Communication challenges in an increasingly digitized public space

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Abstract: Discourse on new media in the context of public space necessitates a reevaluation of the system of beliefs as the condition of shared knowledge changes. The introduction of personal computers could be equated with democratization as it became almost ubiquitous and employed in various tasks – business, professional and personal purposes. The nature of information replication and redistribution or sharing is another factor, which is also logically consistent with citizens' participation in public affairs. Transparency and accountability would therefore be expected as consequences of such emerging technologies. It is the purpose then of the study to identify possible digital spaces which have a high potential in becoming a public sphere as defined by Habermas and other thinkers who pioneered in mapping technological trends and its impact on the political culture or how governance is practiced by the members of a given community. The study may be relevant to development sectors, good governance advocates as well as the academic and scientific communities. The study could be relevant to communicators as it may serve as guidepost in the understanding of new ideas and recent scientific trends which are directly related to information flow and sharing in both the theoretical and practical aspects of the dynamic field of communication studies. Three online communities – government managed, an advocacy site, and news and features site were evaluated..
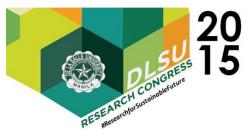
1. INTRODUCTION

Principles such as equality, freedom and civil liberties, and meaningful participation in the affairs of the state are essentially manifested in the quality of interactions between stakeholders, which transpire along the course of public governance in a democracy. Such democratic processes were theorized by Habermas as a public sphere wherein such processes could be enabled and sustained through the conscious, informed and active engagement of citizens in public affairs and matters of the state.

Habermas warned of the narrowing of the public sphere as major democratic instruments such as the mass media failed in its catalytic function to encourage public debates and participation on issues and concerns about the commons. It was also observed that government, corporations and even individuals with interest in having public recognition

and name recall such as entertainers and political personalities; follow the same pattern along the same logic, that of cooptation (Boeder, 2005).

Will the new media follow such a pattern or it will it live up to the expectation that its wide use will give rise to digital public spaces along the Habermas model of a public sphere?

Habermas recognized that reason and communication go together in the evolution of mature democracies (Boeder, 2005). Considering that the new media could be taken as a high technology communication designed to encourage people to participate in social Web activities and with some popular sites essentially user driven, the prerequisite of dialogue or information looping between individuals and groups could easily be satisfied.

Such interactivity manifested in the social networks opens the possibility that the Web could indeed serve as a public space for meaningful dialogues about the affairs and concerns of the state and governance.

1.1 The digital public space and the movement of information

The easy movement of information across the new media greatly enables people to process vast amounts of information to satisfy an informed decision making process involved in concerns such as resolving issues and addressing public concerns.

Technology impacts on such movements not only on the manner of how information is packaged and delivered to its intended receiver but also affects how such information shapes how people – individuals, groups and communities perceive the world and consequently act based on such information. The Internet and user-driven social networks and file sharing sites enabled by the Web, spawned its sets of jargon such as connectivity, access, meme, viral, contagion, etc among others to describe the manner of movement of information.

Furthermore, the Internet technology system necessitated a protocol for it to function as intended by its developers, Vint Cerf and Bob Khan as embedded in the 1974 Internet Protocol. This protocol ensures the sanctity of packets of information as it moves from one point to the next until it reaches its intended destination.

1.2 Objectives and significance of the study

It is the purpose then of the study to identify possible digital spaces which have a high potential of becoming a public sphere and to evaluate and identify the new media technology trends which could sustain such a digital public space.

Among others, the specific objectives of the study include: a) Identifying possible action points or hot zones or impact areas or aspects of the political culture which may be influenced by a digital public space; b) Identifying possible indications of cooptation raised by Habermas on his critique of the mass media; and c) Contributing to the growing volume of studies about the new media and the challenges it poses.

1.3 Scope and limitation of the study

The study covers the broad domain of the new media and its applications but is limited to the digital public sphere modeled on the basic concept of a public sphere as area of research interest.

2. METHODOLOGY

2.1 Conceptual Framework

Aspects of the public sphere and basic principles of cybernetics were combined in a conceptual model depicting the dynamic social-digital-information flow interplay at work at a digital space. Communication in the forms of dialogues, debates and discussions are critical in the quality functioning of democratic processes. Communication, how it transpires and is mediated by technology are logical domains of cybernetics.

Loops, interactivity, information sharing and common knowledge pool could serve as analogues of dialogues, participation, information access and cultural knowledge which are critical notions to Habermas' construction of the public sphere.

