

Today in the Globe: Facebook's Political Reach

19 February 2010 | David Eaves | | [Comments](#)

I have [the following piece](#) published in the Globe and Mail today. It isn't going to further endear me to Michael Valpy ([who is already not impressed with me](#))... but felt another perspective on the issue was needed. He, like many traditional columnists, is not a fan of social – or digital – media. Indeed, he has argued it is [destroying our country's social cohesion](#) and democracy. Those familiar with me know [I feel differently](#) . By allowing us to self-organize, connect to one another and to our politicians, social media is enabling a different and very powerful type kind of social cohesion and democratic expression.

I respect Valpy a lot and hope we get a chance to sit down and talk social media at some point. Given our collective interest in journalism and statements [like this](#), it feels like it would be fruitful for both of us. Hopefully it will happen.

Facebook's Political Reach

Yesterday, Michael Valpy posted an interesting piece about a [Nanos poll](#) showing Canadians – including younger Canadians – question how much influence political Facebook groups should have on any government.

The problem with the piece lies in the headline: “[Facebook forums shouldn't sway government](#), young Canadians say.” It suggests that online activism – or social media in general – isn't credible with the public. This, however, isn't what the poll showed. Indeed, the poll says little about the credibility of Facebook, particularly compared to other forms of political activity. It does, however, say a lot about social media's dramatic growth in influence over the past five years.

Critically, the poll didn't compare forms of political activity. If one had done a similar poll asking whether Canadians believe a demonstration should sway the government, or if direct action – such as when [Greenpeace hung a banner](#) from Parliament – should alter government policy, would the numbers have been dramatically different? I suspect not. Governments have electoral mandates – something Canadians broadly agree with. Most political activity, both on and offline, is designed to shape public opinion and ultimately, people's decisions at the ballot box. That is a threat influences government.

Consequently, it may not be the medium that matters as much as the number of people involved. Do people believe the government should pay attention to a 1,000 person rally? Likely not. Should they pay attention to a 10,000 person Facebook group? Likely not as well. But at a certain point, with large enough numbers, almost any medium matters. Would people think that the government should reconsider a policy in the face of 10-million-person petition? Or a five-million-person Facebook group? Possibly. What about a 500,000-person march? Even this might prompt respondents to reconsider their response.

Ultimately, the Globe article jumps to a negative interpretation of Facebook too quickly. This is understandable in that traditional news organizations are still coming to grips with social – and

digital – media. But by allowing us to self-organize, connect to one another and to our politicians, social media is enabling a different and very powerful type kind of social cohesion and democratic expression.

More interesting is how split Canadians appear to be over political groups using Facebook "to share ideas, information and to help mobilize their activities" (30 per cent have a positive view, 30 per cent have a negative view and an enormous 40 per cent are undecided). Here is a technology few Canadians knew existed five years ago, and it is already viewed favourably by a third of Canadians as a way to engage with political groups. As people become more familiar with these online activities I suspect comfort levels will rise, since many people often don't initially understand or like new technologies. This survey shows us online political organizing is moving into the mainstream – perhaps even more mainstream than a protest or a petition.

So should Facebook influence the government? The prorogation debate shows it already can. But do people believe Facebook should be less influential than other (more traditional) forms of political activity? In this, the survey reveals very little. Indeed as Nik Nanos, the pollster who conducted the survey, adds at the end of the piece (and in contrast to the title): "we still haven't come to grips with what [Facebook groups] really mean."

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As one who has recently joined the ranks of those concerned about the lack of balanced coverage in

the mainstream media, I suggest that the power of cyber media is nicely demonstrated by digitally archived “Comments” posted in response to print-published articles about the Middle East. Preponderantly well-reasoned digital posts (>275) about Peter Kent’s outrageous claim that “A war with Israel is a war with Canada” demonstrates that the tide may already have turned on an issue that could well lead to nuclear war. And where can one view these electronically stored thoughts? On the website of Valpy’s own Globe and Mail!

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JDrolet ★ [1 day ago](#)

I think the weight of trust carried by the old media versus an unknown blogger is in favour of the professional journalist. But that is true only if one reads the full article. Someone reading the title alone of say a Globe&Mail article integrates it in a similar way as a general comment on a blog: that is to say, as one small piece of information that needs to be corroborated. Of course, that is a positive behaviour since so often the title is a travestie of the article itself ..., and yes, also in the Globe and Mail. That being said, i absolutely trust that if one can be critical of his readings, e.g. newspaper, and yes even the G&M, one can do the same on the net. The one difference is the greater choice of what can be read and again that is a good thing for two reasons: the diversity of views in opinions is a plus and the fear that one is swayed by bad information is not reality: if one reads a "sensasionalist" journal than he/she will like sensasionalist" blogs: no big impact on truth. Or as I said, one phrase earlier, a small one because of the great things brought by diversity as it tends to erode abuse, corruption, etc because transparency is a great cleanser.

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Mike Hoyer ★ [12 hours ago](#)

I can't figure out why you're interested in engaging Valpy on the subject. The man wears his media-insider privilege like a hazmat suit, and everything he's had to say on the subject unwittingly supports your arguments, but with all the sneering lack of self-awareness he can muster.

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