each other. This creates a sense of accountability that reduces verbally violent and brazen ("flaming") behaviour. This study found also that even if political groups are usually formed by likeminded individuals, a certain grade of discussion between differing viewpoints occurred.

YouTube

YouTube is a video-sharing website which allows users to upload, view and share video clips. Users can also leave their comments on the videos they viewed. Interestingly, YouTube allows the incorporation of its video within other blogs or websites, and provides the users with the relevant HTML code. (Jordan 2008).

The political use of YouTube has grown exponentially in the last few years because of its potential to reach millions of viewers at no cost. According to the Washington Post journalist Howard Kurtz, "YouTube levels the playing field, allowing well backed and less-known candidates to reach the same audience" (cited by Jordan 2008, p. 79).

On the YouTube site thousands of political video of various kinds are uploaded: together with official videos released by political parties and candidates, there are also videos uploaded by activists, lobbyists and other political organizations that use YouTube to spread their ideas (Harp and Tremayne 2007).

Many of the not officially sanctioned videos are designed to try to throw negative light on political opponents, by publishing documentation of embarrassing or contentious episodes regarding those politicians. Often cited in this context is the "macaca incident" which led to the defeat of US Senator George Allen at the 2006 midterm elections, where a video-blogger filmed Senator Allen referring to him with a disparagingly racial remark. (Jordan 2008).

Important in the context of the political use within video-sharing web sites is the phenomenon of the so called "Viral videos", video clips which became hugely popular after being linked on blogs, on other video-sharing web sites and even on e-mails. The most known political example of a viral video is that of the so-called "Obama Girl", who published on YouTube in June 2007 a music video, "I Got a Crush...on Obama", which was accessed by over ten million viewers. (Vergani and Nasi 2009).

Wiki

A Wiki is a web site (or at least a collection of hypertextual documents) which is updated by its users and the contents of which are developed cooperatively by all those who have access to the site or the collection (Wagner 2004). The content can be modified by all users, not only adding contributions to the existing text but also modifying it or even cancelling what was written by previous contributors. Each modification is registered chronologically, so that it is always possible to restore any previous version, in case of necessity. The aim of a Wiki is to share, Exchange, store and optimize knowledge in a collaborative way.

Wikis can have various political uses. Makice (2006) describes the experience of *PoliticWiki*, an online project conducted during a six months period in which the participants were asked to elaborate cooperatively a political platform. The study showed that the bulk of the interventions on the text of the platform were made by few users. Two of them were responsible for more than two thirds of the changes. On the other hand, the majority of the participants (55,1%) intervened with only two contributions or less. This distribution is interesting because seems to replicate the situation within the blogosphere where the same pyramidal structure, at least in terms of online traffic and political influence seems, to be present.

Twitter

Twitter is a micro-blogging free web site where users can read short messages of not more than 140 characters (called "tweets") that can also be read on mobile phones. (Tumasyan et al. 2010). Twitter provides each user with a personal page which can be updated with new tweets through the site itself or via SMS or e-mail. This feature favours "real time" contributions, uploaded during the day as soon any need to communicate with others arise. The updates are shown instantly on the personal page of the user and communicated to other users who subscribed to receive them. It is also possible to restrict access to the tweets, or allow free access. Introduced in 2006, this new Web 2.0 tool has soon reached an incredible popularity, with millions of users, and many political personalities have now opened a tweeter account.

The main feature of Twitter is the limitation of 140 characters for each "tweet"; for this reason, they can convey much less informational content than "normal size" weblogs. Furthermore, a large number or tweets contains only or predominantly links to other online resources ("retweets"). Despite this, Tumasyan et al. (2010), examining more than 100.000 tweets published in Germany in the weeks before the 2009 German federal elections, found that through Twitter it is possible to conduct engage in substantial interactive discussions, and that users can reach, share and spread interesting political information, just as with the other blogs. Interestingly, it was found that during these Twitter discussions, only 4% of all the users were responsible for more than 40% of all the tweets. It seems again confirmed the existence of a pyramid-shape pattern where the bulk of the online political debate is conducted by a limited number of users, presumably those more politically motivated.

Furthermore, the authors found that a quantitative analysis of the number of tweets mentioning political parties during that electoral campaign could be a reliable tool to measure the voters' intentions and to predict the outcome of the election.

Vergeer et al. (2010) studied the use of Twitter in the Netherlands during the 2009 European elections, and found that the number of votes received by candidates "tweeting" actively is correlated with the size of their network. Moreover, the frequency of the micro-blogging activity of the candidates during the campaign seems to positively influence the number of votes received by them.