Giffin (2000) states that the cybernetic tradition looks at the overall workings of communication as a system, which is defined as "a system of parts, or variables, that influence one another, shape and control the character of the overall system."

This study treats the movement or flow of information (data) to be as important as the associated meaning construed at any point in the network or information loop. Tracing the movement of information or how it is shared across different groups of people is relevant in this study.

From data movement, patterns of relationships and interactions as people respond to the information they access could be evaluated.

Information acquisition, opinion formation, political dimension, and collective action were used as indicators to find out the prospects and challenges of new media acting as a public sphere.

2.2 Instrument

The case study is the major research instrument choice supplemented by basic charting techniques such as flowcharting to track information movements relevant to the study.

2.3 Generation and sources of data

Documents and public postings and basic statistics provided in the site studied were the main source of data evaluated.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Three types of online communities including a government managed site, an online news and information outfit and an advocacy community hosted by Facebook were evaluated to see whether any of them show indicators of functioning as a public space along the Habermas model. The sites reviewed were chosen based on listing of Philippine Web Accessibility Group (http://pwag.org/2013/01/dost-tops-philippine-government-website/), a group that evaluates government and nongovernment websites for accessibility and popularity.

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3.1 Presence of active loops and interactivity

Loops and interactivity suggest a dialogue albeit indirect have been in place. Such a link of different people who formed such links inferred a rudimentary consensus building based on the common interests which drive people to enter such loops. Such loops may be temporary in nature as in cases of extreme weather disturbances as evidenced by spontaneous outpouring of support to Leyte residents in 2013 when Haiyan ravaged the Visayas.

The government managed site reviewed (Department of Science and Technology) showed the least interactivity and functions. The site functioned more as a service and resource site than a space for dialogues and debates on science and technology issues. Its provision for feedbacks and comments were limited to 'one-on-one' basis. Queries were channeled through e-mail.

The sources of information included in DOST's site were in-house and inter-agency as suggested by its links with other government units as well as with its regional offices. The DOST also maintains an Intranet and hence limits information to members of the unit and essentially not accessible to the public. DOST appears to have not made use of social networks such as Facebook to keep a running dialogue or to have a sounding board of public opinion on matters relevant to S&T issues and concerns.

Looping is more pronounced on an advocacy type non-government organization - Transparency International Philippines (transparency-ph.org). The site essentially functions as an information hub, a resource site for advocates of transparency and accountability in government. It curates news articles, conducts research and makes multimedia productions as they pertain to issues related to public governance. A cursory browsing of the site revealed reposts from online versions of leading dailies and traditional mass media video feeds such as Philippine Daily Inquirer, Philippine Star, Wall Street Journal, ABS-CBN and GMA news channels; and web-based news and information sites such as Rappler.

Transparency International Philippines maintains a Facebook account that very much follows the logic of its website. Its Facebook page which is a public page registered 469 likes, which is considered a low number. The FB page is barely a year old.

3.2 File sharing and knowledge pooling

Informed citizenry remains a top mantra for the effective participation in governance. Government and non-government websites function as repository of information, moreover, information which have been filtered and curated along the mandated tasks, missions and visions of the respective organization maintaining such site. While at a glance, this may reflect a fragmentation of Web users along sectarian or partisan lines, it could be seen as a natural tendency which presents a diverse and wide range of opinions and point of view especially on contentious issues such as corruption in government, inefficiency and uneven development of social sectors.

Traditionally, the mass media or the press played the catalytic role but as Habermas pointed, cooptation by big economic and political interests marked the operation of the mainstream media (DiMaggio, 2001).

Independent online news and information sites such as Rappler, therefore, are playing an alternative role and could be considered a definite indicator that indeed a public sphere could be a work in progress even in its rudimentary form.

Not only is Rappler playing the role of an information resource pool for online users interested in governance issues, but its news features are also channeled and shared by subscribers reposting them on social networks such as Facebook and Twitter.

Rappler's Facebook page (facebook.com/rapplerdotcom) launced in 2013 showed 1,173,604 likes suggestive of a wide base of subscribers or information consumers. While not all Rappler articles are critical of government, it is considered a credible news source. Transparency International Philippines exhaustively uses Rappler as source of its reposts of articles on governance anomalies and questionable actions on the part of agency and local government unit officials.

Rappler combined the effectiveness of social networks with diligent news gathering. More important it is being perceived to be independent and unbridled compared to traditional mass media outfits.

