

DIGITAL ENGAGEMENT: BLOGGING, CHATTING & TWEETING

As defined by the Oxford Dictionary, the word civic relates to ‘the duties or activities of people in relation to their town, city or local area’. Engagement, is simply defined by the same dictionary as the action of being engaged. However, together, the two words defined above, mean much more than just an action, they imply active participation. “Civic engagement is often defined precisely as forms of voluntary activity aimed toward solving problems in the community and helping others”. Civic engagement is a concept that is nowadays of very high interest to the media in particular, as there are apparently declining levels of participation, as well as low electoral turnout and public weariness. However, “the debate on citizenship is replete of discourses that exhort young people to adapt the dutiful practices of participation that correspond to the regulatory norms established by earlier generations.” Civic engagement is defined by UNICEF as: “individual or collective actions in which people participate to improve the well-being of communities or society in general”. This has traditionally taken the form of actions such as voting, attending community meetings or functions, contacting public officials, attending protests, signing petitions, or writing articles about one’s community.

The media have noticed, however, a disengagement from the traditional channels of political and civic participation. Many years ago, when people were unhappy with their governments, or were simply upset with the political situation in their own countries, they used to be part of parties, sign petitions, take to the streets, march or do sit-ins to express their disapproval. People would organize these manifestations using landlines, word of mouth, or through the news. The efforts were impressive. Maybe one of the best examples for such manifestations is the Civil Rights Movement in the US in the 1960’s.

Nevertheless, nowadays the dynamics of speaking out have changed drastically mainly due to technological advances. If the Civil Rights Movement is a defining demonstration for the 20th century, the 21st century is so far best known for movements such as the Arab Spring or Occupy Wall Street. What is special about the former two is their origin and support, as they have prompted “a flurry of online support from ideological sympathizers to keep the movement going”. The two movements were organized mainly online having “a horizontal, autonomous, leaderless, modified- consensus-based system with roots in anarchist thought”. Digital civic engagement is by definition a collective action through online platforms, drawing on communities acting up together for a greater cause. As Ekman and Amna see it, “such engagement comes in the form of collaboration or joint action, particularly through digital space to improve conditions in the civic sphere.”

The Web 2.0 has represented a new participatory space, influential in “characterizing a changing set of expectations about the relationship between ordinary users and the Internet”. Besides, it is a familiar setting where people start making moral judgements regarding the world nowadays. Web 2.0 describes the current state of the internet, which has more user-generated content and usability for end-users compared to its earlier incarnation, Web 1.0. In general, Web 2.0 refers to the 21st-century Internet applications that have transformed the digital era in the aftermath of the dotcom bubble. Overall, as stated before, the Web 2.0 is the own public sphere of the young, facilitating online politics. The Internet of Things, simply known as IoT, the inter-networking of different devices able to collect and exchange data, is based on machine-to-machine communication and is overall a very disruptive trend, constantly

evolving. The cyberspace has become a part of people's everyday lives, providing a framework for broad social participation. As expected, the internet has also started to be a great influence in terms of politics as it "has become indispensable for the growth of advocacy and issue politics, social movements and activist networks outside parliamentary party politics". Social media, in particular, is an essential tool to mobilize reactions and to develop citizens' knowledge of political issues, thus facilitating their participation in the civic and political life. While it is noticeable that there is chemistry between the online social movements and the offline ones it is difficult to establish a relationship of causality between the two: the metadata demonstrate a positive relationship between social media and participation in civic and political life.

Blogging

The blog (a contraction of web log/weblog) is a form of online publishing, communication, and expression that has gained significant popularity since its emergence in the late 1990s. Princeton's Word Net database defines a blog as "a shared on-line journal where people can post diary entries about their personal experiences and hobbies (; ...) postings on a blog are usually in chronological order", and describes blogging as "reading, writing, or editing a shared online journal".

