# Social Network Site Usage and Social Participation

Sonia Lara
Concepción Naval
University of Navarra
Pamplona, SPAIN
<slara@unav.es>
<cnaval@unav.es>

**Abstract**: There exist numerous recent studies which describe the penetration of the usage of social networks among young and not-so-young citizens. These media are characterized as having a great potential for fostering socialization and the sense of belonging to a community; nevertheless, there exist contrary research results concerning whether or not they are influencing the development of greater civic involvement in a real way. In this paper we analyze this question in the light of the educational challenges that are presented by social networks as promoters of social participation.

According to a study by the consulting firm Experian Hitwise, the social network Facebook was the most visited website in the U.S. between March 6 and 13 of 2010; previously, this position had usually been occupied by the Google search engine, according to data from Experian Hitwise. Facebook captured 7.07 percent of internet traffic, while Google only received 7.03 percent. The study compared only the domains Facebook.com and Google.com, without taking into account other sites belonging to Google, such as Gmail, Google Maps or YouTube. If these websites were taken into account, the traffic to Google would have reached 11.03 percent. According to Matt Tatham, Communications Director of Hitwise, these data show that "content sharing has become an enormous driving force on the Internet". "People want information from friends they trust, as opposed to the anonymity of a search engine". (News from Lavanguardia.es[1], 16th March 2010)

## Social Participation

When we speak of participation we are touching on a central question in the framework of a democracy (Forbrig, 2005; Macedo et al., 2005; Saha, Print, Edwards, 2007). The political formation of the citizen, in the Greek sense of the term--being able to assume responsibilities in social life--has been one of the concerns of education since ancient times. Nevertheless, more recently, with the exaltation of the individual this focus has become very problematic. Today we live in some sense in a "society of individuals", in which the social dimension of the person has been losing its value as a source of meaning for life. The modern individual acts by giving priority to his or her private aspirations and experiences. Indeed, some authors have spoken of the existence of a dead or empty public space in our society (Sennett, 1978; Naval, 2000, 2003).

Given this situation, several questions arise: how can this lost participation be revitalized? how can we recuperate from the difficulties which this situation presents? This clearly cannot be done by passing a law--which would involve the contradiction of imposing participation--but rather requires a low-level plan of action which seeks to stimulate participation, preparing people to engage in it.

But what do we understand by participation? Participation is defined in the Cambridge Dictionary as "when you take part or become involved in something". Etymologically we can discern in the Latin verb *participare* an active sense: "take part", and a causative sense: "to make take part", which completes the action of giving with that of receiving in participation. In this way another sense of the term arises, which is that of "impart, announce, communicate" (Redondo, 1999; Naval and Altarejos, 2000).

---

[1] http://www.lavanguardia.es/internet-y-tecnologia/noticias/20100316/53898645303/facebook-supera-por-primera-vez-a-google-en-numero-de-visitas-semanales-estados-unidos-google-maps-n.html

In this way the notion of commonality is implicit in the two fundamental meanings of participation: the result of participation is "having something in common". And if what we call community arises from the union of those who have something in common, participation turns out to be an inseparable dimension of community.

In addition, participation is a fundamental dimension of democracy, but not the only one, since it is proper to a reality which is antecedent to and foundational for democracy, which is the community. Certainly, there is no community without participation; it is precisely participation which makes it possible (Redondo, 1999, 163). A true community is not possible if there is no sharing in something common, that is, if there is no participation. Thus, since participation is the essence of community, it is a condition of possibility for democracy itself. There is no democracy without participation. Nevertheless, they cannot be simply identified with each other.

Ortega y Gasset said that "a society is not constituted by an agreement of wills. On the contrary: any agreement of wills presupposes the existence of a society, of people who live together" (1997, 44-45).
For various motives, participation is an element proper to all democratic institutions. One of these motives is its full realization under the form of communication. In participation, an essential dimension of communication is shown: giving, but without this implying a loss on the part of the one who gives. "That which is specific to communication is precisely this: giving without becoming impoverished. He who communicates does not relinquish that which is being given, nor does he relinquish himself (...) It is precisely for this reason that communication cannot be defined without making reference to the concept of participation, which expresses this 'making something extend' to another which is the essential constitutive element of communication" (Redondo, 1999, 178). In the social relation participation exists connaturally under the form of communication.

