

Political Facebook Groups: Micro-Activism and the Digital Front Stage

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The growth of social networking sites (SNS), like Facebook, has caused many to rethink how we understand political activism and citizen engagement. In 2010, 43% of Internet users reported using social networking sites “several times a day,” a sizeable increase from 2009 where only 34% reported using social networking at the same rate (Pew 2010).

Research on digital activism has emphasized the use of websites, listservs, and other forums by formal organizations to raise awareness for their specific causes (McCaughey and Ayers 2003; Van de Donk 2004). Information communication technologies (ICT’s) have been regarded as particularly effective tools in mobilizing disparate, resource-poor counter-spheres in collective off-line activity (Van de Donk 2004).

In recent years, scholars have moved away from viewing information communication technologies (ICT’s) as simply a tool for formal activist organizations. Breindl (2010) argues that on-line digital activism has largely been examined through a classic “social movement paradigm.” She calls for scholarship that looks at how the meaning and structure of activism has been transformed by ICT’s.

One key way it has been transformed is by allowing for small scale, many-to-many forms of politically oriented communication, what I conceptualize as a new term: *microactivism*. Examples include the formation of political Facebook groups, re-tweeting of articles of political interest and sharing politically relevant videos on YouTube. These acts reflect micro-level intentions and are not necessarily geared towards mobilization like more traditional forms of digital activism.

This *microactivism* has helped bring about a radical reformulation of the political arena. One major change that emerges from the ease of many-to-many communication brought about by SMS is the reduced incentive to join social movements (Earl and Schussman 2003). These new applications encourage *movement entrepreneurs* (Garrett 2006) not affiliated with formal social movements but interested in fomenting social change. The ease with which individuals can create content and connect with one another to share content is viewed by others as a harbinger of a more democratic and egalitarian society (Benkler 2006, Jenkins 2007, Shirky 2010).

Salter (2005) argues that sites like SNS’ provide new *radical public spheres* that provide additional spaces for voice cultivation and political citizenship formation. More importantly, in his view information technologies help shift political discourse to more informal venues that are less subject to elite control (Dahlberg 2004).

Social critics like Morozov (2009) suggest, however, that *microactivism* might do more harm than good. Morozov (2009) refers to the ease with which individuals can create and join communities of interest as *slacktivism*. He suggests that this ease of membership

and identification detracts from more serious and coordinated efforts to affect social change. The positive feeling associated with affiliating with a movement might satisfy one's need for social connection without them engaging with formal political power.

Additionally, small acts of microactivism have been seen by some as counterproductive. Zuckerman (2009) contends:

there's a case to be made that the actions taken by US supporters of the Green Movement were counterproductive – they added credence to the regime's case that US and UK forces were attempting to topple the Iranian government and that the Green Movement was an external, not grassroots, domestic force. There's also a case to be made that there's nothing online activists could do in the face of a determined repressive government and that we shouldn't have expected any change to come from online activism (June 2010, online).

White (2010) faults activist organizations themselves for this shortcoming. He decries an obsession with marketing techniques, what he calls *clicktivism*, for the decline in the power of left activism:

The end result is the degradation of activism into a series of petition drives that capitalise on current events. Political engagement becomes a matter of clicking a few links. In promoting the illusion that surfing the web can change the world, clicktivism is to activism as McDonalds is to a slow-cooked meal. It may look like food, but the life-giving nutrients are long gone.

Despite the debate around the efficacy of *microactivism*, very little empirical work exists on the subject (Breindl 2010). This paper seeks to expand our understanding the dynamics of political SNS's by means of a content analysis of 250 politically oriented Facebook groups. Using *Google Translate*, I examine Facebook groups from 32 different countries in 23 different languages. Using grounded theory (Glazer and Straus 1967) and Goffman's (1978) work on dramaturgy, I develop a theory of a *digital front stage* that helps explain how and why Facebook users create groups. This digital front stage is maintained, I argue, through the use of four sets of signifiers (expressivity, identity, signifiers and text length). Because Facebook is a *nonymous* (as opposed to anyonymous) environment, actors can seek to construct "hoped for possible (political) selves" (Markus and Nurius 2006). Political Facebook groups allow for the performance of these "possible selves" through the formation of idealized political identities. In the conclusion, I discuss the implications of SNS applications like Facebook groups for the future of digital citizenship.

