


# The Role of Social Networking Services in eParticipation

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**Abstract.** A serious problem in eParticipation projects is citizen engagement – citizens do not necessarily become more willing to participate simply because net-services are provided for them. Most forms of eParticipation in democratic contexts are, however, dependent on citizen engagement, interaction and social networking because democratic systems favour the interests of larger groups of citizens – the more voices behind a political proposition, the greater its chances of success. In this context of challenges the study of social networking on the internet and social network theory offers valuable insights into the practices and theories of citizen engagement. Social network theory focuses on the chains of relationships that social actors communicate and act within. Some social networking services on the internet attract large numbers of users, and apparently sustain a great deal of interaction, content-generation and the development of loosely-coupled communities. They provide the forum for much discussion and interaction. In this respect social networking could contribute to solve some of the problems of engaging their users that eParticipation services often struggle with. This paper investigates the potential of Social Networking Services for the eParticipation area by defining social networking services, introducing the driving forces behind their advance, and discusses the potential use of social networking software in the eParticipation context.

**Keywords:** eParticipation, Social networking services.

## 1 Introduction

This paper focuses on social networking services (SNS) such as Facebook and MySpace in the eParticipation context. There are several reasons for SNS should be investigated and discussed. Many eParticipation projects are initiated to increase citizens' (particularly young citizens') participation in politics, but few are successful [1]. Citizens on their part also express interest in participation. They value being able to communicate opinions efficiently and having their opinions matter [2]. One reason for the failure of eParticipation projects is lack of involvement of citizens in developing and designing services [3]. SNS, in contrast, attract large numbers of users, and apparently sustain a great deal of interaction. Here users are no longer passive receivers

of predefined content. The development and design of these services are highly dependent on active participation. In this respect social networking could contribute to solve some of the problems of engaging citizens that eParticipation services often struggle with.

SNS are beginning to be used in an eParticipation context and by political stakeholders. EParticipation through SNS has not solved the democratic challenges posed by lack of participation. In order to understand the potential of SNS, it is necessary to look beyond *government-driven supplier oriented initiatives* - the major researcher focus in the existing literature [4, 5]. Here the object of study is a project or a policy which is (usually) sponsored by politicians and implemented by government institutions. Of course many other actors may be involved, such as software suppliers, researchers and citizen groups. However, government remains the driving force and normally provides the funding. Many research projects are sponsored and paid for by governments, and have to meet objectives which suit the purposes of politicians and administrators. Thus it is easy to develop the understanding (through reading this literature) that eParticipation is the responsibility of government and is also primarily enacted by government.

This understanding stands in rather sharp contrast to understandings developed through the study of related literatures. In the fields of technology innovation and technology and society, for instance, technology development and adoption is not primarily regarded as government-driven (though of course governments have a role to play). The wider interests of commerce and consumers (citizens) are also primary drivers of technology change. In modern social theory such as Castells' account of the network society [6], governments are regarded as a structure of society, where social movements made up of citizens and enabled by network technologies (such as the internet) provide the driving force for change. According to this perspective, much of the technological support associated with eParticipation (internet, blogs, virtual communities, discussion forums, wiki's, decision support, and podcasts) is developed in response to societal demand, rather than promoted by governments.

Inspection of the internet (in as far as this is possible) shows extremely widespread spontaneous political activity. Citizen blogging is a dominating form of political expression in highly developed European countries, far outstripping government-inspired political discussion forums in scope, use and dimension. SNS contribute to this trend since citizens are active participators in all aspect of developing the networks, the content as well as (in some respects) the design of the services.

A perfectly legitimate object of research study is therefore citizen-driven eParticipation. Here the focus is on citizens' demand for political expression and participation, rather than the comparatively unimaginative services which governments supply. Widely-used technologies are high-jacked as political campaigning and influence tools, as subversion instruments, and for the promotion of the alternative ideals of sub-cultures. If governments are to provide effective eParticipation services in the future, then they will probably do it at the insistence of their citizens, using the tools and technologies that citizens have decided are appropriate and effective. Thus the extremely popular SNS are an important topic for eParticipation researchers.

