The Social Media and Civic Engagement Matrix

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Abstract. This poster presents a framework for classifying online civic behaviors expressed in social media. We draw attention to how engaged communities report high qualities of life, and then we argue prior research typically portrays engagements as positive and cooperative. We explain why prior studies seem to take the view they do and present findings from an interview study that suggests civic engagement often feels uncomfortable or negative. We propose a two-dimensional matrix of sociality and efficacy—the Social Media and Civic Engagement Matrix—that provides a useful theoretical tool for thinking about civic engagement activities. Finally, we conclude by outlining plans for future research using our framework.

Keywords: Civic Engagement, HCI, Societal Norms, Social Media.

1 Introduction

Studies examining online civic engagement activities [1–3], like soliciting donations, acknowledge these activities can improve communities. Engagement is treated as a one-dimensional component where more is better, often referring to activities, or actions, that are meaningful and are directed at others [4]. However, we suggest civic engagement is not always positive or enjoyable to all parties all the time.

Following the 2016 U.S. presidential election of Donald Trump, there has been increased attention paid to democratic norms [5]. Because studies examining online civic engagement have focused on democratic countries, they have implied that behaviors conforming to democratic norms are "good." The result has been a generalized focus on how engagement can improve a society's quality of life. For example, see the ongoing debates in the literature about social benefits of activism relative to "slacktivism" [6,7]. In focusing on community betterment, however, we argue that social norms have gone overlooked as an important component of civic engagement, and a broader class of online engagement activities, potentially norm-violating or antisocial, remain to be studied. Furthermore, the emergence of mediated forms of civic engagement have the potential to reshape attitudes about self-government and what sort of behaviors are appropriate in public life.

We present a matrix for classifying a wide range of online engagement activities along two dimensions: sociality and effect. This matrix highlights two engagement

aspects that have so far been either ignored or implied but that we think bear specific attention.

2   Selected Review of Literature

Increasingly, a range of civic actors from politicians to nonprofits, use social media to engage with members of their communities. What does it mean to be civically engaged? Robert Putnam [9] famously discussed bowling leagues and fraternal organizations, but other research has talked about nonprofits using social media to fundraise, draw attention to social causes, and organize events [1,2]. Research demonstrates that civic engagement improves quality of life, and the World Health Organization [10] defines it as an individual's position in relation to their life "goals, expectations, standards, and concerns." Civic engagement activities improve the position of individuals in life by addressing social problems [11]; so, for example, a nonprofit sponsoring a public clinic could improve a community by providing healthcare services to the needy.

Within research that examines online civic engagement, there tends to be a democratic, prosocial focus. For instance, many studies that examine civic engagement on social media have looked at countries like the U.S. with established democratic norms [1–3]. Whether intentional or not, researchers appear to have internalized these norms with implications for how they describe engagement activities. Speaking about online political discussions, Freelon [12] defines democratic norms as "asking questions, giving reasons, and avoiding insults when communicating across lines of difference; a communitarian norm that celebrates those same behaviors." Democratic norms call for citizens to treat others with dignity and respect while solving communal problems.

A consequence of research examining Western democracies, and researchers internalizing democratic norms, is that studies generally portray online engagement activities as positive. For example, in the studies cited above, researchers look at the ways engagement improves communities. Debates about activism and slacktivism [6] may privilege some activities over others, but they retain the same focus. However, it is possible that online engagement activities may benefit communities while violating societal, democratic norms, and this broader class of actions has yet to be systematically evaluated.

3   Developing the SMCE Matrix

Between the fall of 2017 and the summer of 2018, we conducted 40 semi-structured interviews of nonprofit employees and their affiliates in Chicago, IL and Kalamazoo, MI. Our interviews explored nonprofit social media adoption, feelings of community attachment, and civic engagement. Unsurprisingly, many interview participants talked about civic engagement as it related to democratic politics, but in cases where politics were not discussed, participants framed it as tied to everyday life [13]. Contrary to our expectations, interview participants said civic engagement is frequently uncomfortable, or even negative.

Freelon [12] examined online political discussions and suggests that negative experiences originate from norm-violating behaviors: democratic norms set expectations for people to treat others with respect. Ostensibly, individuals bring this respect with them when they engage in online activities, and social psychologists report that the violation of norms creates negative feelings [8]. The negative feelings that result from the violation of the "respect" norm may be part of what is driving the debate about civility online [e.g., 14]. Informed by Freelon's article and literature discussing norm violations, we developed a heuristic to classify mediated engagement examples from our interviews and the literature (e.g., Table 1) while taking norm-violating behaviors into account.