Blogs are used to publish a wide array of content: In addition to textual blogs, blogs are also used to share photos, audio clips, and video clips. Although some degree of openness and sharing is usually associated with blogging, blogs with access restrictions exist in corporate and organizational spaces and where individuals wish for their blog to remain private. Blogging is a global phenomenon, reaching across languages, communities, and organizational contexts. Definitions of what constitutes a blog from scholars in different disciplines highlight different aspects of blogs, such as genre antecedence, structure and content, communicative function, rhetorical practice, and practitioner perspective, or they attempt to establish theoretical frameworks which integrate several of these facets. The divergent and at the same time overlapping scholarly approaches to blogs as text, discourse, social action, and cultural practice reflect both the perspectives of a range of academic disciplines and the shifting interpretation of the blog format by practitioners and non-practitioners.

Simultaneously, there appears to be a gradual move away from definitions that tie blogs exclusively to a specific style or content closely resembling antecedent practices, such as diary-writing and journalism, to definitions that are more open and recognize what Boyd refers to as "the efficacy of the practice". As blogs come of age and merge with even newer forms of CMC such as status updates on social networking sites like Facebook and microblogging services such as Twitter, they are increasingly defined in terms of themselves and without reference to pre-cursors.

The origins of blogs can be traced to the practice of link sharing on the early World Wide Web. Earlier, a blog was based on the presence of dated entries containing links, commentary, and thoughts on a personal website: The original weblogs were link-driven sites. Each was a mixture in unique proportions of links, commentary, and personal thoughts and essays. Weblogs could only be created by people who already knew how to make a website. A variety of media contents (photos, music, video clips, etc.) can easily be embedded in blog entries or other hypertext-based services, while at the same time portals and multimedia

applications integrate blog-like functions. What remains unchanged is that blogs structure digital content sequentially and that they are more frequently maintained by individuals than institutions or companies. Definitions based on the structural characteristics of blogs are popular among researchers; for example, blogs are described as “frequently updated web pages with a series of archived posts, typically in reverse-chronological order” and “modified web pages in which dated entries are listed in reverse chronological sequence”. This approach to definition can be interpreted in light of the extreme topical, functional, and participatory variance of blogs, i.e., the fact that subject matter, purpose, and community are highly variable from one blog to another and, internally, from a single post to the next. Blogs share characteristics with genres that are author-centric in terms of mode and sequential in terms of text organization, such as the diary and the personal letter, and these common characteristics are sometimes suggested to have been inherited by the blog in a genealogical sense.

Chatting

‘Chat’ has two connotations, out of which the one referring to the Internet exchange of messages seems to overshadow the traditional meaning. The term ‘chat’ in a lexical sense means a friendly conversation, the situation in which people sharing time and place talk in a friendly way. The same term has been adopted to refer to conversation via computer. Chatting is simply a digital technology to participate with one or more people, through the internet, in a real-time conversation, typically as a series of short text exchanges in a specific application, as instant messaging, or by using images, voice, video, or some combination of these. Either way ‘talk’ in real time is the case. However, despite different spatial characteristics the two senses of ‘chat’ can be paralleled. The parallel is, however, only relative since computer-mediated chat displays far more diversity than the traditional one, whether with regard for purpose-related, situational, or linguistic determinants.

Purpose-related determinants are reified in two realizations of chat, private and public, that provide space for respectively person-to-person and multi-participant interaction. In the former, the exchange of messages typically occurs in real time, and is under the control and sole observance of two participants. In a situation of the kind (termed as ‘query’), confidentiality is at the heart of interaction, thus the third party, an active or passive participant, is denied access (unless the interactant lets the third party watch the screen).

The latter can be tagged as a chatgroup or chatroom communication; i.e. “... continuous discussions on a particular topic, organized in ‘rooms’ at particular Internet sites, in which computer users interested in the topic can participate.” As it can be derived from the tag, such a situation allows for a multi-participant interaction that, conventionally, has the form of a discussion, which is why the number of participants is not limited. They join in and quit the ongoing debates at their convenience. What draws them together is the shared interest and willingness to articulate their views or needs, whether in real time or within a particular time span. The anecdotal evidence is that visitors to chatrooms hold the floor on a single topic, and in the discussion directly address the topic rather than an individual; in one-to-one chat, the reverse is common for the most part. The computer-mediated chat, in terms of situational determinants of a communicative situation, offers the possibilities that chat in a traditional sense cannot.