This paper is organised as follows. The next chapter introduces the eParticipation area. Then we briefly describe social networking before we introduce driving forces and major characteristics of SNS and discuss how these could be used in the

eParticipation area. We conclude by discussing future use of social networking software in the eParticipation area, seen from both citizens' and governments' perspectives.

## 2 eParticipation

The importance of arenas for a free democratic debate, where citizens and other stakeholders can meet and discuss political issues freely, has been emphasized by democratic theorists from Aristotle, via Rosseau [7], to Habermas [8]. Discussion concerning how communication technology could (or could not) be utilised is not new; Dewey cautioned that communication technologies could by no means replace face-to-face interaction for collective learning, education, problem solving and moral development [7] as early as 1927.

In the early days of the internet, this rather pessimistic view of ICT's value in supporting social network found support. The pessimism was, however, grounded in knowledge about traditional media like TV, radio, mail and newspapers and their inability to support social networks due to limited interaction and a high degree of central control open to abuse or manipulation by the elite [7]. Another critique argues that a genuine social and mutually engaging interaction can only take place in a face-to-face setting, because real interaction is based in a bodily presence [9].

Despite these scepticisms, the term eParticipation appears early this century, drawing on general development in computer supported cooperative work and groupware technologies, the drive towards ICT supported interaction between governments and citizens, and the general development in eGovernment towards more complex services [1]. eParticipation involves the extension and transformation of participation in societal democratic and consultative processes mediated by information and communication technologies [1], and the focus on eParticipation responds to a perceived decline in political engagement, a disconnection between citizens and their elected representatives, and a consequent decline in the legitimacy of political institutions [1].

EParticipation aims to increase the availability to participate in order to promote fair and efficient society and government support, by using the latest technology developments. Many forms of ICT with the potential to support participation are readily available (or in development). Examples include chat technologies, discussion forums, electronic voting systems, group decision support systems, and Web logs (blogs).

## 3 Social Networking in the eParticipation Area

Most forms of eParticipation in democratic contexts are dependent on social networking. This is because democratic systems favour the interests of larger groups of citizens – the more voices behind a political proposition, the greater its chances of success. Most political work involves mobilization of interests, community backing, deliberative discussion and other forms of activity enabled by social networks. An eParticipation site provides a mechanism for a network of interested parties to come together.

Though no comprehensive evaluation of eParticipation projects exists, it is clear that many initiatives are rather unsuccessful [1]. Though the technology platform appears deceptively simple and cheap to implement, many efforts fail to attract widespread interest amongst citizens or politicians, are unrepresentative [10], lead to poor information [11] or poor quality of debate [12], or are monopolised by a few vocal contributors. A serious problem with these forms of eParticipation is citizen engagement – citizens do not necessarily become more willing to participate simply because net-services are provided for them.

In this context the study of social networking on the Internet becomes interesting for eParticipation researchers. Some social networking services attract large numbers of users, and apparently sustain a great deal of interaction, content-generation and the development of loosely coupled communities. They provide the forum for much discussion and interaction – though not primarily the serious political deliberation and discourse targeted by eParticipation services. In this respect they seem to solve some of the problems of engaging their users that eParticipation services often struggle with.