Facebook and Microactivism

Facebook groups have grown exponentially in the past year. The social networking application provides citizens with powerful tools for expressing their political views and aggregating interests around issues of common concern. A Google query of Facebook groups conducted in August, 2010, yielded 397 million hits. The website *allfacebook.com*,

which tracks Google's indexing trends, reported that Google had indexed 620 million Facebook groups in February of 2010. The same website reported that Google had indexed 52 million groups in October of 2009, a 12 fold increase in a matter of months. (allfacebook.com).

While it is next to impossible to determine the percentage of these sites that are political or activist in nature, it is not far-fetched to presume that they rank in the tens of millions. The ubiquity of Facebook, coupled with the ease with which a group can be formed, makes this tool a convenient form of political expression. Compared with blogs, social networking sites like Facebook have seen significant growth in the past year. As of July, 2010, Facebook had amassed 500 million users, a gain of 300 million users in 15 months (blog.facebook.com, 2010). By contrast, a recent Pew survey found that only 14% of teens blog, compared to 28% in 2006 (Pew, 2010).

Because Facebook is still a relatively recent phenomenon, the literature on groups using the technology for political purposes is limited. However, there is little doubt that the Facebook application has had broad social effects. By facilitating the formation of social networks, Facebook provides movement entrepreneurs with an accessible audience from which to express political views. A recent Pew survey found that nearly one-third of young people aged 18-29 used SNS's for political purposes (Lenhart et al. 2010).

Early scholarship suggests that Facebook use had some positive effect upon political engagement. Park et. al. (2009) found for primary motivations for participating in a Facebook group: socializing, entertainment, self-status seeking, and information. The authors found that students who used Facebook to engage in information seeking or socializing were more likely to participate in political group activity. However, those who used Facebook for entertainment were not any more likely to engage in political activity than those who didn't use Facebook at all. Similarly, Feezell et. al. (2009) found that participation in a political Facebook group was associated with higher levels of political engagement. However, they also found that participation in Facebook groups was not associated with greater levels of political knowledge than those not involved in Facebook groups. The upshot of this early scholarship is that Facebook might aid in mobilization, but not necessarily in citizenship development.

Early scholarship on the discursive potential of Facebook groups provides a mixed picture of its democratic potential. While, Kushin and Kitchener (2009) find generally civil discourse within politically oriented Facebook groups, Feezell et al. (2009) found Facebook groups information to be of poor quality and the discourse to be generally un-civil. Jackson et al. (2009) suggest Facebook group discourse, particularly when initiated by formal organizations like political parties are characterized by "weak interactivity" in reaching out to members because of their desire to control their message. An analysis of candidate websites in the British Parliamentary elections of 2009, led Jackson et al. to refer to political party Facebook groups as *Web 1.5*, which they define as the "extensive use of the architecture of participation, but much less use of the community's democratic structure" (2010, 91).

Early research of political Facebook groups has thus far not paid attention to its impact on identity maintenance. I argue that political participation is as much about presenting a political self as it is about affecting broad scale social change. Svensson refers to this desire to negotiate a political self through discourse as a form of *expressive rationality* independent of instrumental or communicative modes of discourse (2009).

Rather than view talk as serving a direct political purpose, Svensson emphasized the importance of talk as collective identity formation. This phenomenological approach to discourse is often undervalued when discussing the role of talk on-line. Perhaps what explains the increased off-line engagement on the part of Facebook users is not the ability to affect social change, but the spaces to *perform and manage identity* on SNS sites.

Constructing a Digital Front Stage

While we have some insight into the effects of Facebook groups on discourse and political participation, the current literature on the question lacks a broader examination of the content of political Facebook groups. As a result, I chose to conduct an inductive qualitative content analysis of a sample of politically oriented Facebook groups. Content analysis of the 250 Facebook groups revealed four aspects of identity maintenance that constitute what I call a *digital front stage* vis-a-vis on-line political activism. A digital-front-stage provides us with a conceptual framework for assessing how *micro-activists* on-line perform political identities on SNS platforms. My goal is to highlight how a *digital front stage* (Goffman 1978) is created by *microactivists* to construct an idealized political identity.

