

Sociable technology and democracy by danah boyd

In social networks literature, the term homophily refers to the idea that “birds of a feather stick together”.¹¹² Usually, the most tightly knit groups share much in common - from philosophical beliefs to interests. Additionally, people who share a lot in common are more likely to get to know one another.¹¹³ Although two close friends do not necessarily hold the same political views, the probability that they do is far greater than the probability that they do not.

Birds of a feather flock together because there is value in doing so. It is through this commonality that one can find security in one's views, feel validated and supported, and have the kind of environment that fosters motivation and joy. When communities reference the value of 'safe space,' they are referring to the homophilous environments in which people do not have to defend their minority status. Common ground is crucial to develop a safe environment in which to explore the personal and philosophical issues.

While homophily is personally valuable, its impact on emergent democracy can have dire consequences. Most noticeably:

1. It is easy to overestimate the success of a movement;
2. It is hard to rally diverse groups.

¹¹² McPherson, Miller, Lynn Smith-Lovin, and James M. Cook. 2001. Birds of a Feather: Homophily in Social Networks. *Annual Review of Sociology*, 27, pp. 415-44.

¹¹³ Feld, Scott. 1981. The Focused Organization of Social Ties. *American Journal of Sociology*, 86(5), March, 1015-1036.

Homophily can often cloud an individual's perspective about the general trend. Living in San Francisco, I am constantly surprised to overhear people express genuine shock over every election and political decision. Who on earth voted for Schwarzenegger? What rational person is pro-life? Why is anyone upset that my gay neighbors can finally get married? Albeit, even as a diverse city, San Francisco is probably the largest political bubble in the United States, but this type of shock can be heard elsewhere: on college campuses, in churches and throughout liberal and conservative, urban and rural communities. People within a community usually have the same views and they rarely know people with differing views. When reflecting on political events, people project their value system onto others and fail to comprehend how someone might possibly think differently.

Political views are not the only values that are densely clustered amidst people. (Sub)cultures consistently overestimate the popularity and spreadability of their perspective and values. For example, bloggers know other bloggers and tend to overestimate how much of the world blogs. More noticeably, bloggers value their activity and tend to think that everyone should or will blog without realizing that other people do not have the same value system that would make blogging appear appealing. Given the combination of limited lines of sight and applying one's values on others, it is not surprising that it is difficult for any individual to grasp the larger picture. Without broad awareness, people are likely to overestimate the success of their movement—it seems as though everyone agrees. Clay Shirky argues that this may be one of Dean's biggest problems when reflecting on how Howard Dean failed to capture the American voters amidst an apparent overwhelming support online and in the media.¹¹⁴

When considering the value of diversified networks, Granovetter argued that weak ties helped people find jobs because they allowed people to reach out to a more diverse audience with greater access to more diverse

¹¹⁴ Shirky, Clay, *Exiting Deanspace*, February 3, 2004, http://www.corante.com/many/archives/2004/02/03/exiting_deanspace.php

possibilities.¹¹⁵ Strong ties are where the greatest overlap of commonality is found; weak ties open up difference. Thus, when thinking about how to reach out to people with diverse political views, it is crucial to think beyond the homophilous worlds in which we are most comfortable.

Technology connects people beyond the physical restrictions of place. While technology offers the potential to access more diverse audiences, it also allows people to extend their homophilous tendencies into the digital realm rather than relying on physical proximity. As discussed below, technology tends to increase the connections of like-minded individuals more than increase the breadth of diversity. Although technology provides a public forum in which people can express different political views, this does not guarantee that those views are heard.

When Californians were up in arms about Proposition 54, which called for prohibitions in education and hiring based on classification by race, ethnicity, color, or national origin, Berkeley students covered the campus with anti-54 messages. Yet, unless one went to Berkeley, one was not likely to see these messages. Physical proximity was a barrier to spreading the physical messages. Online, many Friendster users converted their Profiles to express “no on 54” messages by changing their names, uploading pictures and talking about Proposition 54 in their Testimonials and Interests. Hundreds of anti-54 Profile connected to other anti-54 Profiles (or the anti-54 Fakester). Yet, when I spoke with Friendster users who purported to surf the network for hours daily looking for interesting Profiles, very few could recall seeing the anti-54 Profiles. They were not hidden, but they were clustered. Once one came across the cluster, one could see hundreds. Until then, they were invisible. Physical place was no longer the limiting factor - social space was. Collections of like-minded anti-54 activists connected throughout Friendster, but their message was barely heard by other participants.