### 3.1 Social Networking

Social networks and networking in different forms and shapes are not new inventions strictly related to SNS and Web 2.0. Comte, often regarded the founder of modern sociology, was among the first researchers to focus on the societal impact of social relations between individuals [13]. He did so in the first half of the 19th century, however sociologists following just after Comte, e.g. Simmel and Durkheim, are much more influential today. Simmel and Durkheim made substantial contributions to sociology by theorising about the relation between the individual and the structures of society. Among other issues Simmel focused on the interaction between individuals and the growing interdependency between individuals in modern society. According to Simmel this means that modern society to a much higher degree than the traditional society depends on honesty and trust between individuals [13]. Durkheim on his part wondered how modern societies survive when ethnicity and religion no longer are the common structures that hold a society together. His answer was that the glue is solidarity and he identifies two major kinds of solidarity: *mechanical* and *organical* solidarity. *Mechanical* solidarity is characterized by individuals that are all generalists and little division of labour, whereas *organical* solidarity is characterized by a high degree of specialization and division of labour. According to Durkheim it is the organical solidarity that holds modern societies together by increasing the interdependency between individuals [13]. Even though Simmel and Durkheim disagreed on many issues they supplement each other when it comes to understanding social networking today; by specializing and networking with others specialists we can accomplish more than we can on our own, but to hold the network together thrust and honesty between the members of the network (or society) are crucial.

After Simmel and Durkheim sociology has developed in many different directions. Over the past 50-70 years there has been an increasing interest in the role of communication and symbols in the social construction of reality when it comes to understanding relations between individuals and society in general (see for example Habermas [14], Giddens [15] and Luhmann [16]). Another important development is

the one that focus specifically on social networks. The term social network has been used systematically since 1950s to denote patterns of connections in societies. Social network theory focuses on the chains of relationships that social actors communicate and act within. These relationships can be described in terms of nodes and ties - where nodes are the individual actors within the social networks, and ties are the relationships between the actors. Social network theory differs from some traditional sociological studies which take as their starting points the attributes and actions of individual actors. Social network theory produces an alternate view, where individuals are less important than their relationships, and their ties with other individuals.

Particularly interesting for participation studies are the role of social networks in producing social capital. According to Bourdieu and Wacquant social capital is “the sum of the resources, actual or virtual, that accrue to an individual or a group by virtue of possessing a durable network of more or less institutionalized relationships of mutual acquaintance and recognition” [17,p 119]. Following this definition it is reasonable to regard social networks and SNS a driver for development of social capital. It is however still a complex process of distributing information and negotiating knowledge and opinions in the network – once again development of trust in the network is important for the network to be valuable and thus give the individual social capital. When the network holds a significant amount of social capital it has a role in the formation of public opinion. Social networks with high social capital thus influence collective action, voting choices, and other aspects of political participation. Castells [6, 13] used the concept of network to capture both social relationships and the infrastructure of the emerging internet. His thesis was that society is altered by the emergence of the internet – in which commerce, governance, work, identity, change through social movements, gender and politics are partially transformed In this sociological account, the prime characteristic of modern society is social network, which are enabled by the technological network (the Internet).

The characteristics of participation may therefore also be altered by the emergence of the internet. Trust and ability to negotiate meaning among the members of the network does however still seem to be of importance when comes to judge the strength and impact of the network.

### 3.2 Driving Forces of SNS

SNS provide ways for people to locate each other, to provide information about themselves (and various other forms of content), to interact in various ways for various (often un-specified) purposes, to overcome networking barriers such as geography, different time zones and language, and to maintain contact over time. SNS has to some degrees, altered the role of users from more or less passive consumers of static websites, to “prosumers” (both consumer and producers) of dynamic online web-platforms [14, 15]. Social network services are not only (or primarily) a technological development, but should also be understood as a social evolution. They are characterised by the principles of free access to information, self-organisation, mass collaboration, non-exclusive services, and user participation – also reflected by other movements such as open source development.

The rapid growth of SNS is driven by technical, social, economic and institutional forces. The rapid uptake of broadband technologies is a major *technological driver*,

which enable users to download, create and post online content. Earlier limitations in access restricted content creation to text and low quality graphics. Thus the uptake of broadband technologies is a prerequisite for the development and use of SNS allowing creation, uploading and downloading of larger media files. Hardware and software necessary to support SNS are widely available. Hardware such as storage devices and cameras, are getting cheaper and with improved quality. Software tools are more available, with a rapid growth in free (mainly open) software that allow users to find, edit and create media files without specialist knowledge [14].