3.3 Prospects and challenges of a digital public sphere

The findings of the study suggest that the ingredients are generally existing and what seems to be lacking is the driving force in the progression towards a digital public space. On the broad stroke, the Internet is a public space but it is a huge space and whether its integrity could be sustained through time is quite difficult to ascertain and project. Nevertheless we can see the role stakeholders are playing which could lead to bright prospects as well as challenges all of which will need some time to iron out.

3.4 Critical stakeholders

By 'critical,' we mean stakeholders who play influential roles in creating, curating, channeling and administering sites and social networks. They are as follows:

Contributors: Essentially, contributors comb the sources of information and write the news or feature articles posted in websites. In the case of Rappler for example, a pool of contributors from different lines of expertise provide the talent and wherewithal to come up with relevant stories. The contributors then spearhead information extraction, analysis and presentation to the public via a site of their choice for posting.

Information curators: An analog of editors and content experts, the curators filter and evaluate stories for posting on their respective web pages. In the case of government-managed websites, the logical content structure exhibited a thematic unity revolving on mandates and enabling policies of the specific agency. The DOST website reviewed in the study manifested such a pattern. In contrast, Rappler still reflects diversity suggesting greater leeway of contributors in sourcing news. Curators play a crucial role of balancing conflicting interests between the owners of the site e.g. an organization and the interests of the online public.

Social networkers: Any active member of a social network plays a role of contributor, channeler, curator and web page owner. While contributors and curators of sites such as Rappler, Transparency International and DOST could be social networkers as well, of more interest and concern are the roles of the average Juan and Maria who avail of the amenities afforded by the Web. They are connected and have access to a tremendous source of knowledge on governance and many hold strong opinion.

The researcher, for example have friends in Facebook who regularly repost cause-oriented links or post reactions to news clips or opinions on certain issues or hot topics of the day.

Other stakeholders: Site owners, sponsors and Net providers though driving forces per se may not be critical in the formation of a digital public sphere. These stakeholders have business imperatives and embedded interests with the interests of the public and the democratic ideals in which governance in the country could find its bearing.

3.5 Social networks as emerging digital public sphere

Social networks such as Facebook could be the preview of an emerging digital public sphere along the Habermas model. 'Going viral,' an Internet popularized term suggests that a particular information commonly being shared and re-shared by many people peaked at a certain period of time. Presumably a consensus on that particular item that went viral, whether in favor of or opposed to certain developments could be measured and analyzed provided of course, one has access to all postings in Facebook related to Philippine affairs and provided one has the hardware, applications and people who would administer such a program. Theoretically, a social network with broad and mass membership such as Facebook could serve as a macro digital public sphere as it satisfies the dialogue requirements of a public sphere. The dialogue is a major attribute of a public sphere. Strength in numbers is another important principle in the matter of representation in democratic processes and government affairs.

Rappler, Transparency International and a wide array of civil society organizations maintain a Facebook account(s). This is separate from personal accounts of people connected with these organizations.

One glaring pattern is the failure of national government agencies to fully use these social networks as a means for genuine dialogues with people. While it is not within the scope of the study to probe deep to the reasons why, it appears that government is navigating away from potentially a high profile and contentious engagement with the online public and prefers a controlled deployment of information which government agencies deem as needed by the public to know.

Though social networks exhibit signs of performing the function of a public sphere, private ownership remains a possible source of divergence with the public later on. Most of these networks are corporate entities with important decision making still residing in a handful of people whose accountability is essentially uncertain. What we have in Facebook, for example, is a prototype public sphere which although essentially functional is not yet fully tapped and with a future which remains highly uncertain.

4. CONCLUSIONS

4.1 An emerging prototypic digital public sphere

A prototypic digital public sphere is emergent as shown by the popularity of some social networks such as Facebook. Different sites perform different functions – Rappler, for instance, play along the catalytic functions of a free press while advocacy groups such as Transparency International Philippines use Facebook as a means to channel information. Their Facebook accounts given its interactivity features (sharing or reposting, liking and commenting) enable venues for dialogues.

4.2 Awareness of social and Internet dynamics

A section of Web users, the contributors, curators and social networkers play important roles in how democratization in the country could be enhanced once effectively supported by a digital public sphere. These critical stakeholders could be the collective image of netizens or responsible and aware Internet users -- well informed and active participants in the unfolding political and governance events in the country.

4.3 Government is apparently non-active in development and use of the Internet as a public sphere

The government-managed website remains packaged in the traditional non-interactive mode with no provision for engaging the public. Communication is one way and curated according mainly on the point of view of government. It remains to be a simple repository of information about the agency, its programs, services and activities, a public service site and not a public sphere.

5. ACKNOWLEDGMENT

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