¹¹⁵ Granovetter, Mark. 1973. The strength of weak ties. *American Journal of Sociology*, 78, pp. 1360—1380.

Social Technology and Homophily

Since its inception, the Internet has supported sociability. People flocked to BBSes and Usenet to find others like them and to engage in discussions about technology, politics, sexuality and a vast array of other topics of interest. Social support groups formed around common needs and issues.

While people were simultaneously exposed to like minds and diverse opinions, individuals chose communities based on their personal needs. For many, including myself, the Internet offered an idyllic space to find others of a similar ilk. This was particularly powerful for marginalized groups of people separated geographically who knew no one like them locally. Early social tools were fundamentally beneficial for all of the geeks, freaks and other social outcasts. Through online interactions, individuals could realize that there were others like them and find social support and validation in a way that helped people shape their views and identity.

Social technology supports homophily in a new way. As people seek out groups, they searched for others like them. The technology does not prevent diverse groups from converging, but the needs and goals of the individuals determine the personal value of convergence. Of course, as groups formed around one type of similarity, other differences emerged. For example, the Usenet group *rec.motorcycles* attracted people interested in motorcycles, but they did not limit their discussions to the topic of the group. Regulars talked about their life and engaged in political debates. As I am writing this, there is a long thread on this group entitled “Riding Gear for the Homophobes of Reeky” where a discussion about a motorcycle issue spiraled into a political debate. While most would label this thread a flame war, it is precisely these types of conversations where differences can be seen amidst similarities.

While the public nature of Usenet allows people to cluster based on interests, the boundaries of unmoderated spaces have to be maintained socially instead of structurally. One cannot guarantee that all members agree on all issues. In a public environment, disagreements emerge and spiral into flames. There is little social pressure to stop. People express their frustration, but it only encourages the flames. Thus, people simply

wait for flames to die or they leave in frustration. Flames almost always happen when individuals are attacked, usually because of something tangential to the topic at hand or because the core values of the group are attacked.

Consider the war between *alt.tasteless* and *rec.pets.cats*.¹¹⁶ A community of cat lovers came together on the *rec.pets.cats* Usenet group to share stories and gain support. Usenet afforded this relatively non-controversial collection of people to converge to share stories and support one another with information about cats. Through regular posting, the subscribers to the cat group had evolved a set of norms that encouraged new posters to be active, positive and supportive participants. Yet, when regular posters at *alt.tasteless* decided to 'raid' the cat group, regular posters were horrified by the shift in social norms. Postings about microwaving cats were not part of the community's values and the onslaught of tasteless and threatening messages created a mini-war between the two communities.

In the motorcycle newsgroup, it is not a heated discussion about motorcycle differences that created the flame; it is an argument about homosexuality. In the cats group, it is a difference about social norms. Disparate views can be very divisive to a public forum when there is no common ground. Usenet, like many other Internet tools, is technologically democratic: anyone is welcome to participate. Yet, embedded in the sites of interaction is a set of social norms assumed by the participants. Not all groups uphold the same norms and the convergence of disparate groups brings this issue to its head. As such, spaces that permit like minds to converge also supply fertile ground for disagreeing views to flourish.

The public nature of Usenet did not work for many people, particularly those wanting social support regarding controversial issues. Some of these groups evolved into protected mailing lists or otherwise hidden communities. Much of this can be attributed to the need for safe space. For heated discussions, people wanted communities with some baseline

¹¹⁶ Quittner, Josh. The War Between *alt.tasteless* and *rec.pets.cats*, *Wired*, Issue 2.05, May, 1994.

of commonality. As such, mailing lists and private forums emerged as a safe space for conversation.