But when one speaks of social participation, one speaks of one of the forms of participation, since there are others. This is a motive for weighing the evaluations of the benefits of democratic participation. And it is at the same time a reason to affirm the transcendence of citizenship education, specifically understood as education for participation. Insofar as it is preparation for adult life, education fulfills its social dimension as education for participation in a democratic society; that is, as education for democratic citizenship (Macedo, 2000; Kymlicka, 2003; Naval, Print, Veldhuis, 2002; Osler, Starkey, 2005; Kerr et al., 2007).

In this framework, social networks may play a role in the learning of participation in order to foster civic commitment, or stated in other terms, in participatory citizenship education. Let us examine some general notions about social networks in order to later evaluate their potential for fostering participation.

## Social Network Sites

D. Boyd and Nicole B. Ellison (2007a) defines social network sites [SNSs] "[…] as web-based services that allow individuals to (1) construct a public or semi-public profile within a bounded system, (2) articulate a list of other users with whom they share a connection, and (3) view and traverse their list of connections and those made by others within the system. The nature and nomenclature of these connections may vary from site to site". Similarly, Hanchard (2008) defines SNSs as online communities of people who share interests and activities, or who are interested in exploring the interests and activities of others. They typically provide a variety of ways for users to interact, through chat, messaging, email.

Social networks incorporate the characteristics of an endless array of social media, including blogs, instant messaging, email, bulletin boards, chat and media-sharing sites. SNSs are an amalgam of the services provided by prior applications. Kim, Jeong y Lee (2010) summarize the principal features of these social media:

− *Personal profiles*. The majority of SNSs have a main page where users can provide personal information, and are able to decide upon and control the privacy of this data. Some authors have analyzed in a very interesting manner how adolescents create these profiles and use the associated privacy controls (cf. Boyd, 2008; Livingstone, 2008)
− *Establishing online connections*. SNSs offer the possibility of searching for and locating persons, in order to add them as contacts (friends), via various means: by their email addresses, as members of existing groups in a given SNS, by the school in which they study or have studied, by type of work engaged in, by place of residence, etc.

- *Participating in online groups*. SNSs offer the possibility of creating interest groups on any topic imaginable, with the possibility of participating at different levels: as an observer of what is shared there, as a subscriber and active member, as a follower, etc.
- *Communicating with online connections*. SNSs permit communicating via diverse services: email, instant messaging, public and private bulleting boards, and even Internet phone services.
- *Sharing user-created contents (UCCs)*. SNSs permit users to share contents they have created by means of various media: blogs, microblogs, photos, images, music, bookmarks and text. They can also label these contents for easy discovery by others.
- *Expressing opinions*. Another interesting feature that favors participation is the possibility of adding commentaries to user-created contents (UCCs), and even to vote on their relevance, interest, etc.
- *Finding information*. All the UCCs which are hosted by the SNS are easily locatable by means of integrated search engines, depending on the level of privacy associated with the UCCs.
- *Holding the users*. SNSs offer various services whose purpose is to maintain the usage frequency of their members. For example, by keeping users informed, by means of updates, of the latest activities performed by their contacts (friends), interest groups, etc., which hook the users into making a search that perhaps was not previously planned.

In order to better understand the reach of the relationships which can be established in social networks, we can focus on the characteristics proper to this online medium, as opposed to day-to-day (and offline) situations limited by space and time. Specifically, Boyd (2007b) establishes four fundamental properties which permit clarifying the reach and potential of this new medium for becoming socialized and participating:

1. *Persistence*: Unlike the ephemeral quality of speech in unmediated publics, networked communications are recorded for posterity. This enables asynchronous communication but it also extends the period of existence of any speech act.
2. *Searchability*: Because expressions are recorded and identity is established through text, search and discovery tools help people find like minds. While people cannot currently acquire the geographical coordinates of any person in unmediated spaces, finding one's digital body online is just a matter of keystrokes.
3. *Replicability*: Hearsay can be deflected as misinterpretation, but networked public expressions can be copied from one place to another verbatim such that there is no way to distinguish the "original" from the "copy."
4. *Invisible audiences*: While we can visually detect most people who can overhear our speech in unmediated spaces, it is virtually impossible to ascertain all those who might run across our expressions in networked publics. This is further complicated by the other three properties, since our expression may be heard at a different time and place from when and where we originally spoke.

