Opportunities and Challenges for Social Policy: Engaging Youth Online

Michael A de Percy, University of Canberra

Available at: https://works.bepress.com/madepercy/5/
Opportunities and Challenges for Social Policy: Engaging Youth Online

The benefits of a free, globally available and rapidly expanding communication network waits for the next generation of social policy practitioners who dare to challenge the traditional approaches to citizen engagement. Michael de Percy.

In this article I outline some of the opportunities and challenges presented to social policy practitioners considering the use of social networking tools to engage with youth online. At present, most government uses of online social networking tools are limited to placing advertisements on banners in applications such as Google’s ‘Blogger’, Microsoft’s ‘My Space’ and the latest and most popular application, ‘Facebook’. However, little research has been conducted on the use of publicly-available social networking tools in social policy initiatives or the possibilities such tools present. Indeed, the tools themselves present challenges to entrepreneurs in designing business models which provide appropriate returns on investment, despite the market value of Facebook alone being estimated at some $US15 billion (Guth et al 2007). Nevertheless, the market significance and exponential growth in numbers of users worldwide suggest that social networking tools are more than just a passing fashion. In this era of ‘responsive government’, information communications technologies (ICTs) have ‘the potential to further promote a culture of democratic decision-making in Australia’ (AGIMO 2008) and here I suggest that social networking tools specifically provide a relevant, efficient and popular means to engage with youth on their own ‘cyber-turf’ if social policy practitioners are willing to confront the challenges.

Recent successes by policy practitioners engaging with youth include the Commonwealth’s ‘Stamp Out Chlamydia’ (SOC) campaign, described by one of my colleagues, a marketing lecturer at the University of Canberra, as ‘the best example of social entrepreneurship’ by a government agency. On the ground, this campaign is run by nurses and health practitioners and is a leader in engaging youth in social policy initiatives. The campaign provides free testing for the early detection of Chlamydia for participants while at the same time increasing awareness of a disease which is easy to catch, but also relatively easy to prevent and cure. Data from the testing is being used through collaborative partnerships with universities and other health organisations, providing multi-faceted policy outcomes such as increasing awareness, engaging with citizens and increasing knowledge through research. As youth are at most risk of catching and spreading the disease, SOC was specifically designed to target tertiary students in Canberra. The secret of the campaign’s success has been the level of engagement with youth through the use of non-traditional media such as Canberra’s BMA (a free magazine devoted to local youth culture), the design of a youthful ‘Jack Black-style’ logo displayed in most Canberra clubs, and dynamic and engaging staff at the coalface who actively seek support from target groups in the local community to help market the campaign’s events.

Hopefully the policy networks established during the SOC campaign can be utilised for other social policy initiatives, but there is a risk that the end of the...
campaign and subsequent staff turnover may result in these networks dissolving over time. This is an area where social networking tools could actually sustain and expand these local policy networks by enabling the networks to develop 'virally' online, reaching further into the target audience. The 'viral' nature of social networking tools occurs for two main reasons. First, any member of a campaign participant's network can see another member's interaction with the campaign's social networking site. This means that, through the anecdotal 'six degrees of separation' phenomenon, it is possible to engage a very large, global audience. The major difference between social networking tools and other forms of communication is that the target (or receiver of the message) chooses if, when and how they receive the message. My experience with the tools to date suggests that human curiosity is the driver which encourages the target to at least see what another user has been doing—this type of curiosity is a very powerful marketing 'hook'. Regardless, the target chooses if, when and how they receive the message. My experience with the tools to date suggests that human curiosity is the driver which encourages the target to at least see what another user has been doing—this type of curiosity is a very powerful marketing 'hook'.

The 'viral' nature of social networking tools occurs for two main reasons.

The second reason for the viral nature of social networking tools is the accessibility to documented information which is available from any Net-connected computer anywhere in the world (where access to the relevant site is not restricted). Campaign events can also be added to individual 'event' sites, enabling the site's hosts to monitor users' indication of attendance and to organise their social calendar online. This function is particularly useful as youth are notorious for 'forgetting' about events—social networking tools provide timely and accessible reminders of the event's starting time and location. The contact details and interaction of participants (selected at the participant's personal level of privacy protection) are documented in real-time (or as the correspondence occurs), reducing the effort needed to document the correspondence or store emails and other records on an ongoing basis. Traditional records of interaction tend to be kept for a time before disappearing into silos of 'too much information' which are fated to deletion once the employees involved change jobs.

