



Why New Social Media are Not Certain to Save Democracy

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Pundits talk about the 21st century as the full flowering of the information age – often arguing that information-sharing among peers using new Internet technologies can be a remedy for the low participation and disenfranchisement that plague many modern polities, including U.S. democracy. As analysts stress, we are moving from an earlier era in which information flowed only when a few broadcasters reached large audiences to a new era in which many people can now transmit ideas and information from peer to peer, 24 hours a day. Ostensibly, almost everyone now has access to boundless amounts of information useful for understanding and influencing public policy and political decision-making. In consequence, optimistic observers celebrate the possibilities of social media and other new peer-to-peer communication technologies to reach and teach masses of people.

But are the new communication modalities actually making public life more equal and participatory? We need to be thoughtful moving forward and look for empirical evidence. Rather than promoting equity in what people know and think about science, household tips, or policy recommendations, reliance on social networks to spread information could actually magnify inequalities. For one thing, the majority of the world's population has not yet directly engaged the Internet. Even if we assume that everyone will eventually have access to and use the Internet, an increasing body of research suggests people generally do not acquire or share information equally. Whether or not the Internet is involved, information sharing is constrained by factors outside of many people's control.

Research on Social Networks and Information Flows

A few years ago, I collaborated with colleagues on research about leveraging peer networks for referrals to a free mammography program. Could such networks be used to encourage widespread use of a life-saving medical test? Within the group of women we studied, it turned out that only a small subset actually did almost all of the referring that happened. A few women referred many, but most referred no one at all. A similar kind of skewed, unequal distribution seems to characterize social network interactions of many sorts.

What is more, information of all sorts does not spread in networks equally or uniformly. Many of us are familiar with the ubiquity of furry kitten pictures that can be forwarded online by one person to others. These heart-warming feline pictures reach much wider audiences than, say, a white paper on the policy options state governments might pursue to reduce carbon emissions. As this example illustrates, researchers have found that emotionally evocative and sensational material travels further and more often via the Internet than does other material. Sensational information – or misinformation – is privileged over the factual, subtle, and nuanced.

For thousands of years, ever since the advent of speech, human beings have sought and used information from a variety of sources. Before television there was the town crier; before the Internet people used the mail or talked to one another. Throughout history, some people have been more connected than others to the latest developments in academic and political debates and scientific research, in part because well-informed people they know share information within their social circles. What is striking about the present moment is the widespread hope that new communication technologies can overcome longstanding habits and disparities. Paradoxically, we live in a world awash with information and filled with exuberant references to sharing via “social networks,” yet if we are not careful, longstanding and deeply ingrained social structures will simply cause the newly abundant information to reinforce and amplify age-old disparities.

As the world transitions to an informational landscape where more spontaneous and decentralized sharing occurs, we need to keep in mind that all people do not play equal roles – and some kinds of messages are easier to spread than others. Social media are abundant now, but do not eliminate old human tendencies and constraints. Inequities remain to be addressed with the aid of continued research.

The Way Forward

Where does this leave those who hope for a more equal public sphere? At least three types of initiatives could help to remedy disparities in information-sharing:

- Educational efforts can make more people confident in their ability to understand and use available information – such as social science data about the workings of economies, societies, and democracy.
- Public communication can be framed and spread in ways that meet people where they are – by offering information in ways that fit within daily routines and resonate with the needs and challenges people routinely face.
- Community infrastructure can be built to spread easy access to new communication technologies and offer convenient forums for neighbors and people with similar interests to share ideas and information with one another.

None of those three paths offers quick fixes, because all of them require that those who can deploy information technologies move beyond the next election or product roll-out to engage in long-term planning alongside affected communities and social groups. Peer-to-peer communication is not a guaranteed panacea in the absence of investments and sustained planning to redress inequalities and blockages embedded in the interpersonal networks where people live their daily lives. Advocates and policymakers will need to make plans and investments to encourage inclusive information-sharing, and frame stories and presentations to resonate with everyday needs and conversations. Experts and managers dealing with immediate crises may see such efforts as a waste of time. But only by taking extra steps now can we sow seeds for true collective enrichment in the emerging dynamic communications environment. By addressing existing disparities in access to information and modes of sharing, we can work toward a future in which most people can take part in truly inclusive dialogues, enabling humanity to craft more vibrant democratic communities and ensure the health of our planet.

Read more in Brian G. Southwell, *Social Networks and Popular Understanding of Science and Health: Sharing Disparities* (Johns Hopkins University Press, 2013).