The major *social driver* is the changed media consumption habits of Internet users, especially among young users. So far youngsters are core producers of online content [14]. These young people will soon grow up and can potentially change how the Internet is used in the education sector, professional life as well as the political sphere. Changes in cultural attitudes, like increased individualism, and in social and political values (e.g. privacy, or aspiration to more participative forms of governance) could also influence on the use of these Networking software.

*Institutional drivers* include new legal means to create and distribute content, and the rise of copyright licensing agreements to support distribution of user generated contents. Moreover, widespread distribution of online content are getting cheaper, and network effects, where the value of the service increases for every new user, are economic drivers for the development of social network services.

### 3.3 Characteristics of SNS

Social networking services can take different forms, but they share certain primary characteristics. Drawing on both analyses, theoretical and empirical, Medaglia et al [16] identify six characteristics of social networking services:

- *Digital Persona/Virtual Identity.* Social networking software facilitates the development of an on-line persona. A persona is, in this case, an image or representation of the user. The persona is controlled and developed by the user themselves (though the structure for that representation is given by the features of the software). The persona is always a projected image of the user and it may have more or less correspondence with the user's real identity (as they themselves understand it or as understood by other people). Digital identity presupposes a digital public or audience – a profile is first meaningful when experienced by another user.
- *Network Building.* The software offers tools and opportunities for building the social network(s) of the user. It facilitates searching for other users, recruiting tools for members of the user's off-line network, meeting or being introduced to other users, and grouping of users around themes and interests. Users build interlocking networks of friends, colleagues, work acquaintances, contacts with shared interests, family and so on. On-line networks can be independent, but they often overlap and interact considerably with users' off-line networks. The service is dependent upon achieving a critical mass – sufficient users to make it feasible to build up a meaningful network.
- *Network Maintenance.* The software provides features for persistence, such that the user's network can reach over time, and survive changes to their or other

users' persona. The software maintains the coupling between networked users irrespective of other changes in their real or on-line circumstances.

- *Network Interaction.* The software provides ways for users to interact, through direct communication, shared activities, games, or exchange of virtual objects. The virtual environment minimises some difficulties connected with physical interaction, such as geographical or time separation, or mobility.
- *User Generation of Virtual Content.* Not only are users responsible for controlling their own digital personas, but they have the opportunity to provide virtual content and digital objects. These can include text, pictures or video, music clips, three dimensional virtual objects, or programs or applications. This content is important both for the virtual identity of the user, but is also exchanged as a primary component of network interaction.
- *Network Self-Governance.* The network displays observable social norms, social conventions, informal codes of behaviour, and (sometimes) formal rules and regulations. Governance structures are partly enforced by the service providers, partly written into the way the software functions (what is enabled or disallowed), but primarily reproduced by the on-line communications, actions and behaviours of the network members.

#### 4 Features of Citizen-Driven Use of SNS and Further Research

The networking features of social network building tools make them good candidates for use in the eParticipation area. Societal democratic and consultative processes involve developing networks with other stakeholders, and communicating, sharing interests and entering into alliances with others. Groups like the ICT4Democracy [17] and Citizens Empowerment Symposium 08 [16] are discussing issues directly related to the eParticipation area. There are some features of citizen-driven social networking which are relevant to eParticipation and are already becoming evident:

- *Social movements facilitated by networking software.* Social networking on the net facilitates social movements and political mobilisation. It has the potential ability to enable networks and networkers beyond geographical boundaries and language limitations – the globalisation of protest [18]. Location-based services help in finding like-minded individuals, whereas other social networking tools facilitate dialogue and the co-ordination of political action. It is not known whether these developments can alter the balance of power between actors in established political systems and the various interest groups in society.
- *The hyper-complex network.* Networking on the internet may alter the structure of social networking towards large constellations of many dense networks with many nodes made up of predominantly weak ties [19]. This tendency may be extended by convergence of the technologies and the development of aggregators – software linking user-generated content for the various proprietary tools.
- *Community development.* “ICTs facilitate community participation and collective action (a) by creating large, dense networks of relatively weak social ties and (b) through the use of ICTs as an organizing tool” [19]. They do this by providing networking infrastructure, but also by supporting ‘communicative mobility’ - the

intellectual movement of people towards common understandings of a shared situation[20].