A current example of a 'viral' network is the US Facebook group 'Psychology Marketing project—I need your help!!!' set up by Monic Rokel which at the time of writing had 768 016 members globally. The project was designed to demonstrate 'how influential viral marketing can be' by the researcher generating a network of 200 000 random members. The membership goal was achieved in less than a week and following the project's success, the network continued to grow well beyond its target despite the aim beyond 200 000 initially being 'just for fun'. Nevertheless, viral networks present a challenge to public administrators who have traditionally attempted to control information dissemination and the nature of citizen engagement. As viral networks tend to resist centralised control (see de Percy 2008 for a conceptual overview in broadband infrastructure deployment), one of the major challenges in adopting social networking tools for citizen engagement is the need to relinquish control.

The membership goal was achieved in less than a week.

Relinquishing control presents a challenge to the use of social networking tools for two main reasons. First, most government agencies (and businesses) restrict the use of Net-based applications such as Facebook and Windows Live Messenger in the workplace because of the risk of staff using these networks for personal reasons during work time. However, according to Dawson (2007), firms such as Deloitte Australia actively use Facebook inside the organisation, encouraging staff to use the tool to connect with one another and also to expand the organisation's network. Second, there are obvious security issues involved in using any third-party or external system. Nevertheless, numerous private sector organisations actively use this software and have been able to overcome the security issues (see Dawson 2007), so the challenges are not insurmountable.

There is an abundance of freely available social networking tools such as Facebook which in 2007 registered Australian members at the rate of 100 new users per hour (Schliebs 2007). In addition, Facebook and YouTube were used to great effect in Rudd's 'Kevin07' campaign despite the Coalition government's criticism of these innovative campaign tools (ABC News 2007). The political use of Internet-based tools is not new—former British Prime Minister Tony Blair used an online participatory forum which proved very successful in the UK. The lessons from Blair's use of online participatory forums are well documented (see Wright 2006) and some of the lessons from the UK experience are relevant for social policy practitioners, particularly the choices to be made about moderating participants' comments in the light.
of bureaucratic control. Too much moderation can affect participants' willingness to participate whereas too little can present a significant risk to government agencies if participants use the forum inappropriately or use offensive language in their correspondence.

The point is that online participatory tools can be effective if used appropriately. Major opportunities provided by engaging youth on their own 'cyberturf' include increasing awareness of social policy campaigns regardless of physical distance and also increasing awareness of and attendance at social policy events. When used in conjunction with traditional marketing methods, social networking tools can help increase face-to-face participation by providing users with information and 'diarising' events. Attempts to increase youth attendance at student events at the University of Canberra are certainly proving this to be the case. 'Viral' networks are growing on tools such as Facebook with many interest group networks being created by the students themselves. Indeed, there are various Canberra-based sites dedicated to voicing youth concerns with innocuous policy issues such as local bus timetables which would no doubt be of interest to policy practitioners and politicians.

**The point is that online participatory tools can be effective if used appropriately.**

The major challenges to the effective use of social networking tools include: overcoming the traditional need for the bureaucracy to control public communication (protecting integrity reduces timeliness); online security and work practice issues (most social networking tools are banned or blocked in the workplace); a lack of technical skills to use the tools effectively (particularly by those specialists who run the social policy initiative); and possibly the reluctance of policy specialists (both practitioners and academics) to view social networking tools as a legitimate forum for policy participation. However, social policies such as the Rudd Government's intended use of monies collected from the 70% increase in excise on sales of premixed 'alcopop' drinks in an effort to curb binge drinking in teenagers (see Viellaris & Stolz) will no doubt be the subject of much debate. If citizens, particularly youth, are to be involved in and educated about such issues, there are plenty of opportunities for non-traditional methods to engage youth in social policy communities online.

The most likely problem is that by the time public administrators are convinced of the usefulness of social networking tools, changes in technology and youth trends may require advanced skills for these tools to be utilised effectively in the future. The amount of time and effort required to stay abreast of the strategic and technical skills necessary for the effective use of social networking tools cannot be exaggerated. For this reason, it will be very difficult for policy practitioners to catch up if they are not learning how to use the systems to encourage participation in social policy now. In the meantime, the benefits of a free, globally available and rapidly expanding communication network waits for the next generation of social policy practitioners who dare to challenge the traditional approaches to citizen engagement.

**REFERENCES**