The various roles of Online Social Network Applications

Social Networks as mobilization tools

Scholars have often debated if the advent of Internet has had beneficial effects increasing the political participation and the political engagement of the internet users. According to a few authors, the Web could disengage and have a detrimental effect on the civic and political involvement of internet users, because the primary function of the online application is to provide entertainment and distraction. Others, on the contrary, assess positively the impact of Internet on political participation, facilitating political discussions and citizens' involvement in politics (Boulianne 2009).

De Zuniga et al. (2010) examine specifically the mobilization role of blogs and bloggers, and find that blogs do enhance political discussion, because the blog readers who look for political information on the web are more likely to debate political issues and to be politically active online. However, this increase in online participation does not produce a similar growth in offline political participation.

Zhang et al. (2010) conduct a similar research on the mobilization role of social networking sites, and reach comparable results. During the 2008 US Presidential campaign it was possible to detect an increase in participation in civic activities among the online social network users. This, however, did not result in a comparable increase in political participation.

According to Baumgartner and Morris (2009), the ability of the Web 2.0 applications to generate more interest on politics among Internet users – and especially among the young adults – is overstated. Their research, in fact, shows little evidence of the fact that social network sites give their users more political information, quantitatively and qualitatively, than the traditional sources of news. These findings are supported by Feezell et al (2009) in a study regarding Facebook and its potentialities of political engagement. For example, referring the political groups created by the Facebook users, the authors state: "Group members are exposed to little new or well-articulated information about the political causes around which these groups form".

Another aspect of this debate concerns the role that the Web could have as a mobilization tool by political parties, candidates and groups of activists interested to involve in their activities the greatest possible number of citizens.

Krueger (2006) explains that the traditional "offline" forms of political mobilization by the political actors, because of their inherent high costs, target usually only subjects who are most likely to respond positively, namely those who are already politically engaged, those who live in a socioeconomically advantaged environment and the civically skilled. It could be logically inferred that Internet, dramatically reducing communication costs, could widen the mobilization area. The results of Krueger's research, which regards exclusively the Web 1.0 environment, show that those who possess Internet skills are much more likely to be reached by online mobilizing opportunities. These individuals, however, are usually more socio-economically advantaged and therefore already subject to the traditional forms of mobilization. The conclusion is that Web 1.0 does little to expand political mobilization to citizen of more diverse socioeconomic conditions.

This situation is probably destined to change on a Web 2.0 environment, mainly because of the change in demographics currently occurring among internet users, with a steady inc rease in the online presence of people with reduced economical means (Smith and Rainie 2008).

Social Networks as tools for electoral campaigns

Data Mining

Social network web sites are a rich source of data and politically relevant information that can be used during an electoral campaign to try to gain votes targeting their campaign activities more efficiently (Wills and Reeves 2009). The process of extracting this information is called data mining, and can be performed by sophisticated software. These web sites can contain explicit information, disclosed by the users themselves, and also implicit information, which can be extracted from the position and relationships created by the users within these sites. Regarding, for example, a user who did not explicitly state his/her political orientation, it is possible to infer his/her inclinations by examining the explicit political information given by his/her "friends" on Facebook.

Fundaising and Coordination of Campaign Activists

During the 2008 US election cycle, Obama's success was significantly helped by the fundraising success of its campaign on Web 2.0. Similarly, campaign directors can use effectively tools such as Facebook or Twitter to galvanize and coordinate the efforts of the volunteers and activists who work within the campaign. For example, Obama's run during the primaries started with a large win in Iowa favoured by the online efforts of his followers on MySpace and Facebook (Perlmutter 2008).

The Issue of Content Control

One of the characteristics that differentiate the first generation of internet applications (web sites and electronic mail) and the Web 2.0 environment is the amount of control exercised and the grade of interaction allowed on the content displayed by the politicians in their social network sites (Williams and Gulati 2007, Howard 2005).

Allowing candidates to use freely tools such as Twitter could be dangerous, because the risk for slip-ups and gaffes is high (Vergeer et al. 2010). These considerations could hamper the diffusion of these applications among politicians, and the amount of first-hand interaction between them and the voters.

Online Social Networks affecting the relationship between politicians and voters

Jackson and Lilleker (2009) studied the influence of weblogs, and of online social networking on the relationship between Members of Parliament and their electorate.

Political theorists in the last two centuries have proposed different theories to describe the relationship between MPs and electors. According to these, the role of the parliamentarian could be that of a delegate, of a trustee, of a party agent or of a constituency representative. Recently it was suggested that the Web 2.0 environment could favour the birth of a new model of political e-representation, where the links of geographical representation are not as essential as it is today, where parliamentarians communicate directly and interactively with their constituents and where MPs represent their electorate on the basis of common interests.