## Challenges of social networks for fostering participation

There exist numerous recent studies which describe the penetration of the usage of social networks among young and not-so-young citizens (cf. among others: Bringué and Sádaba, 2009; Davies and Cranston, 2008; DCLG, 2008; Ofcom, 2008; Smith and cols., 2009; Sylvester and McGlynn, 2009; Taylor and Keeter, 2010; Wildbit, 2005). The majority of young people use these networks to communicate and share contents, behaviors which are promoting a participative culture, as Jenkins and cols. (2006) term it. They define it as a culture with few barriers which promotes artistic expression and civic commitment, which supports the creation of personally-authored content in order to share it, which has some kind of informal mentorship of novices by more experienced members, which makes the members of this culture believe that their contributions matter, and where the participants have a certain degree of social connection among themselves (or at least, are aware of what others think of what one has created). Forms of this participative culture include:

- affiliations: memberships, formal and informal in SNSs;
- expressions: producing new creative forms;
- collaborative problem-solving: working together in teams, formal and informal, to complete tasks and develop new knowledge;
- circulations: shaping the flow of media.

These manifestations of participative culture can be summarized under two headings. Those behaviors which encourage us to *communicate*, express ourselves and make others participants in what we think and do. And those which encourage us to *collaborate* with others in the startup of projects, the resolution of problems, the defense of an idea, etc. From the point of view of social participation and civic commitment this latter is of especial interest. It is worth seeking to discover to what point online social networks are or are not fostering greater social participation, in comparison with traditional forms of offline participation.

SNSs are characterized as having a great potential for fostering socialization and belonging to a community; nevertheless, there exist contrary research results concerning whether or not they are influencing in a real way in the development of greater civic involvement. In the meta-analysis that Boulianne (2009) performed, evidence is encountered that runs counter to the hypothesis that maintains that the use of the internet has a negative effect on civic commitment due to the use of time online, to the detriment of time used offline. But on the other hand, no evidence was found that the net impacts this commitment positively and in a substantial manner. Along the same lines, the study by Pew Internet (Smith, Schlozman, Verba and Brandy, 2009) which analyzes the civic commitment of Americans over 18 years of age, making reference to the use of the Internet, shows that SNSs have little influence in a change towards a more participative attitude and greater civic involvement. Some of the more interesting results are that online activity reflects the same type and tendency of behaviors observed in real life, attending to diverse criteria: age, socio-economic level (educational level and income), access to broadband, etc. That there is a correlation between civic involvement (number of activities undertaken) and socio-economic level. And that those who are youngest (18-24 years) are the least involved in civic activities, below those who are the oldest (64+ years). The youngest users only surpassed the oldest users if they were compared in terms of activity performed online.

## In conclusion

We have stated above that SNSs are promoting a participative culture which is reflected fundamentally in the capacity that they have to: in the first place, communicate, express and share ideas and user-created contents; and in the second place, to cooperate and reach agreement in order to resolve problems, defend a position, etc. Nevertheless, there is no clear evidence that these networks are fostering greater civic commitment. And a reflection of this result is that young adults are those who are least involved in civic activity, behind the eldest in society. Educators should know how to take advantage of the massive use that young people are currently making of SNSs in order to communicate, express themselves and share user-created contents, in order to help them make a cooperative use of them which makes them more committed to their society, for instance: collaborating in the tasks of citizenship: cleaning up; organizing popular celebrations; communicating on issues of common interest: writing to someone in authority, requesting some service, etc.; working with other citizens in order to resolve problems of your community or at the world level; getting involved in a fundraising activity for a social project: school, parish, NGO, neighborhood; signing a petition, among other activities.

## Acknowledgements

## References

Boulianne, S. (2009). Does Internet Use Affect Engagement? A Meta-Analysis of Research. Political Communica-
    tion, 26 (2), pp. 193-211.
Boyd, D. (2007b). Why Youth (Heart) Social Network Sites: The Role of Networked Publics in Teenage Social Life.
    In D. Buckingham (Ed). *Youth, Identity, and Digital Media Volume. MacArthur Foundation Series on
    Digital Learning*. MIT Press: Cambridge, MA.
Boyd, D. M. (2008). *Taken Out of Context: American Teen Sociality in Networked Publics*. Dissertation. University
    of California, Berkeley [http://www.danah.org/papers/TakenOutOfContext.pdf]
Boyd, D. M. and Ellison, N. B. (2007a). Social Network Sites: Definition, History, and Scholarship. Journal of Com-
    puter-Mediated Communication, 13 (1).
Bringué, X. and Sádaba, Ch. (2009). La generación interactiva en España. Niños y adolescentes ante las pantallas.
    Ariel. Colección Fundación Telefónica: Madrid. http://www.generacionesinteractivas.org/?page_id=1678

