

ARE TODAY'S YOUNG PEOPLE POLITICALLY AWARE? (THE ANALYSIS OF TWO INTERNATIONAL ACADEMIC ONLINE FORUMS)

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Abstract

This paper first looks at computer-mediated communication (CMC) technologies: at their advantages and disadvantages for learning and teaching. Secondly outline of the background for the research is given: the nature of the online forums in question, the material chosen for the discussion and the task. Thirdly, the author analyses the content of the forums by year (the 2010 forum and the 2011 forum) and by the participants' nationality (Russians and Americans). In the end some trends are voiced.

Keywords: computer-mediated communication technology, collaborative learning, the Internet, e-electioneering, politicians.

1 COMPUTER-MEDIATED COMMUNICATION TECHNOLOGIES: PROS AND CONS

Computer-mediated communication (CMC) technologies are transforming higher education. Students and educators are encouraged to use CMC technologies to facilitate student learning. Students are accessing course materials on the Internet, they submit their term papers via the LMS (Learning Management System) and take part in various online projects. CMC technologies can improve student learning outcomes, promote critical thinking, enhance peer-to-peer interaction [1] and they "provide opportunities to design and implement methods of advanced learning such as deep learning, sustained and critical discourse and effective discussion" [2, p.587].

One of the criticisms against introducing CMC technologies into the educational process is that they "dehumanize higher education and reduce students to the status of objects that are manipulated by machines" [3, p.102]. Another one is that giving students the freedom to work at their own pace and to pursue their own interests can lead to a failed discussion, especially if a student feels isolated as students are used to the only authority of knowledge in a classroom – that of the teacher and to discard this concept is a long and confusing process for them.

Classroom time can be supplemented by online learning activities, thus, resulting in 'web-enhanced class'. Students attend classes at scheduled time, interact with the instructor face-to-face, complete the instructor's assignment and, eventually, take exams. But, besides, this, they are engaged in online projects related to the topics they are studying. These projects can be considered as independent activities or as an add-on to the course.

Online activities for academic purposes constitute an opportunity to overcome the limitations of traditional classroom instruction. They challenge the classroom as the only place for learning and teaching and the teacher as the ultimate source of knowledge and control. The implementation of computer-assisted instruction classrooms may become "more student-centered, with teachers naturally shifting away from traditional roles as lecturers and disciplinarians, and embracing roles of facilitators and mentors engaged in shared problem solving with students" [4, p.3]. Students are encouraged to construct their own ideas from a variety of voices rather than repeating the educator's point of view. They control the information supplied to the net as they become creators, not mere spectators.

Arranging international online projects helps "to break the isolation of universities" [5, p.577] and gives students an opportunity to interact with their peers [5]. It guarantees individualization and democratization of education. Individualization means that students perform tasks at their own pace and at any time convenient for them. Democratization suggests increasing the access to collaborative learning for everybody.

Online activities should not replace quality interaction in class. They should not be regarded as a substitute for on-campus learning.

Typically, instructors encourage collaborative learning by organizing classes into several small peer groups and assigning tasks that require students to discuss an issue, carry out an activity, or solve a problem [1]. The small-group structure increases the likelihood that the social interaction necessary for critical thinking and active learning will occur [6] because “students feel comfortable expressing their thoughts and can engage in high-level verbal interactions as they discuss pertinent subject matter with peer” [7, p.58]. Collaboration improves not only academic achievement but also boosts self-confidence, provides personal insight and enhances the ability to apply the concepts outside the classroom [8], [9], [10]. “It develops, capture and transfer best practices on specific topics, by stimulating the active sharing of knowledge. It influences development outcomes by promoting greater and better-informed dialogue” [11, p. 572]. From this perspective, learning is less a matter of knowledge acquisition and more a fundamental process of forging an identity and becoming a member of community of practice through active participation [12], [13], [14].

One of the most comfortable ways for students to interact with each other is an asynchronous online forum. Students post messages as a part of a discussion as well as post their replies at any time convenient for them regardless of who else is logged in. they also can take time to think over their answers as an immediate reply is not a must. Students can post their opinion on the issue under discussion or reply to another team member’s posting, either elaborating on or taking an opposing view regarding the ideas expressed. It challenges them to carefully reflect on what they are going to post, so they become critically aware of the quality of their contributions to the discussion and as they are required to post a reply to somebody else’s posting, they exercise critical reading skills [3]. They learn to formulate and articulate their own ideas. In this way they get an individual voice. Thus, students are engaged in argumentative practices.