Theoretical Framework

Goffman defines a front stage as "that part of the individual's performance which.... functions in a general and fixed fashion to define the situation for those who observe the performance" (1978, 32). From this perspective, Facebook group creation is less about instrumental action and more about exchanging information to perform identity. Goffman pointed out that a *front* was part of a broader *performance*, or "all the activity of an individual which occurs during a period marked by his continuous presence before a particular set of observers." This performance consists of several elements or "expressive equipment" including:

- 1) The setting – "items which supply the scenery and stage props for the spate of human action played out before, within or upon it."
- 2) Appearance – "those stimuli which function at the time to tell us of the performer's social statuses."
- 3) Manner – "those stimuli which function at the time to warn us of the interaction role the performer will expect to play in the upcoming situation"

This *expressive equipment* takes on a unique dimension on social networking sites. Absent are the signs and signifiers that characterize face to face interactions. In its stead are "digital signifiers" which include text, images, avatars, social networks, testimonials etc. (boyd and Heer 2006). In this sense, a digital front stage represents the ways in which micro-activists perform public identities in the absence of traditional signifiers that characterize identity maintenance.

A *digital front stage* approach provides a helpful orientation towards the meaning-making process. While creating a Facebook group is only one of many ways in which individuals can perform a political identity, it is arguably the most

compelling. According to Facebook, the average user is “connected to 80 community pages, groups and events.” (blog.facebook.com). Facebook provides what Zhou et al. (2008) call a *nonymous* (as opposed to anonymous environment) from which to construct identity. Facebook differs from other on-line forums in that it is predicated on the user revealing themselves to a network of others. Consequently, it is not a space where one can engage in “identity tourism” (Nakamura 2001).

Zhou et al. (2009) view SNS sites like Facebook as a *nonymous*, third type of environment where rather than create new selves, actors seek to express their “hoped for possible selves” Markus and Nurius (1986) refer to this possible self as “images of the self that are currently unknown to others.” This aspirant self is an identity that one seeks to adopt in the world but cannot because of a variety of different limitations (height, physical attractiveness, shyness, lack of access to networks, etc.). A *nonymous* environment like Facebook provides opportunities for those excluded from off-line opportunities to realize their hoped for identity.

Methods

I chose to study Facebook groups because the ubiquity of the social networking application makes it a central forum for the specific forms of *microactivism* in which am interested. I conducted a content analysis of 250 politically oriented Facebook groups. When an individual browses groups on Facebook, they are provided with a drop down menu that provides users with different genres of groups from which they can browse. One group includes the category (general interest/politics). Facebook presents users with 550 political groups from which to browse.

From this group of 550, I randomly selected 250 of them. Facebook customizes the search results based on groups to which you already belong. As a result, a selection bias may have resulted if I had used my Facebook account to collect data on the groups. Instead, I created a new Facebook account without any friends or group affiliations. This was intended to sidestep Facebook’s tendency to customize group searches based on a member’s existing group profile. Additionally, I was able to avoid any bias in sample selection that might inhere in my personal Facebook social network.

I then analyzed the content of the group main page. Included in this main page was a description of the group and any news updates the group creator(s) sought to include. Because this page is the first page one sees when browsing or searching for groups, it reflects the main purpose of the group’s formation. It illustrates a digital version of what Goffman (1959) calls the *front stage*, or the role we play when others are observing our behavior. Content analysis has some limitations when compared to conducting in-depth interviews with regard to analyzing the motivation(s) for the creation of a group. First, it does not provide the interviewer the ability to pick-up on non verbal cues that contextualize individual responses. Secondly, content analysis data does not allow the interviewer to ask follow up probes intended to allow respondents to expand their answers on individual subjects. However, content analysis data allows for rich accounts at

substantially lower cost than in-depth interviews and avoids problems of response rate and self-selection bias. However, future follow up interviews with creator(s) of these groups would allow for richer data collection.

From content analysis of the sample 250 elements of a *digital front stage* emerged along four distinct axes: expressiveness, target, tone and length. Using these coding categories, I coded the text on the main Facebook group page using *Qualrus*, a qualitative software package. Response lengths ranged from one word to 5,433 words. The responses were analyzed using a constant comparative method (Glazer and Strauss 1967). This method is often used in qualitative analysis to uncover common themes in data. The advantage of a constant comparative method is the ability to adjust analytical categories as new theoretical concepts emerge.