Tweeting

Twitter is a widely used free social networking tool that allows people to share information, in a real-time news feed through posting brief comments about their experiences and thoughts. Public messages sent and received via Twitter — or ‘tweets’ — are limited to no more than 140 characters and can include links to blogs, web pages, images, videos and all other material online. Despite the brevity imposed by this media tool, Twitter use is extensively used in a wide variety of circumstances and, according to Mollett, ‘thousands of academics and researchers at all levels of experience and across all disciplines already use Twitter daily’. After setting up a twitter account (www.twitter.com), users establish a profile and a Twitter ‘name’ — for instance, @OTprofile — and can then send and receive tweets, accessed through any computer or mobile networked device. Once a tweet is sent, it appears in the user’s Twitter ‘feed’ and in the feed of anyone who is following them. Searching can also be used to find relevant tweets. This can be by keywords, often identified by user-defined hashtags, identified by an initial ‘#’ symbol (for example #occupation or #journal). Hashtags help to locate particular areas of discussion. As a communication tool, Twitter allows the free exchange of ideas nationally and globally, between people interested in similar areas of expertise, as well as providing the opportunity to engage in critical debate.

Terms and Definitions in Twitter

Term	Definition
Follow	Following another user means that all their tweets will appear in your feed. Click on their user name (also known as a ‘handle’), and their profile will appear with a prominent Follow button beside it. Just click on this to ‘follow’.
Who to follow list	This is a list of Twitter’s suggestions of people or organisations that you might want to follow, based on points of similarity with your profile. Scroll down the list and click the Follow button next to anyone you want to.
Unfollow	To stop seeing someone else’s tweets, go to your following list and find the person you want to stop following and hover the cursor over the Following button until it is replaced by the Unfollow button, then click.
Block	From time to time a spammer or other unsavoury character may appear in your Followers list. Click the icon next to the unwanted follower’s name so that the ‘Block [their name]’ option appears — click this and they will be removed from your Followers list. For any form of spammer or malware user it is a good idea to click also ‘Report [their name] for spam’ so as to limit their capacity to annoy others. You should look at and ‘weed’ your Followers list regularly. Twitter shows the new followers at the top of the list.
Retweet of RT	To share somebody else’s tweet that you have seen in your feed, hover above it and select retweet. It then goes to all your followers, with a small arrow icon, which shows others that this wasn’t originally your tweet.
Reply	To respond to somebody else’s tweet, hover over it and select the Reply option, which will then appear in their Interactions section or ‘tab’.
@	Used in tweets when you want to mention another user. Also the first part of every twitter user name — for example @BAOTCOT.
Mentions	Check your Mentions area or ‘tab’ to see when others mention you in a tweet by your username. If you mention others, this will appear in their Mention tab. Hashtag – used to categorise tweets. Popular topics are referred to as trending topics and are sometimes accompanied by hashtags, such as #london2012, #OTuesday or #Ochat. Click on any tweet categorised with # for a list of

	related tweets from many different users. Including already popular hashtags in your tweet may attract more attention to it. Hashtags are also used as part of 'back channel' communication around an event, be it a conference, a TV programme or a global event. An event audience can share comments, questions and links with each other while continuing to follow the formal presentation.
Direct Message or DM	These are private messages that you can send to other Twitter users. To send a or receive a DM click the envelope icon on your profile page. DMs can only be sent between using who are following each other.
Shortened URLs	Given that a typical web address is rather long and clumsy, free URL shortening sites such as bitly.com and tinyurl.com provide links which you can paste into tweets. Copy the web address of the page that you wish to share, paste it into the box on either site, and you will be given a short link which will redirect anybody who clicks on it back to the original page you want to share.
Twitter Space	Twitter Spaces is where live audio conversations happen. These ephemeral, live audio conversations allow for open, authentic, and unfiltered discussions, and there's a Space for any and every topic and conversation, from small and intimate to millions of listeners.

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