For five years, I helped build and manage such a community. V-Day is a non-profit organization working to end violence against women and girls worldwide. Over 1,200 people organize productions of “The Vagina Monologues” each year to raise money, awareness and support. Through an internal site called the V-Spot, organizers and their colleagues can communicate with the vast array of activists working towards the same goal. Collective values around tolerance and support are articulated and maintained through the community. V-Day organizers are not a homophilous group—they do not share all of the same viewpoints, values or even language. Yet, in a constructed safe space, the organizers are able to put down their differences to communicate on common ground about ending violence against women. Muslims speak with sex workers; older women speak with teens. National and political boundaries are forgotten. At one point, a liberal college student voiced her outrage that Tampax was a sponsor. A woman from a conservative religious community wrote back to note that she was dismayed that Planned Parenthood was a sponsor; she said that she swallowed her disagreement and reminded herself that the goal was not to find differences, but to find similarities between the organizers, to remember that they were all working towards the same goal.

One of the ways in which V-Day has been valuable is by providing people with a mechanism to connect over commonalities amidst differences. Yet, it is not the online community that made V-Day effective. Technology operated as a glue between different active offline communities. Yet, by being a part of a larger community, V-Day organizers felt empowered and supported to fight to end violence against women locally as part of a global cause.

Engaging People, Engendering Community

Social tools offer a broader context in which people could ground their beliefs and actions. This is important because engaging people requires more than education; people feel empowered when they recognize that they can make systemic changes. In the Philippines, citizens rallied against their government using SMS to collectively gather and voice

their opinion.¹¹⁷ The power of collective action using technology was realized when they overthrew their President. This situation is particularly powerful because the motivating force was one's own social network, not an external source.

While media has a dramatic effect on our political knowledge, an individual's social network plays a much more critical role on affecting an individual's view. Parents help shape children's views as do other strong ties. While education, age and sexuality affect one's political viewpoint, religion, socio-economic class and cultural values ultimately have far more influence over our politics. Given that these are tightly coupled with one's family, it can often be hard to determine which factor is really key. In other words, an individual growing up in a rural conservative religious town with parents whose values match the social norms is most likely to have those same values.

It is important to consider the role of one's network when thinking about how technologies are used to engage people politically. In the United States, activists and technologists worked to harness collective action via new tools like MoveOn.org and Meetup.com. Simultaneously, individuals used blogs and SMS to spread information and connect with like-minded people. Arguably, these technologies engaged a whole new cross-section of the population to participate politically. Yet, they are not being used to generate effective political coups.

In the Philippines, the people creatively used available technology to meet their needs. Conversely, American activists are building tools to encourage democratic participation and to empower people who are currently not engaged with the democratic process. It is important to recognize that these are two different uses of technology for emergent democracy. On one hand, people are using what is available to them; on the other, tools are being designed to meet specific people's needs. In considering how to evolve emergent democracy, it is important to consider the relevant social groups as well as traditional social theory concerning how and why people engage ingroup behaviors.

¹¹⁷ Rheingold, Howard. *Smart Mobs*, Perseus, Cambridge, Mass. 2002

Democratic participation varies throughout the world. In some countries, such as Australia and Brazil, voting is compulsory. Failing to vote could result in fines, jail or other restrictions on one's rights such as the inability to travel. In other countries, such as the United States, voting is considered a privilege. Yet, in both compulsory and non-compulsory systems, there are always people who do not participate, either because they are ineligible or because they choose not to participate.

As groups fight to give rights to disenfranchised populations—such as those denied their vote through errors in the Florida balloting system that falsely accused them of being felons—there is another group of non-voters that must be considered: those who choose not to participate. A crucial assumption about these people is that they fail to grasp the importance and value of participating. This is particularly important when considered the declining American participation in democracy. Actions such as MTV's “Rock the Vote” and MoveOn.org are devised to engage people, to empower them through education. When interviewed, some people who are disengaged from the democratic process argue that they are wilfully, voluntarily disengaged.

This highlights a critical issue within democracy discussions. Compulsory systems solve this problem by mandating participation, resulting in far fewer by-choice non-participants. In other environments, efforts are made to educate, incent, or guilt people into participating. But citizens who opt out of civic participation often do so because they *already* feel disenfranchised, as when the lack of a palatable candidate creates an election with no desirable possible outcome.

When working to address by-choice non-participants, it is important to understand the factors of their non-participation. While education will address some concerns, systemic changes are necessary to address others. These are tightly intertwined problems. It is important to consider both how the collective can empower themselves and feel powerful enough to affect the systemic nature of their concerns.