Findings

I argue that many *microactivists* create political Facebook groups as a *digital front stage* to perform their “hoped for (political) selves.” When Facebook users create a new group, they not only seek to raise awareness about a political issue, but they also take part in meaning-making processes about their roles and responsibilities via those they encounter. By providing users opportunities to reveal a political position or an opposition to a candidate, SNS sites help encourage the formation of activist identities that may force users to reflect more deeply on themselves as civic beings. It allows them to try an activist identity “on for size.” The analysis led me to highlight four distinct dimensions of a *digital front stage* (expressivity, identity, signifiers, length)

Dimension 1: Expressivity

Svensson (2009) identifies three forms of political discourse: instrumental, communicative and expressive. My analysis revealed all three forms of discourse in political Facebook groups. However, overwhelmingly, the vast majority of groups seemed to have been created to express political voice rather than to seek an instrumental outcome or to foster dialogue. This corresponds to work Feezell et al. (2009) have done on the content of wall posts in political Facebook groups. They found that two-thirds of wall posts on Facebook groups were opinion-based and, of those, very few were “quality” opinions (i.e., substantiated by evidence).

One way to reframe the information posted on political Facebook groups is to view them as expressive performance. The content of these groups should be seen as an intersubjective process, determined in large part by *microactivists* performing political identity. Group creator(s) with expressive purposes for creating a group and providing information are less concerned with the validity of that information and more interested in how the information assists in identity management.

Surprisingly, few sites were created for the purposes of fostering dialogue. Of the 250 sites analyzed, only two were expressly created for the purpose of “creating dialogue” between peoples: one was created to dialogue issues affecting Moroccan youth and a second sought dialogue about the direction of the Italian Democratic party.

Often groups were formed to advocate for or against a policy position. Many times these groups didn't ask visitors to take further action. In some instances, expressiveness often was reflected in the apparent need to conduct a defensive performance of political identity. A site called "Legalize Marijuana @ Serbia" promoting a site called vutra.org, contains a set of arguments in Croatian seemingly designed to anticipate possible objections to a site/group that advocates the legalization of marijuana:

Vutra.org NOT promote the use of cannabis, or ANY DRUGS!

Vutra.org a website launched by a group of enthusiasts in order to contribute to the fight for the legalization (or decriminalization) cannabis-a....

For decades a lot of people are mistaken, because an opinion formed on the basis of prejudice and (unintelligible).....

Our view is that everyone should decide for themselves and their actions, and to take responsibility for them.....(translated from Serbian).

In this instance, the creator(s) of the group seems acutely aware that the position they are advocating is controversial and associated with a deviant behavior. As a result, they are presenting an identity to visitor of "truth seekers" encouraging visitors to get past "prejudices."

Other groups were not advocating socially deviant positions but were rather providing evidence to support a narrow policy issue. This example of the proposed closing of a nuclear power plant in Spain required explanation for visitors. In the description of the site, the creators call for:

...the government to reverse the capricious closure decision. For an energy policy without ideological prejudice. Because rates will rise. Because CO2 emissions will increase. Because we have to import electricity. Because many families will lose their livelihood. Mr ZP, forget for a day demagoguery and explain clearly to all the Spanish what will actually involve the closure of a Spanish nuclear plant that serves as global references for their good performance, reliability and safety. (translated from Spanish)

Despite the plea, there is not call to take further action. A few sites were instrumental in purpose in that they suggested "next steps" for visitors to take. This suggests a more formal or conventional view of an "activist." These actors sought direct social change through their actions rather than simply performing an activist identity by raising awareness about an issue. Such sites often asked individuals to sign petitions or to go to a specific website for more information. For example, this Facebook group sought the impeachment of Argentinian President Christina Kirchner. The group description asks visitors to write a formal letter to the "Commission on Impeachment of the House" and provides clear steps on how to do so.

These groups are also engaged in constructing a political identity, even if that identity construction is instrumental in nature. However, these groups fall in line with what we conventionally think of as political activism. Other forms of instrumental group formation asked for visitors to engage in off-line activity (boycotts or buycotts or strikes). Examples of such action included calling for a protest day to save the British National Health Service and a “counter strike” against a proposed public service union strike in France in 2009. An example of a boycott action included a boycott of the 2008 Beijing Olympics because of human rights violations. One *microactivist* for example called for a *buycott* of Catalan-made products:

I always try to buy products labeled in Catalan. If we all do the same, there will be more. YES stop consuming products that are not labeled.... There are supermarkets (I do not propoganda) that their products are labeled exclusively in Catalan (translated from Catalan).

Other site provided detailed instructions on how to show solidarity with the Iranian protesters during last summer’s Green Revolution. This site provided more detailed instances of “hactivism” that could be employed to show support.