Table 1. Engagement Examples

#	Example	Source	Quadrant
1	Changing a Facebook profile picture as a show of solidarity for the survivors of a terrorist attack or natural disaster rather than donating to relief efforts.	Literature	Prosocial-Exacerbate
2	Registering citizens to vote via social media.	Interview Data	Prosocial-Improve
3	Posting stolen emails on WikiLeaks to prevent the election of a candidate with a history of supporting unilateral military action.	Literature	Antisocial-Improve
4	Teachers striking and students protesting school closures.	Interview Data	Antisocial-Improve
5	Harassing individuals associated with a social movement you disagree with.	Interview Data	Antisocial-Exacerbate

4   The SMCE Matrix

Our Social Media Civic Engagement (SMCE) Matrix is a heuristic device to classify perceptions of engagement behaviors. This matrix (see Figure 1) defines civic engagement as activities that individuals perceive as generally (a) effective in improving quality of life [15] and (b) prosocial. Included in our illustration are the approximate positions of examples from Table 1. We describe civic acts using social media along a continuum of their effect on quality of life from "improve" to "exacerbate." Efficacy is not necessarily linked to democratic norms, which implies that engagement acts take an authoritarian bent when individuals presume to "know what is best." The matrix also describes "prosocial" and "antisocial" behavior to explain why civic engagement often feels negative. Antisocial behavior is a type of behavior [4] that is perceived as antagonistic to individuals and/or members of a group because it violates or disregards democratic norms [12]. Conversely, prosocial behaviors are positive, cooperative engagement activities that are in accordance with democratic norms. Prosocial behaviors are the type most often referenced in research examining civic engagement via social media.

Examples of prosocial, effective actions abound in the literature like registering voters and raising money for those in need. The antisocial-improve box can be trickier. For

instance, in 2016, Julian Assange released emails stolen from Hillary Clinton to influence a presidential election because he perceived her as likely to promote military interventionism abroad [16]. His action certainly violated norms about secrecy and democratic process, but positive outcomes from this action are strengthened privacy laws and increased attention to election security in the U.S. Labor strikes and other organized protests would also fall in the antisocial-improve quadrant. Collective acts of protest are purposefully disruptive and are effective in part because of the social disruption and conflict they create or reveal. Prosocial-exacerbate actions are those that establish social connection, and are well-intentioned, but have little impact such as changing one's profile picture to show solidarity with survivors of a disaster when they could donate time or money instead. Much of the attention about negative online interactions focuses on acts that fall in the antisocial-exacerbate box, such as harassment and doxxing that violate norms and make life worse for people.
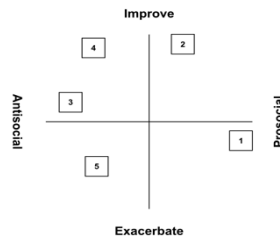

Fig. 1. Social Media and Civic Engagement Matrix with examples

5   Conclusion and Next Steps

In this poster abstract, we argued that social media and civic engagement research often focuses on positive, cooperative behaviors that better communities. We indicated how interview participants in our study of nonprofits said civic engagement does not always feel positive, and then we argued that a reason for this is online engagement activities may violate social, democratic norms. Last, we presented a framework to classify perceptions about an expanded range of online engagement activities. We suggest this matrix because it decouples the sociality and effectiveness of various actions, allowing us to interrogate those aspects of behaviors independently. Conflating sociality and effectiveness ignores the impact of some norm-violating behaviors and masks features of exacerbating behaviors that new interventions may address.

    Moving forward, we plan to test the utility of our matrix by collecting and analyzing data about citizen attitudes related to a range of online activities. As we noted earlier, social media and other online tools provide new ways for citizens to engage in civic behaviors and better their communities, but there is no reason to believe the process must be enjoyable at every step. The introduction of communication technology may disinhibit behaviors that are inhibited offline [17], and researchers are still studying the role norms play in shaping online civic behaviors [e.g., 12,18,19]. Exploring these issues will shed light on the role technology and social media increasingly play in facilitating democratic practices and processes.

6   References

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