- *Viral dissemination of ideas and issues.* Large dense social networks allow the viral spreading of ideas or issues without large push investment – each networker sends them on. The many nodes and overlapping networks mean that an issue can be rapidly distributed - enabling unpredictable exponentially-exploding concentrations of ideas forcing attention from the media and action from decision-makers. Internet-enabled social networks can thus play a role in political agenda-setting.
- *Erosion of distinctions between real and virtual identity.* In principal, every social networker on the net can be identified - at least the contribution they make can be traced back to the computer it was made on. In practice social networkers can project their real life identity onto the net, or choose to be different (often protected by anonymity). Thus a conservative businessman (in real life) can be an anonymous animal rights activist practising civil disobedience (hacking) on the net. This extension of virtual identity and the eroding of boundaries between net life, virtual world life and real life raise issues for eParticipation where the evaluation of the participation is always tempered by an understanding of the participant's identity.
- *Participation in internal governance.* Social networking providers offer slim governance – usually confined to preventing overt and extreme anti-social behaviour. This means that much of the site governance is performed participatively by its members. An example is reputation management [21] –where networkers rate other networkers by the quality of their contributions or the nature of their networking ties (how many friends and who they are).
- *Extensions of commerce and government through social networking.* The principle form of networking at many networking sites is peer-to-peer network – networking between like-minded individuals. However individuals can also stand as representatives for the organisations they work for. Businesses, communities and interest groups are heavily represented in many forms of internet social networking. The virtual governmental presence is slower to emerge, but is clearly on the way. All social networking sites can potentially be used for networking between government institutions and businesses, interest groups and citizens.

#### **4.1 Further Research Directions – SNS and eParticipation**

Comparison of the existing research literature on citizen-driven SNS and eParticipation themes allows us to formulate some further research directions.

- *Cross cultural and national variations in using SNS for eParticipation.* The democratic context influence the use and influence of eParticipation projects [22]. The opportunity to add user-generated content and enforce some self-governance allow to adaptation of SNS to various eParticipation context. Research is needed to further understand how to adapt SNS to fit various purposes and democratic contexts.
- *The emergence of trans-national activism.* eParticipation strategies are mainly developed nationally, often focusing on a local municipality level [1].



Citizen-driven eParticipation projects, based on the use of SNS, are often focusing on specific issues or interests, independently of borderlines or government structures. More research is needed to explore how these citizen-oriented services, independent on traditional way of organizing politics and government, could be designed and managed to attract stakeholders and gain democratic influence.

- *Digital divide in the use of SNS for eParticipation.* Current growths in the use of SNS for eParticipation purposes increase the importance of conducting research on digital divide issues. SNS are by nature ICT-based, without any obvious off-line counterparts, excluding the non-Internet users. On the other hand, more and more participators are attracted by SNS, expanding the potential to attract citizens by SNS-based eParticipation services. Research is needed to increase our knowledge on how to tackle the digital divide issues.
- *Social roles and interactions in internet-mediated eParticipation.* SNS are developed mainly to support activities initiated by members and networks. The software act as supplier of terms, by the restrictions made, whereas the networks define social roles and interactions. Government initiated eParticipation services are often grounded on an idea of control and moderation from the government itself, quite contradictory to the SNS' premises. Research is needed to explore the (potential) contradiction between the nature of SNS and the nature of government-initiated eParticipation services.

## 5 Conclusion

In this paper we introduced two forms of eParticipation – that driven primarily by governments and that driven primarily by citizens. We explored the close relationship between eParticipation and social networking, and described the emergence of modern internet-based social networking services which are used for various kinds of participation. Though already widely used by citizens for political participation, these tools have yet to be adopted by governments. We are therefore able to suggest both future research directions for the eParticipation research area related to SNS, and some SNS features governments can use to foster eParticipation amongst their citizens.

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