1. Show your support by changing your profile picture on Twitter to the color green by clicking Settings >Design>Change Design Colors>Background>009933. (This may seem trivial, but Iranians have said every bit of support matters in keeping them going)
2. Help conceal Iranian activists who are on Twitter from the secret police by changing your location to Tehran, Iran and your timezone to Tehran (GMT +3:30).
3. Set up proxy servers to help ensure that Iranians can stay connected to the outside world-
<http://extrafuture.com/2009/06/15/how-to-set-up-an-anonymous-proxy-for-iranians-using-squid-on-mac-os-x/>

While many of these sites emerged in the analysis, many more sites were created without a discernable instrumental purpose. Instead, they seemed to be created simply to “announce” a position. This turn towards expressive politics fits with Goffman’s dramaturgical approach. The *onymous* nature of SNS sites allows individuals to manage a political identity in a popular and convenient on-line venue. Rather than articulate these views in private, group creators sought to put these views out for public consumption without any corresponding call for visitors to take action.

Often sites would seem to call for action, but then not provide “next steps” for visitors to take to bring about the called for change. For example an Italian-based group called “We withdraw the Italian ambassador in Israel” calls for a change in policy, but doesn’t provide on the description page how the group will go about affecting that change. It could be that the group creators don’t know how to go about bringing about the desired

result. But it could also be that the creator(s) want to “perform political activism” by making a public call for a policy change.

This group was created to demand the return of our ambassador from Tel Aviv... racists of all kinds are asked to stay away, we are not anti-Semitic anti-Zionists. (translated from Italian)

The narrative allows the creator to assert a policy position on an issue that potentially has made the group’s creator upset. The group allows him/her/they to signal that upset to a sympathetic audience of others. At the same time, they are asserting their public voice, their “hoped for possible self” that takes positions on issues of concern.

Often times discourse on the Facebook groups adopted a rant-like quality with little connection to taking action formal policy position. One example is a UK Group entitled: “STOP SHARIA LAW BECOMING BINDING IN THE UK!! BRITISH SOIL= BRITISH LAWS!!!” In the description of the group, the author simply expresses anger at a possible discussion had by the government:

The wonderful Labour Government is in talks to bring in Sharia Law. I THINK NOT!! Our legal system and law and order is in a dire situation as it is without having another countries law brought in! It's damn insulting! I'd rather have a new GOVERNMENT though! If the Sharia Law was brought in it would be used by people to get out of situations by jumping between Sharia Law and UK law. No one would know what the true law was no more. It's always been one rule for us and another for immigrants that come into this country. The segregation gap is bigger than ever!!

The purpose of this site was not to provide information about specific policy decisions (although the group creator(s) does include links concerning Sharia law). The main point of the group appears to be to reveal this position to a public. From a dramaturgical perspective, the SNS provides a setting that gives the impression that one is “fed up” and “taking action.” Whether the “taking action” occurs in practice is secondary.

Other groups simply asked visitors to “support” a current or historical public figure. These sites asked nothing of visitors, instead using the platform as a means to express gratitude or to “honor” a political subject. This honoring may simply be what it purports to be. In one instance, a group called “Ronald Reagan” was created for:

...all people, Republicans and Democrats alike, who love Ronald Reagan. The fact is that he was the single most greatest president of our time. His policies, beliefs, and actions led America to flourish in his time in office. I do believe that he could get us out of these bad times if he were here today. I also believe that no matter how many years pass, his legacy will live on forever, and President Reagan will always have an impact. God Bless!

It very well could be the group creator simply wants to express gratitude for a public official they cherished. However, the creation of a Facebook page is a very public expression of gratitude. As a performance, it connects the creator of the group to the

subject of the group and those values the subject signified. Creating or joining this group says very specific things about the members.

Similarly, some groups were created to express support for an idea or a movement. This site called “ARGENTINA SUPPORTS POPULAR RESISTANCE HONDURAN” is designed to convey solidarity with a fellow nation going through turbulent times:

This group invites all Argentines to join the cause of the Honduran people, supporting their protests and demonstrations against the coup. As Argentines do not ignore a Latin American people that... is experiencing what we sadly know. (translated from Spanish)

There is no call for the Argentinian government to intervene or otherwise lend support. The group creator(s) is simply publicly making a statement of support. It is impossible to know (without asking) the reason for this show of support, however it again points to performative elements of Facebook group formation.

Expressive discourses also emerged around opposition to a position or candidate. In this sense, the performance was tied to a specific incident, person/group or policy. Most of those group pages addressed a specific policy. Examples of Facebook groups designed to protest a specific action include. This UK based group called “Have you really forgotten already? Stop the Tories” is described as a site for:

all those who haven't forgotten how bad Tory governments are and are terrified by what is seemingly an inevitable Conservative win at the next election...