According to Jackson and Lilleker, however, there is not yet evidence of any trend towards e-representation, because politicians so far do not have changed the way they relate with the voters. The Web 2.0 applications seem to be used mainly as an information "portal", and also to try to portray the MPs in a more humane way, in an effort to "connect" more deeply with their voters

Jackson (2008) analyzed specifically which kind of content was put on the weblogs of a few members of Parliament in Great Britain. This analysis suggested that only 11% of the posts uploaded could be classified as an expression of the constituency role of the parliamentarians, dealing about, for example, the cases of individual constituents or seeking views on local or national issues from their constituents. The most common role exercised by the MPs in their blogs was that of party agent, with 25% of their blogs promoting party policies and activities.

Elections and Online Social Networks: Two Examples

United States of America

2006 Elections

The 2006 midterm elections in the United States were the first where social network websites played a significant role in the campaign, especially Facebook which actively tried to became an online platform for political debate introducing a new section on its site called "Election Pulse" devoted exclusively to the elections (Gaines and Mondak 2009). Each candidate had the chance to manage a mini-site within the section containing their profile: 32% of the Senate candidates and 13% of the House of Representatives took up the offer. Williams and Gulati (2007) noted that the candidates who managed to double the number of their Facebook supporters during the campaign were able to increase of about 3% their share of votes on polling day. This datum seems to suggest that Facebook had a tangible influence on the results of the elections, allowing the candidates to spread their political message and to connect on a deeper level with the voters

The impact of the MySpace and YouTube on the campaign was examined by Gueorguieva (2008). According to the author, YouTube was used both by the candidates and by political activists with different aims: on one hand the candidates employed it to access voters through their promotional video clips. The activists used it as a weapon to try to derail the campaigns of their political opponents.

Also noted by Gueorguieva was MySpace's role in the campaign to promote voters registration, an important aspect in the USA electoral system where voting is not compulsory. YouTube was also successfully employed as a tool to recruit campaign volunteers, and to solicit fundraising pledges.

The Obama Phenomenon and the Elections 2008

According to Smith and Raine (2008) the influence of the new Web 2.0 internet activities increased significantly during the 2008 US elections: 35% of American voters watched online videos and 10% used social networking sites to take part in political discussions.

The main beneficiary of this increased influence of Facebook, MySpace and Youtube on the electoral campaign was Barack Obama – who made more than half a million "friends" on Facebook only - and the Democrats, especially among young voters (Haynes and Pitts 2009).

It must be noted, however, that because of the temporal proximity of these elections, so far there are very few studies on it on academic journals.

Australia

Macnamara (2008) examines the 2007 Australian federal elections, dubbed by the local media at the time as "the YouTube elections". While finding that this was an exaggeration, because only a limited number of candidates had a consistent presence online during their campaigns, he pointed out the emergence of a few trends in the use of SN online tools in the Australian political environment. Blogs and social networks sites were not used interactively by the politicians: the dissemination of information from the politicians to the voters was still uni-directional, just like in the offline environment, with few notable exceptions. This, however, was not true for the online presence of political interest and activist groups, which was much more interactive.

YouTube was used by all major political figures, such as the Prime Minister John Howard, his opponent Kevin Rudd and the leader of the Greens Bob Brown, and attracted a large number of reactions among the public. YouTube users posted a large number of spoofs and parodies, attacking some of these politicians and especially John Howard. Finally, Macnamara noted that the main issues discussed on SNS were somewhat different from those which dominated the discussion on the traditional media.

A previous study on Internet and Australian politics (Gibson and McAllister 2006) based on the 2004 federal elections found that candidates could improve substantially their election results by using a web site to reach the voters with information about themselves and about their campaign.

Conclusion

In conclusion, social network sites and tools such as Facebook, Twitter, YouTube and the blogosphere have played an ever increasing role in politics in the last few years. These Web 2.0 applications have been extensively used as electoral campaign tools capable to shift large amount of votes, even if it is not yet clear what is their role in mobilizing citizens and voters. There is also an open debate on the possibility that their use can permanently modify the relationship between politicians and electors. No clear answers have been given so far to all these discussions and interrogatives.

The rise of the web 2.0 is a recent phenomenon, and so is its application to politics, as some of its applications were created over the last 4-5 years. Academic research in this field, therefore, is likely to increase rapidly in the next few years. However, the studies on the relationship between Web 2.0 and the political environment which were outlined in this essay can help to shed some light on the trends which could characterise the evolution of research in this field.

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