In the Philippines, short messaging system (SMS) allowed tens of thousands of citizens to collect and voice their anger. SMS was not used to educate people; it relied on people's previous level of civic awareness.

Furthermore, SMS was not developed to incite political revolutions; people used available technology to meet their needs.

In converse, consider the American Dean Campaign. Technology aided those behind Dean to form a strong collective voice; this allowed that group to educate others more effectively about why they believed in Dean. Yet, this technology did not offer the disengaged population a reason to get involved unless they saw their values represented by Dean.

Shirky argues that the digital fever around Dean was a mirage—it reflected the ability for communities to form around a campaign and for money to be raised, but this did not necessarily translate into votes. The digital Dean Campaign represented an “affinity over geography” while voting is inherently “geography over affinity.”¹¹⁸ Technology operationalized homophily and allowed like-minded souls to gather with ease. This is truly powerful, yet it is not necessarily the metric of success that participants imagined.

Technological Considerations

Given different approaches to emergent democracy, it is important to step back and consider how technology is involved. Current models seem to suggest at least three different uses of technology with respect to democracy:

1. People use available technologies in a creative way to communicate within their social network;
2. Technology is developed to connect physical communities for broader support;
3. Technology is developed to help educate and empower.

Each of these approaches has different strengths and weaknesses and appeals to different groups. Yet, there are two glaring differences embedded in these three examples. First, do people drive technological use or is technology created to incite people? Second, do people use

¹¹⁸ Shirky, *ibid.*

technology to connect to people in their social network or to reach out and meet new people? If so, would they join a community or participate in connecting communities?

When considering this, it is important to realize that technology may not be able to change human goals. People either want to meet new people, or they do not, and if they do, they often want to meet people like them. Neither education nor the opportunity to create community will incent everyone to participate. The greatest incentive to participate is pressure from the everyday community in which the individual is already involved.

Herein lies the greatest challenge. If individuals determine the most effective ways to use technology, not the technology creators and activists, how can technology encourage repurposing for political action? This is a problematic statement. Meetup.com and MoveOn.org truly meet some people's needs—they are great technologies that have incented many new political participants. Yet, they are not for everyone. Some people have no interest in meeting new people while others are too overwhelmed by regular email about actions to do without incentive.

I would argue that the most clear predictor of someone's willingness to participate is probably that their friends are participating. When the United States started bombing Afghanistan, groups of friends gathered in San Francisco to collectively participate in MoveOn.org actions. It was precisely the combination of everyday community and actionable items that made this work for some new participants.

While new technologies cannot predict how they will be repurposed, they can be designed to help bridge the gap between people's everyday communities and the digital tools. Consider:

- How could local communities/friend groups be represented and collectively connect to new groups? It only takes one leader in a community to help build a larger network. In particular, how can disparate groups connect along an axis of commonality to be mutually beneficial in a way that will not spiral into a flame war?

- How could people see the impact of their local community/friend group on the whole? How would people feel if they could see how many of their friends voiced their opinion on an issue, participated in a poll or donated money? How could one use the power of distributed relationships to recognize one's significance in the process? If one person's public participation incents others to participate and this is made visible, perhaps people will realize that their vote is more than simply a vote, but an action that affects the whole chain of participation.

Embedded in this discussion are three important social certainties:

1. Not everyone wants to engage in online communities;
2. In building communities, people tend to seek out people with similar perspectives;
3. Community is valuable for support; outreach is limited by the diversity of a community's breadth.

Within democracy, effectiveness is measured in quantifiable terms: bigger is better—more money, more votes, etc. Communities should not be measured based on size—more does not mean better. Many Usenet groups and mailing lists die because too many people are involved. Furthermore, while poll numbers are valuable for candidates, those numbers become quickly meaningless for individuals on a personal, local level. Telling someone that 28 percent of the nation voted and that their vote was literally one in a million is quite different than telling someone that 28 percent of their friend group voted and that they were one of four that voted in their 15-person friend group. Localizing participation makes it feel far more visceral and important. On a technological level, scalability is crucial for creating a viable social environment.

As we consider how technology can be used to engage people in democracy, it is important to encourage diverse groups to connect and affect one another without overwhelming individuals. People must be able to find personal significance in the process. To be successful, technology must support people in negotiating their identity, relationships and community as part of the political process.

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