Given that the conversational contributions are written, that online posting is sequential, and there are traceable records of the conversation flow, these environments provide reflective learning in both on-task and post-task interactions [15], [16], [17].

Connecting the online discussion and in-class activities should increase the amount of time students spend on the class material, allow for continuity between the virtual and face-to-face dialogue, and foster deeper understanding through more active involvement with the material [1]. It encourages students to converse with other students outside regular class time and make more frequent connections between the issues discussed and their personal lives.

“The mixed-mode delivery affords the luxury of extending opportunities for discussion beyond the traditional, physically and time-constrained classroom environment” [3, p.105].

The “cyber-society” has become an integral component of young people’s lives, and identifying effective strategies to harness these technologies to support teaching and learning will be critical for the future of higher education [1].

2 ACADEMIC INTERNATIONAL ONLINE FORUM

2.1 The outline

The idea of an Internet-based forum used for educational purposes was offered by Professor Gary Scudder (Champlain College, Vermont, the USA): two groups of students across the seas get together to discuss an issue chosen for them by their professors. It was called Global Modules (GMs). The site is www.globalmodules.net.

The university I am working in (National Research University “Higher School of Economics” in Russia) is a partner of Champlain College which means that Russian students are matched to American students only. But the forum allows casual conversation to take place in a so-called “Coffee Shop” where students from all over the world may communicate on various topics.

The project usually lasts four weeks: 1) introductions and perceptions; 2) obligatory reading of a certain fragment on the topic or watching a topic-related video and then answering the questions; 3) the continuation of the discussion focusing on some particular issues and 4) conclusions and saying good-byes. The questions are prompts to give a learner an idea what to start with so that online discussion can be more structured and sustained.

2.2 The material

In the springs of 2010 and 2011 we held two sessions each on the expanding role of the internet in the democratic political process. The starting reference point for discussion was a shortened version of the text titled “Background – Evolution of the e-Election and Digital Democracy” (from the research report “E-electioneering. Use of New Media in the 2007 Australian Federal Election”) [18]. It dwells on the following issues:

- 1) There are two views on political and social implications of the Internet: a) an enthusiastic one claiming that new media can give people greater access to information, communication and interaction and b) a pessimistic one warning of a breakdown in social connectedness.
- 2) A key characteristic of Web 2.0 media is their potential to facilitate two-way ‘conversations’ and engagement. For instance, the convention of blogging encourages readers of blogs to submit comments and make input to discussion (i.e. become producers) rather than being only consumers or audiences as mostly occurs with mainstream media.
- 3) Some level of digitally-enhanced democracy is emerging and bringing a changed sense of community, a greater sense of participation, less dependence on official channels and expertise, and a repositioning of politics within popular culture.
- 4) New media gave prominence to issues closer to local communities than traditional media and official political channels of communication such as policy speeches.
- 5) Despite their inbuilt interactive capability, most Web 2.0 type media used for political communication are being controlled by corporate, organisational and political ‘gatekeepers’ and remain one-way dissemination of information.
- 6) The new participatory media are double-edged swords for political candidates and parties. While, on the one hand, they offer politicians new channels to reach voters, on the other hand, mainstream media noted the potential for new media to damage or ridicule candidates.
- 7) One of the key attributes of new media is personalising communication and speaking in the language and context of popular culture, rather from the elite position of the traditional political ‘soap box’ which, in modern times, has become policy speeches.
- 8) There was also substantial comment that neither of the major political parties used new media to its full potential or even appropriately in some cases. Criticisms included not updating pages frequently, not observing ‘Internet etiquette’ such as avoiding blatant commercialism and propaganda and allowing public comments including critical comments. There was also criticism of politicians being awkward and uncomfortable in new media formats such as YouTube videos adopting a formal traditional public speaking stance rather than the more relaxed and casual style of new media (about America).
- 9) Another key issue discussed in mainstream media was that advertising regulations governing mainstream media, such as the advertising black-out period prior to elections and the authorisation of advertisements, did not apply to new digital media, with speculation that advertising regulations needed review.
- 10) Proponents of electronic democracy, who include increasing numbers of public interest groups, argue that a wide range of technological capabilities could be applied to facilitate closer links among citizens, as well as between citizens and politicians. They also point to an array of new opportunities, such as the electronic delivery of many public services to people’s homes or conveniently located multimedia kiosks; more access to a wider variety of public information; the creation of electronic forums for large-scale debates; and direct democratic participation through online voting and interactive polling.
- 11) Critics, on the other hand, argue that such innovations may have many disadvantages. These include lowering the level of political discourse; exacerbating inequalities between information haves and have-nots; merely mimicking more traditional forms of media; undermining traditional intermediaries, such as political parties and interest groups, and helping politicians to gauge and, thereby, manage public opinion and voting behavior more efficiently.

