***
Communications [course]
Professor ***
Midterm Paper
February 15, 2012

Introduction

The creation and introduction of the transatlantic telegraph in the 19th century was a major breakthrough for communicative technologies. People gained the ability to connect with one another in a way that they never had access to before. The invention of the telegraph was a stepping-stone for communication innovations. This singular cable was an important advancement in technology, and its creation laid the foundation for the global network that we see today: the Internet. By connecting people through these cables, thereby producing networks, the worldwide web has taken over many facets of the public's life. Clay Shirky asserts that everything has migrated to the Internet and that it is a place of coordination among individuals. Shirky argues that the Internet creates a shared awareness among the masses and proposes that it could be a solution to the collective action dilemma. Eli Pariser expands on Shirky's notion, but he argues that information received by individuals' social networks is filtered in ways that can undermine collective action. I contend that Shirky and Pariser's arguments regarding social capital, though seemingly contradictory, both provide accurate and comparable lenses through which to understand new media technologies.

Building Social Capital

Shirky claims that the Internet allows for a many to many pattern of communication, which solves the collective action dilemma. He explains that it is an outlet, a common gathering place of coordination, communication, and cooperation among individuals and groups. It

creates a shared awareness which allows for otherwise uncoordinated groups to form and

to begin to work together more quickly and efficiently. The Internet allows this to occur

because "to speak online is to publish, and to publish online is to connect with others"

(Shirky, 2008, p. 171).

The idea of collective action and social capital outlined by Shirky is evident in online

forums like Wikipedia. Wikipedia is an online public service that individuals depend upon

when they want to access information quickly and easily. What makes Wikipedia so special

is that it is a collaborative effort by members who produce and consume the information

posted on the website. In this sense, Shirky would note that Wikipedia is a solution to what

he calls "the collective action dilemma." The collective action dilemma is the balance

between one's self interest and the idea of benefiting the public good (Shirky, 2008, 188-

191). He argues that the Internet allows for collective action to occur and thus solves the

dilemma because it's easy and cheap, as well as both global and social. Wikipedia is an

example of how the Internet reorganizes coordination and communication, lowering the

barriers of collective action that societies in the past faced in a world devoid of this

advanced technology.

I contend that websites such as Wikipedia do solve the collective action dilemma and allow

for the creation of social capital. It is evident that Wikipedia is a successful symposium

because people have been able to find the balance between self-interest and public good.

Wikipedia is constantly changing and being updated with new information by its

producers, while also being consumed by its members making them more knowledgeable, and thus doing a service for the good of the public. In the world of cyberspace where members can be consumers and producers, social capital is raised. Furthermore, just as Shirky claims, social capital is created most effectively in the realm of "Small World Networks." These networks begin due to the idea of "homophily," meaning that people group because of their likes and interests. Small groups begin to form and coordinate, and soon networks among larger groups are created. (Shirky, 2008, p. 213-222). This frequent interaction among people, as Wikipedia demonstrates, creates social capital.

Undermining Social Capital

Seemingly contradictory to Shirky's theory, Pariser argues that information received by individuals is filtered in ways that undermine the dissemination of new ideas and information. Pariser contends that the evolutionary utilization of algorithms and editors, detract from the notion of the idea of collective action. He notes that we have entered an era of personalization, which he calls the "filter bubble."

I agree with Pariser's claim that we have entered into an era of personalization. With the use of algorithms and editors, the Internet is able to create assumptions about a user. With these assumptions in mind, the Internet is able to personalize what it thinks a person will like or deem important. In an attempt to accomplish this, companies such as Netflix employ algorithms in order to know its cliental on a more personal level. The recommendation feature that Netflix offers has proven to be a success for its customers. When a consumer

builds a queue, begins to watch movies, and rates them with stars, Netflix then takes its

client's clicks and viewing experience into consideration. It calculates a user's preference

and builds a repertoire for its subscribers. This cache is composed by filtering through the

database and finding movies that resonate with a viewers past choices. By these means,

Netflix is a personal online movie guru.

Personalized filters have such a powerful allure because we are overwhelmed by massive

amounts of information. In an attempt to answer the torrent of information, these

algorithms that companies have created dwindle down the number of blog posts, tweets,

status updates, emails and massive amounts of information that we could potentially be

bombarded with on a daily basis. These algorithms allow for the Internet to get to know us

better, and furthermore tell us what we should know. We are then able to gather

information that is relevant and that resonates with our personal interests (Pariser, 2011,

p. 11).

Simultaneously Working Toward Social Capital

Pariser's claim of personalization and Shirky's notion that the Internet solves the collective

action dilemma, though seemingly contradictory on the surface, can coexist and coordinate

together to produce social capital. I contend that both Shirky and Pariser's theories are

relevant to one another and that their concepts can be paralleled to form a stronger claim.

Successful social capital is built when we are able to conceptualize and understand that the

Internet allows for collective action by means of personalization.

An interesting example of the collaboration between collective action and personalization

is Facebook. Facebook has become a global phenomenon. This social medium brings

together friends, acquaintances, co-workers, professionals and even strangers. It allows

individuals to connect easily via cyberspace. Members achieve sociability and homophily

through this interface, as users are able to freely post, link, and chat with one another. It is

a social forum that keeps individuals connected, allowing them to collectively interact with

each other.

In 2006, the introduction of Facebook's News Feed demonstrated that personalization does

not undermine social capital but rather that it is necessary in helping solve the collective

action dilemma. Through a set of algorithms, Facebook highlights stories based on its

assumptions about a user. By filtering information, Facebook connects its users more easily

with other members who they have shown interest in. It saves a user from having to take

the time to sort through a flood of information. Often times the highlighted stories that

appear on a News Feed occur because of a user's repeated interest in another member. By

personalizing this on one page, it allows for a user to connect and network with others.

Conclusion

Upon analyzing both Shirky and Pariser's theories, though on the surface seem to be

contradictory to one another, both provide a lens of understanding the Internet's ability to

build social capital. Shirky argues that the Internet solves the collective action dilemma and

creates social capital as demonstrated in online forums like Wikipedia. Conversely, Pariser

claims that the personalization of the Internet creates a filter bubble, which undermines

the idea of collective action and social capital. However, Pariser's argument regarding

personalization plays into solving Shirky's collective action dilemma. The combination of

their theories builds a stronger case: successful social capital is built when we reach an

understanding that the Internet allows for collective action through the means of

personalization.