Davies, T. and Cranston, P. (2008, September). Youth Work and Social Networking. Final Research Report. How can Youth Work best support young people to navigate the risks and make the most of the opportunities of online social networking? National Youth Agency Information and Research. http://blog.practicalparticipation.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2009/08/fullYouth-Work-and-Social-Networking-Final-Report.pdf

Department for Communities and Local Government (2008, October). Online Social Networks. Research Report. Communities and Local Government, UK. http://www.communities.gov.uk/publications/communities/onlinesocialnetworks

Forbrig, J. (Ed.) (2005). *Revisiting Youth Political Participation: Challenges for Research and Democracy Practice in Europe. Strasbourg*. Council of Europe.

Hanchard, S. (2008). Hitwise Asia Pacific Social Networking Report.  Hitwise. February 2008.

Jenkins, H.; Purushotma, R.; Clinton, K.; Weigel, M. and Robison, A.L. (2006). *Confronting the Challenges of Participatory Culture: Media Education for the 21st Century.* MacArthur Foundation.

Kerr, D. et al. (2007). *Vision versus pragmatism: Citizenship in the Secondary School Curriculum in England. Citizenship Education Longitudinal Study: Fifth Annual Report*. Nottingham, NFER.

Kim, W.; Jeong, O-K and Lee, S-W. (2010). On Social Web Sites. Information Systems, 35, 215-236.

Kymlicka, W. (2003). La educación para la ciudadanía. In *La política vernácula. Nacionalismo, multiculturalismo y ciudadanía*, Paidós: Barcelona.

Livingstone, S. (2008). Taking Risky Opportunities in Youthful Content Creation: Teenagers' Use of Social Networking Sites for Intimacy, Privacy and Self-Expression. *New Media & Society* 10(3): 459–477.

Macedo, S. (2000). Diversity and distrust. Civic Education in a Multicultural Democracy. Harvard University Pres: Cambridge MA.

Macedo, S. et al. (2005). *Democracy at Risk*. Brookings Institute: Washington D.C.

Naval, C. (2000). *Educar ciudadanos*, EUNSA: Pamplona (2ª ed.).

Naval, C. (2003).  Democracia y participación en la escuela, *Anuario Filosófico*, XXXVI/1, pp. 183-204.

Naval, C. (2009). Una nueva ciudadanía y una nueva educación en la familia y en la escuela. In J. Ibáñez (coord.). *Educación, conocimiento y justicia*. Dykinson: Madrid (pp. 45-61).

Naval, C. and F. Altarejos, F. (2000). Educar para la participación. In J.L. García Garrido (ed.) *La sociedad educadora*, Fundación Independiente: Madrid  (pp. 226-244).

Naval, C., Print, M. y Veldhuis, R. (2002). Education for Democratic Citizenship in the New Europe. Context and Reform. *European Journal of Education*, vol. 37, pp. 107-128 [Monographic "Challenges for Citizenship Education in the New Europe"].

Ofcom (2008, April). Social Networking. A quantitative and qualitative research report into attitudes, behaviours and use. Ofcom. Office of Communication. UK. http://www.ofcom.org.uk/advice/media_literacy/medlitpub/medlitpubrss/socialnetworking/report.pdf

Ortega y Gasset, J.  (1997). *La rebelión de las masas*, Austral: Madrid.

Osler, A. and Starkey, H. (2005). Violence in schools and representations of young people: a critique of government policies in France and England, *Oxford Review of Education*, 31 (2).

Redondo, E. (1999). *Educación y comunicación*, Ariel: Barcelona.

Saha, L. J., Print, M. and Edwards, K. (Eds.) (2007). *Youth and Political Participation*. Rotterdam: Sense Publishers.

Sennett, R. (1978). *La crisis del hombre público*. Península: Barcelona.

Smith, A.; Schlozman, K.L.; Verba, S. and Brandy, H. (2009). *The Internet and Civic Engagement*. Pew Internet & American Life Project.

Sylvester, D. E. and McGlynn, A. J. (2009). The Digital Divide, Political Participation, and Place. Social Science Computer Review, 28 (1), pp. 64-74.

Taylor, P. and Keeter, S (Editors) (2010, February). MILLENNIALS: A Portrait of Generation Next. Confident. Connected. Open to Change. Pew Research Center. http://pewsocialtrends.org/assets/pdf/millennials-confident-connected-open-to-change.pdf

Wildbit (2005, July). Social Networks Research Report. Wildbit. http://tidbit.wildbit.com