2.3 The task

After reading the text students were to answer the following questions: 1) Which of the two views on political and social implications of the Internet appeals to you most?; 2) Does the Internet really bring

politicians closer to voters?; 3) Do you believe that easy access to high quality information over the Internet could make a positive contribution to creating a more responsible electorate?; 4) Is it worthwhile campaigning via the Internet as people accessing it tend to be entertainment-oriented?; 5) Do you agree with critics that say that digital innovations are mimicking traditional forms of media?; 6) Is the Internet widely used for political campaigns in your country?; 7) What kind of Internet activity prevails (sites, blogs, videos, press releases, direct mail, etc.)?; 8) Is the “social divide” an issue of concern in your country? Do many people have access to the Internet?; 9) Is there any age divide when following a campaign online? Is the Internet the primary source of information of election news?; 10) Are personal sites of candidates interactive? Do websites of politicians provide a two-way communication? Is there any bias in providing information on websites of politicians?; 11) Do you have any suggestions of ways that the Internet might actually improve the political process in your country?

2.4 The processing of the data

To compare the results, two criteria were chosen: 1) the nationality; 2) the year of the session. Afterwards the overall trends were extrapolated. The content analysis was used.

In both forums third-year students were invited to participate. Each time 20 Russian and 20 American students took part in the discussion.

When answering the questions students raised other controversial issues and offered them for discussion.

The length of posts and the number of students willing to talk about the issue testify as criteria for its importance for them.

Now let us turn to the analysis proper.

2.4.1 *Analysing the posts of the 2010 forum*

The first groups in question are the Russians of 2010 (R-1) and the Americans of 2010 (A-1).

a) The Internet offers us an opportunity to get access to a wide range of information which is a plus but at the same time the quality of this information is arguable. The students divided all the e-resources into official ones (politicians' websites and blogs, online newspapers, etc.) and non-formal ones (different forums, blogs of ordinary people, etc.). You cannot trust the information provided in official sources as it is calibrated so as to promote a certain politician and the facts that may undermine his/her image are withheld. At the same time the opportunity to analyze and compare the information from different sources can help us to form our own opinion which is critical nowadays as people tend to follow the lead rather than think for themselves, thus falling victims of manipulation by media.

As for the activities that prevail online, Americans pointed out politicians' websites and videos of their stump speeches (for example, on YouTube). Russian students mentioned politicians' websites and blogs.

Although it is common for a politician to have his/her own website, it is usually not interactive and the communication between the candidate and voters is not a two-way one. The information posted there is definitely biased in the GM participants' opinion as any candidate wants to be elected that is why he/she should be advertised at his/her best which rules out posting any materials that might undermine his/her image.

Neither of the groups has ever experienced receiving direct mail from candidates. And if they ever did, they would not approve of this tactic of attracting their attention to the running candidate.

b) As for the Internet bringing politicians closer to voters, the opinions were divided equally between the affirmative and negative answers. Some students think that by accessing politicians' websites and blogs, watching him/her giving stump speeches, we will be able to know his/her platform, to understand what his/her stand on certain issues is. The other half believes that the Internet depersonalize the electioneering process. The candidate remains out there, inaccessible to grassroots.

c) Nowadays Russian people are not interested in politics and are not politically aware because of voter apathy and a strong belief that their vote cannot influence anything, that the outcome of any election is predetermined. But as both groups of students assume the Internet can change that. Young people are its most frequent users and by moving campaigning online politicians can

educate people politically and attract their attention and, eventually, mobilize them to vote. Arranging an online campaign is a good way to reach the electorate.

- d) When comparing conventional media (TV, radio and newspapers) and the Internet that are used for disseminating information about politicians and their campaigns, the students have expressed different opinions but the most popular choice was in favour of the Internet as it offers diversity and is relatively free of the government control unlike traditional media. Some students treat both equally and they believe that, when campaigning, politicians should combine them. Still there are some students (mostly Russian) who oppose to the use of the Internet during campaigns as the information there can be easily tampered with and you never know whether whatever is reported there is true or fraudulent. The Internet offers an illusion of freedom and choice when, in fact, even this space is devoid of any democracy.
- e) Age divide. Both American and Russian students have agreed that there is age divide when following the campaign online. The reason for that is PC (personal computer) illiteracy of older generation and sometimes reluctance to embrace this tool for any purpose, let alone for finding political news.
- f) Social divide. First of all, the term “social divide” has been interpreted differently by American students. Some of them have understood it as “leading to social disconnectedness, making Internet users socially awkward”. They agreed that is one of the drawbacks of using the Internet.