In all these instances where Facebook groups were created, citizens focused their attention, even for a brief moment, upon performing as a political self in a public forum. Deciphering the motivations for the formation of these groups was not always easy. However, the presence of the SNS site allowed for an additional space to “perform politics.” While not the direct activism sought by some, it is creating more spaces for politics to seep into everyday life. Performing *microactivism* may help solidify engaging in politics into an individual’s sense of what it means to be a digital citizen. Whether the intended aim is to produce immediate political effects, it injects public issues into “everyday politics.”

Dimension 2: Core Identity: resistance/legitimation

The majority of Facebook groups examined suggested an expressive rationale for their creation. However the subjects of expressiveness varied in interesting ways. Castells (1996) argues that the radical transformation brought about by the *network society* (flattened hierarchies, just-in time production, flexible labor pools etc.) has created a legitimacy crisis for nation states that find themselves incapable of effectively managing these networks. The complexity and fragmentation of the network society creates tension concerning one’s place in the social structure. As Castells points out:

In a world of global flows of wealth, power, and images, the search for identity -- collective or individual, ascribed or constructed -- becomes the fundamental source of social meaning." (1998, 223).

Castells (1997) argues that social meaning is achieved through the development of one of three types of identities: *legitimizing*, *resistance* or *project* identity. The analysis reveals examples of the first two identities. I will address each in turn.

1. Legitimizing Identity

A *legitimizing identity*, rationalizes the activities of the groups in power and allows them to extend their dominance over social actors (Castells 1997). The formation of these types of identities is supported by the infrastructure of the *transnational capitalist class*, consisting of "those who own and control the major corporations and their local affiliates, globalizing bureaucrats and politicians, globalizing professionals, and consumerist elites" (Sklair 2002, 144).

Given the nature of SNS' to create alternative discourse spaces (Dahlberg 2006), one might presume that legitimating discourses are rarer on social networking sites. However there were instances where individuals created pages that fit Castells' description of supporting a "transnational capitalist class"

Groups that targeted legitimating subjects ranged from pages supporting neo-liberal candidate such as one supporting the re-election of Colombian president Alvaro Uribe entitled simply "SI A REELECCIÓN DE URIBE." (Yes to the re-election of Uribe). To sites that opposed candidate viewed as "communists." One Mexican-based group opposed the expansion of a value added tax and an US based group pledged to "stand 1 million strong against the stimulus." However legitimating subjects were much less frequent group targets as compared to resistance subjects.

2. Resistance Identity

Those whose are or perceive themselves to be excluded by the logic of dominant groups develop a *resistance identity* (Castells 1997). The struggles often take religious or nationalistic overtones: "God, nation, family and community will provide unbreakable, eternal codes around which a counter-offensive will be mounted." (Castells 1997,66).

A significant number of sites were built to express solidarity with a nation, group or cause. Facebook groups appeared to be particularly attractive to nationalist groups seeking to signal solidarity. An example is a group called "Wherever I Stand, I Stand With ISRAEL." The site provided a long list of charitable aid Israel provided to nations around the world. One group was simply called "PROUD TO BE FRENCH."

A US based group called "I Support the Students sent home for wearing the American Flag" served as a site for citizens to express collective outrage over a school in California's decision to send students home for wearing the American flag on a traditional Mexican holiday.

For those of you who support the students in California for getting sent home from high school for wearing Red, White, and Blue on Cinco De Mayo, Please join this group and help us get the word out about this disgrace to America!

Another example was the UK group “Lets make Saint George's Day a massive celebration!” The group sought to solidify English identity through the promotion of a holiday.

Its time for a change, so are English people proud of who they are?

Are you proud to be English or if your not English proud to live in England?

A small minority take offence to Saint George's Day, I say boulderdash to them, this is England, this is our country, if you don't like it then tough as we will celebrate our day.

The reference to “our country” in the description of the group signals a keen interest in forming a resistance identity opposed to multiculturalism and globalization. In both the “St. George” and the “Flag” groups the creator of the group is adopting the role of rallying a national identity group to take pride in their heritage.

A key concern for many political scientists is to enhance the quality of deliberation among citizens. From this perspective, Facebook groups miss the mark. In the above example, the creator of the site is less interested in discussions regarding multiculturalism and more interested in expressing in-group solidarity.

