



"Digital Engagement and Social Connection"

**Facilitators: Dr. Lance Bennett (@UWComm)
Dr. Talia Stroud (@TaliaStroud / @EngagingNews)**

Saturday, November 9, 2013
University of Texas at Austin

Notes prepared by:

Rachel Reis Mourao, rachelmourao@gmail.com

TOPICS: Occupy Movement, social media bias, social media as a space for dialogue, concerns about the business model of social media, privacy concerns, crowdsourcing, data-driven journalism, civic education and media literacy, and narratives

Occupy Movement

Dr. Bennett started the conversation asking general opinions about the conference. Participants raised concerns about the Occupy Movement, but agreed that Occupy successfully made it "cool" to protest, bringing together young people. One of the participants thinks Occupy did a great job organizing online, but raised concerns about how technology can bridge the disconnect between ideas people have and reality. Other participants were concerned about superficiality because of technology's limitations.

Questions raised: Is Twitter simplistic? What is the real potential of technology?

Dr. Bennett pointed that more important than the character limitation, for example, are the flows of information through links and hashtags, which goes beyond content. In the case of Haiti, there were relief workers at the ground and it was hard to coordinate their activities until people around the world

started helping connect people they knew and the relief workers. These are just some examples of how new media can be used as a problem-solving tool.

Business models

Questions: What is the impact of advertising on Twitter and Facebook? If companies are paying for trending topics, will it dilute what Twitter means?

Dr. Bennett thinks that people that use social media are aware that they are commercial. On the other hand, most of these companies have not intruded much on the content and lives of their participants. Social media activism is also good free branding for the company.

Twitter was also considered a useful tool for people to reach out to their governments. Participants pointed that governments and politicians are particularly sensitive to comments on social media.

Dr. Bennett called attention to the limitations of these platforms, which were not invented for civic purposes. The hashtags, for example, were created by Twitter users themselves. Nevertheless, companies are in constant dialog with their users. Participants mentioned apps like I Vote for America, which allows people to connect to their representatives, so they know who they are and how to contact them by email, twitter, etc. The challenge is how to make such apps attractive to the public.

Social media bias

Question: Is social media skewed to the left?

Dr. Bennett pointed that on other countries the traditional media leans to the right, and social media leans to the left. Provokes participants to think about the agenda of deliberation and civility as a left wing agenda that is pushed to the right, which does not necessarily feel the need to deliberate and be civil with people that are wrong and attacking them. The right has really strong beliefs, sometimes emotional or religious, and the idea of compromising with people in the left is just not right. If that is how one side views reality, than the idea of deliberation might be utopic.

Dr. Stroud mentioned the challenge of bringing together people from both sides, as we don't know how to create a space for civil dialogue yet.

Questions: How does the far right reacts to efforts to deliberate?

Dr. Bennett explained that people have different views on the nature of reality and knowledge. He made a distinction between the methods people use to understand the world and pointed out that deliberation is just one of the many ways people use to understand reality. Realistically, the positivist method does not work for everyone, and we need to create spaces to accommodate people's diversities.

Question: How do social media work to create spaces for dialog?

Participants showed concerns about users choosing to hide feeds from people on the other side of the political spectrum. Dr. Bennett pointed that we do these all the time in our lives. People are generally not oriented to expose themselves to divergent opinions unless they have new spaces to experiment with communicating with each other.

Use of social media for news and information

Questions: Are people using social media because traditional media's products are poor or because the preferences have changed?

Dr. Bennett points out that people are using social media, like Twitter and Facebook, as news feeds. The same people that used to follow journalists and other information producers on paper are following them online. For example, during the spying scandal people found in the new emerging paradigms a way of reporting that matches their ideologies, while old media is still embedded in a particular paradigm of journalism that may not be attractive to the audience.

Dr. Bennett explained that people might want back the well-produced packaged information if they feel like it benefits democracy. However, we are at a point at the legacy press where things do not have to be true, but if they are attached to powerful people, they will be covered as one side of the story. The legacy press coverage on climate change, for example, provided a balanced view of support and denial.

Crowdsourcing

Dr. Bennett explained that the crowd answers some questions better, and a crowd of experts is better than one expert. Some crowds produce high-quality material, like Wikipedia. However, there are all sorts of crowds online producing bad information.

Question: What is the difference between other crowds and Wikipedia?

Dr. Bennett: Wikipedia is a very organized crowd, and they work well when they are organized. Wikipedia is an institution and we need to think about how other crowds of media need to be organized and institutionalized.

Dr. Stroud mentioned a specific experience using crowdsourcing for fact checking, and how bias affected the experience.

Data-driven journalism

Participants mentioned the potential of making information available to the public. Dr. Bennett argues that we have new models emerging, and big data is one of them. Both facilitators agree that reporters must help citizens understand data, and we must invest on better templates so citizens themselves can get the information they want and become able to make sense of the data.

The role of civic education

Dr. Stroud mentioned that even simple things like how to write an effective tweet requires specific training. Dr. Bennett points out that teachers are willing to discuss politics, but institutionalized civic education is not always good. It turns out that some civic education programs actually have negative outcomes; young people get less interested in participating. Education has always been political in the United States, and teachers and administrators do not want to get risky and bring creative ideas into the classroom. That is one of the key issues, the politics of education; that is, all sides need to stop thinking that school is a tool to pushing each other's agenda.

Narratives

Dr. Bennett explained that knowledge has always been politicized, and we need to understand that science is only one way of seeing reality. New media makes it very hard to control the narrative, way harder than mass media. Participants note that it is fundamental to control the narrative to get people interested on voting and participating. Dr. Bennett explains that we are experiencing the breakdown of common institutions, like schools, etc. and social media did not create this problem, but adds to the breakdown.