Other students spoke of the availability of the Internet. Mostly students believe that Americans enjoy the opportunity to use the Internet either on their personal computers/laptops/cell phones or in public libraries, Internet cafes, coffee shops.

As for their Russian counterparts, they are not so optimistic about their opportunities. They have called it the issue of geography as in big cities it is not a problem to access the Internet while in smaller ones the Internet may not be available at all.

- g) The beliefs and opinions above have determined the answers to questions about the use of the Internet for campaigning and the Internet being the primary source for political news.

Russian students mostly focused on the former question while their American counterparts – on the latter one.

As the Internet is not widely available in Russia that is why it is not intensively used for campaigning. For the same reason it is not the primary source of information for political news.

On the contrary, in America due to a wide usage of the Internet it is frequently used for campaigning and it is believed that in the near future elections will solely take place in the Internet. As for the Internet as a source for political news, the opinions were equally divided. Half the students think people turn to the Internet first to learn the latest political news while the other half believes that the Internet is a secondary source though there are positive changes that in the future it will prevail.

- h) One of the ways to improve the political education of the people is to arrange a forum to educate young people politically and give them an opportunity to raise and discuss topical issues. It will provide politicians with the information what matters are crucial for people. Thus, they will get first-hand opinions what they should focus on in their platforms.

Some other issues that were raised as follow-ups to answering the questions above are the following:

- a) E-voting. The students embraced that idea very enthusiastically at first. But after some discussion many of them changed their mind because of an electronic media flaw (it can be hacked).
- b) Politics in an entertaining way. As one of the questions states the Internet may not be a good choice for campaigning as people who access it are entertainment-oriented. Some students believe that it should not prevent politicians from electioneering online but they should modify their campaign so that it is entertaining to follow.
- c) Campaigning is all about managing. Some students compared campaigning to marketing and advertising. Politicians are the ‘goods’ to be sold to voters-consumers.
- d) The Internet may not only help candidates to boost their image but also dilute it. Their opponents may post unfavourable videos or comments which is highly unlikely in traditional media.
- e) Branding of issues. When an issue is branded, it becomes difficult, if not impossible, to discuss its merits. Candidates and voters are left discussing labels, not issues. Labels claiming something to

be racist, socialist, authoritarian or whatever may easily make ordinary people connect the discussed problem with something negative in their minds.

2.4.2 *Analysing the posts of the 2011 forum*

The second groups under discussion are the Russians of 2011 (R-2) and the Americans of 2011 (A-2).

- a) Americans do not believe that the Internet can make a more responsible electorate as freedom of speech in the Internet is a tricky thing: every news item there is opinionated, the information may be biased and not valid and people nowadays do not have time to browse multiple sources to compare the facts and to come to their own conclusions. The Internet is a kind of a mine field, you never know whom to trust. Russians stick to quite the opposite point of view. They believe that the availability of diverse information online gives you an opportunity to form your own opinion, be more fully informed about the political situation in the country and, eventually, to make a sound judgment.
- b) When discussing whether it is worth campaigning online, the American students were more enthusiastic about the idea as their politicians are already using this tool widely and frequently. Their Russian counterparts do not believe in the worthiness of a campaign at all, let alone of an online campaign, as for them it is a sham, though they agree that online campaign is a good way to mobilize voters, especially young ones as they are those who tend to use the Internet more frequently nowadays. Still both groups of students believe that online campaign brings politicians closer to voters.
- c) As for the activities that prevail online, the American students spoke of blogs, videos (especially on YouTube), politicians' websites and their presence on social networks (for example, Facebook). The Russian students pointed out politicians' websites and blogs. Less frequently used activities are uploading videos and twittering. They also expressed their wish for politicians to increase their presence on social networks.

As for the websites of politicians, both groups of students think that they are not interactive, that they do not allow a two-way communication and the information provided there is 'positively' biased.