One Turkey-based group called simply ATATURK under its description simply provided a 2,100 word biography of the Turkish leader. Under the “news” section after the biography begins a section that calls on “Turkish Youth” to: “Turkish Youth! The first task of the Turkish Independence and the Turkish Republic, is to forever preserve and defend.” This group is engaged in resistance identity from the other end of the spectrum. The group calls for preserving a secular Turkey against those who call for a theocratic state.

Dimension 3: Signifiers

A distinct dimension of political identity performance deals with the signifiers one uses to express tone through words on a screen. One criticism of the role that the Internet writ large plays in the political process is that it often leads to an impoverished dialogue. This leads democratic theorists to celebrate the democratic possibilities for ICT's while decrying its actual effects.

However there were several ways in which signifiers were used to signal varying types of political identities. One obvious way that group creators managed their political identity was through punctuation and capitalization. This group for example, was formed to oppose the raising of rates for parking in a Slovenian Town: “WE strongly against introducing Pay parking!

Another UK based group called “ITS NOT RACIST TO WANT THE BEST FOR OUR COUNTRY” highlights how the use of capitalization signals the intensity with which the group creator's views are held:

YOU SHOULDN'T BE MADE TO FEEL LIKE A RACIST COS YOU WANT WHAT'S BEST FOR OUR COUNTRY, IE JOBS FOR BRITS DEPORTATION OF UNNECESSARY FOREIGNERS, SUPPORT OF BRITISH LADS FIGHTING ABROAD, THE WAR ON TERROR SHOULD BE BROUGHT TO OUR STREETS AT HOME, PULL OUT OF AFGHAN AND POLICE THE TOWNS AND CITIES OF UK, THAT'S THE ONLY WAY TO FIGHT HOMEGROWN TERRORISM. F**K POLITICAL CORRECTNESS ITS JUST HOLDING US BACK WHILE PEOPLE COME TO OUR COUNTRY AND USE IT AS A WEAPON AGAINST US.

The use of expletives can also be thought of as a signaling device intended to convey anger and hostility towards a group or policy position.

The insult was another device used to convey anger towards a subject. One Italian group opposed to the communist party in Italy was titled "The toilet is ALWAYS AT THE BOTTOM LEFT." A Facebook group page called "Traitors: FOR D 'ITALY" expressed opposition to Gianfranco Fini, a former coalition partner of Italian prime minister Berlusconi. The page creator uses insults to convey his anger at Fini, presumably for breaking ranks with the Italian president.

Gianfranco ... no, you are not a schizophrenic but only a low-level whore, heartless, nor flag, nor ideal.

Other times, expressiveness focused on almost lyrical mechanisms for supporting a position. A group in Turkey called "No turban to (Turkish)", attempts to be descriptive in making its point

young girls who enjoy the wind in your hair around your forehead warm smile of the sun will disappear when the child lost his brain washes away that time of innocence, they imprisoned the beautiful head or freedom would be a piece of cloth attached to the name of the shackles.

While the evocation of images gets lost in translation, the descriptive nature of the appeal highlights stark differences in how Group creators in different countries use language to perform political identity on Facebook. Often group creators used poems or songs. An Italian group called "Children can come out, the Communists are gone" contained a lyrical homage to the Italian Prime Minister.

There is a big dream
Who lives in us
We are people of freedom,
President we're with you
Thank goodness that's Silvio

In addition to lyrical devices, some groups used satire. One group was formed to support for the rock singer Lemmi for Prime Minister of England. Another supported Walter, a ventriloquist dummy used by comedian Jeff Dunham, as a presidential candidate.

The use of humor in these groups conveys a sense of absurdity towards the political process. It signals a critical, yet playful, performance of a political self.

Dimension 4: Length

Groups ranged on the length of their descriptions. One group called “anti-war” contained the single word “why?” in the description of the group page. Pithy page descriptions were common among the groups studied. Often groups formed in support or opposition to a public official were shortest. An anti Hugo-Chavez group called “Odio a Chavez” (I hate Chavez) had a page description that “ME ALTERA HABLAR DE EL.” (It agitates me to talk about him).

The pithiness of support/opposition sites held across cultural contexts. The group “Resignation as President Georgi Parvanov of Bulgaria!” contains the description “ This is a group (unintelligible) cause "I want the resignation of the President." An Indonesian group supporting former President Gus Dur had a similarly short description.

The pithiness of this group’s description has to do with the fact that practically all those who would be interested in the group know the public official in question. Visitors to the group “Odio a Chavez” know who Hugo Chavez is and have fully-formed opinions about him. The page thus is intended to signal solidarity with those whose opinion of Chavez are negative.

Often the pithiness represented the formality of the page. Sites that were created by a political campaign often featured a brief bio of the candidate or no bio at all. The group called “Alex Sink for Florida Governor” provided a good illustration of formal political groups. The description of the group read “Building on the promise of change. Alex Sink 2010.”

By contrast, the Group “REAL FACE OF PKK” (Kurdistan Worker’s Party) provided a 3,572 word essay on the shortcoming of the Kurdistan Worker’s Party according to the site creator. Sites that sought to bring public awareness to a cause tended to have the longest responses. Group pages that exceeded 1,000 words in length included a group called “Herceg-Bosna PROUD HEART” that summarized the effort to make the territory of Herceg-Bosna a nation state. Other longer sites recounted the Kurdish myth of *Newroz* and described Greek opposition to the name Macedonia. Each of these sites dealt with issues of ethnic/national identity.

Conclusion

Many criticisms have been lodged against the use of SNS is digital activism. The broad critique can be characterized by Carr’s (2010) clever description of the constant flow of information we receive on-line as “filling a bathtub with a thimble.” With so many causes competing for our attention at the same time, it seems impossible for us to be able to reflect upon all of them simulataneously.

This view of *microactivism*, however, pays too little attention to politics as a meaning making process. There is intrinsic value in providing a *onymous* space where *microactivists* can perform their “would be selves.” That Facebook is providing this venue is ironic given Mark Zuckberg’s view of eliminating the distinction between a front-stage and a back-stage. Kirkpatrick (2010) highlights the transformation nature of the Facebook

ethos as told to him by the site's creator:

You have one identity.... The days of you having a different image for your work friends or co-workers and for the other people you know are probably coming to an end pretty quickly...Having two identities for yourself is an example of a lack of integrity." (Kirkpatrick, 2010, 200).

Indeed it could be possible that instead of eliminating the distinction between "front stage" and "back stage" identities, Facebook actually enables more spaces for performance of different types of identities. In this work, I illustrate how Facebook groups enable the creation of a *digital front stage* that allows *microactivists* to construct and manage political identities.

From a citizenship perspective, having more spaces to perform political identity helps bind politics to everyday life. It is important to have political spaces on-line, particularly in an era where digital attention is short. Rather than hold these *microactivists* up to the standard of formal activists, we might think of their participation in the political process as somewhere between a full scale digital activist and a disengaged, atomized citizen.

However, this *microactivism* is fraught with challenges. In Dereschiweicz (2009) insightful essay on friendship, he critiques Facebook for providing individuals with a "sense of friendship" rather than the actual thing. Undoubtedly micro-activism through Facebook also provides merely a "sense" of being an activist, not the real thing. There is some evidence to suggest a truncated view of activism among young people. Scholzman et al (2010) points out that "young adults are much more likely than their elders to be comfortable with electronic technologies and to use the Internet, but among Internet users, the young are not especially politically active" (487).

When teaching a senior capstone course, I assigned the 25 students a "digital activism" project where they chose which type of project they wanted to take on. The vast majority of students decided to create a Facebook group dedicated to their specific cause. The lowered transaction costs associated with "informing" on-line was a potent draw for students. The ease with which information can be posted and shared also makes it easier to define your public obligation as "informing." As Morozov (2009) would predict, the students were satisfied they had "made a difference" through the creation of a page, although that claim was seldom substantiated. It is an open question whether this "informing" turns into more advanced forms of engagement, or does it remain at the level of a "sense of activism" to paraphrase Dershcwitz.

A more worrying critique is deeper critique is that many Facebook groups are homophilous. Few political Facebook groups observed in this analysis focused on developing on *cross-cutting dialogues* (Mutz 2002). Instead, these groups were polenic, either opposing or supporting a group/idea/cause.

Our efforts should focus on instilling habits of *microactivism* such that they break through what Parser (2010) calls the "filter bubble" of content aggregators that inhibit your exposure to contrasting points of view. The "filter bubble" might help you affiliate with groups you support, but it doesn't help with finding instances to have "cross cutting" conversations that ultimately lead to healthier more vibrant democracies (Mutz 2002).

What should our ultimate aims be in developing digital citizens? To define digital activism up and focus on it being practiced effectively by a select few (Joyce 2010) or to define it down and regard everyone and every political act as digital activism. It is worth thinking about how we provide a middle-level view of political participation on-line that doesn't carry with it the obligations of full scale activism but requires political engagement in a deeper and reflective way.

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