- d) Social divide. Americans believe that there is no social divide in their country. People can access the Internet anywhere and anytime. In Russia the answers were equally divided: half the students think that the Internet can be available only in big cities and their suburbs while the other half doubt that even in big cities all people have an opportunity and possibility to use the net.
- e) Age divide. In America in the students' opinions there is no age divide. People of all ages can and do access the Internet. In Russia the situation is quite the opposite. The students believe that elderly people feel uncomfortable about using the net that is why they avoid it if possible.
- f) When answering the question about the primary source of political information, the American students mentioned the Internet together with TV and print media while their Russian counterparts spoke of TV, the Internet and direct interaction with politicians on their campaign trail. (The items are listed in order of their preference).
- g) E-voting. This issue was widely discussed by the Russian students as they strongly oppose to moving the voting process online because of a hacker alert.
- h) Campaigning as entertainment. This question was elaborated on by the Russian students. They believe that politicians would only benefit from introducing an entertaining element into their political campaigns.
- i) The American students also emphasized the importance of meeting politicians face-to-face or watching their debates as only then you can judge him/her by his/her behavior, by his/her reaction to uncomfortable questions on the spot without any spin doctors' help. The Russians mentioned that, too, though not so explicitly.

2.4.3 *Analyzing the posts of Russian students only*

Now let us see if there are any differences between students of the same nationality.

We shall look only at differences as they mark shifts in people's perception and attitude.

The first groups to be analyzed are R-1 and R-2.

R-1 students emphasized the fact that Russians, especially young people, are not interested in politics as they do not believe that their voice can change anything, that the outcome of any election is already fixed. R-2 students did not mention it though it does not mean that within a year the problem has disappeared. But R-2 noticed certain changes in people's attitude to politics: people have become more politically aware and more politically active due to being better informed because of the availability of various types of information in the Internet.

R-1 students did not believe that e-electioneering can make the electorate more responsible for several reasons: a) the Internet is accessed mostly by young people who are not interested in politics so they will not use it to follow a political campaign online; b) the information on the Internet can be fraudulent or distorted, etc. R-2 students, on the contrary, think that the Internet makes the electorate more responsible as, by being exposed to various opinions and by comparing them, a person can make a more reasonable judgment.

R-1 students were not eager to discuss e-voting while with R-2 it aroused a heated debate.

R-1 students did not see campaigning as an entertainment event while R-2 students appreciated this idea.

There is a slight shift in evaluating the issue of social divide in the country. According to R-1 students there is a social divide in Russia while R-2 students see some positive changes.

2.4.4 Analyzing the posts of American students only

Secondly, let us have a look at A-1 and A-2.

As for the Internet being able to make the electorate more responsible, the situation is quite the opposite in comparison with R-1 and R-2. A-1 students believe that the Internet can do that while A-2 students are not so sure.

A-1 students believe that there is age divide when following political campaigns online while A-2 students do not see any.

A-1 students highlighted the fact that with the help of the Internet politicians can target young voters which is an advantage as it helps to mobilize more voters. A-2 students did not mention it at all. A possible explanation is that for A-2 students there is no age divide in America regarding accessing the net, that is why both young and elderly people use the Internet to learn recent political news, thus, by campaigning online politicians reach every stratum of society, not only young people.

A-1 students spoke of politicians' websites being biased in their favour while A-2 students enhanced this idea by introducing the problem of politicians brainwashing voters and censoring reputation-damaging information on their websites.

2.5 Spotting trends

What overall trends are there?

Globalization and information technology (IT) bring the world to our doorstep. IT rapid development and fierce competition among IT companies and web providers drive prices down. Thus, more people become computer/laptop owners and, consequently, Internet users. Easy access and online navigation, the opportunity to have any necessary information at your fingertips and the possibility to stay in touch with your relatives and friends or to make new ones make the Internet an attractive tool for any kind of interaction. Politicians have come to realize that and are trying to use it to their advantage. America is far ahead in this respect. Russians are more cautious about applying the Internet for political campaigning.

The Internet can also be used for collecting information, including political one. Earlier it was not popular much. Nowadays people are starting to get involved more actively, they become more better informed politically as with the advent of the Internet they expect that the Internet, which is relatively government-free, can become the space where democracy does exist.

3 CONCLUSION

Why should teachers introduce an extracurricular computer-mediated communication as part of their course?

One feature that seems attractive for students is the opportunity to talk to their peers in a relatively casual situation.

Another point is that some students feel more comfortable with this project as the ability to think over their answers or comments and to check them for mistakes with others including the professor relieves them of the stress that they may be subjected to in class.

Thirdly, they appreciate the opportunity to express their point of view that will be taken into consideration when making conclusions.

And, finally, they are more enthusiastic to complete the task offered in the forum as in this way they help people of other nationality to get a better understanding of their culture. To answer questions correctly and explicitly, students need to search for additional information in various sources that must be first assessed for their reliability. Thus, students get to know their culture better and they learn to support their point of view by providing experts' opinions or statistical data.

At the same time the decision to embed online activities into the course should be made with the view to enhance the interaction and learning, not as a substitute for face-to-face teacher-student and peer-to-peer communication.

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