Youth Participation in Civic Engagement Through Social Media: a case study

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Abstract

A decline in civic engagement of American youth is well documented in the research. Social media can facilitate the process and disseminate the results of civic engagement. However, participants must have the skills to work in the medium. Incorporating media literacy into civic engagement projects that involve social media ensures that participants understand how to produce good content and empowers participants with the skills to continue participating well beyond the initial project. The *North Omaha Media Alliance* (NOMA) project grounds civic engagement activities with education in media literacy for college students at the University of Nebraska Omaha and high schools students in North Omaha, a community in desperate need of increased civic engagement. NOMA utilizes innovative social media to engage youth from disadvantaged circumstances in civic engagement service-learning assignments. To fulfill the fulfill the educational goals of the service-learning assignments, NOMA leverages the social networking site Ning.com to coordinate activities and link to social media outlets (i.e. Facebook, Twitter, Vimeo and YouTube) to promote the project and display student work. These sites allow NOMA youth to present their perspectives of current national and community issues and become producers of internet content. A description of The *North Omaha Media Alliance* (NOMA) project along with an analysis of project outcomes will address the question how can social media encourage youth from disadvantaged circumstances to participate in civic engagement? Overall, this paper helps scholars and community members understand the opportunities and limitations of social media for civic engagement, recognize diverse perspectives on the use of social media in service-learning from the perspectives of student participants and community partners, gain insight into the successful integration of social media into

service-learning projects, and learn about best practices for using social media to coordinate and promote civic engagement focused service-learning activities.

Keywords

Social Media; Civic Engagement; Service-Learning.

A decline in civic engagement of American youth is well documented in the research. While the 2008 election indicates that youth can be mobilized, there is still a concern about true civic engagement that extends beyond the election (Brooks, 2009; Bachen, Raphael, Lynn, McKee, & Phillippi, 2008). Brooks (2009) defines true civic engagements as "self-renewing, collective efforts by residents, organizations, and communities aimed at improving lives and strengthening communities" (p.37). Social media can facilitate the process and disseminate the results of civic engagement. However, participants must have the skills to work in the medium. Hobbs (1998) defines a broad approach to media literacy as referring to the "process of critically analyzing and learning to create one's own message in print, audio, video, and multimedia" (p. 16). While this is generally applied to mass media (e.g. television and radio), social media offers an effective outlet for civic engagement focused content and media literacy tenets can be extended to social media (Livingstone, 2004). Incorporating media literacy into civic engagement projects that involve social media ensures that participants understand how to produce good content and empowers participants with the skills to continue participating well beyond the initial project.

North Omaha is one example of a community that desperately needs projects that empower and engage their youngest citizens. North Omaha is a community challenged by economic decline and frequently negative media coverage emphasizing crime. The community is home to 18.1 percent (70, 563) of the city's population. U.S. Census data indicate that 64.1 percent are African American. 31.1% of residents of North Omaha are unemployed, 40.4% are living below the poverty level and single parents head 46.4% of households. Overall, Omaha has the third largest black poverty rate among America's 100 metro areas. While there is much more to the community than these statistics suggest, most residents of the city see the picture of North Omaha as a blighted, violent neighborhood where little of a positive nature occurs. There have been positive developments within the community but negative media saturation continues to perpetuate problematic perceptions throughout greater Omaha. This persistent

negative portrayal of the community has a naturally discouraging effect on residents, particularly the youth.

North Omaha is working to combat a history of neglect by revitalizing and creating new economic opportunities. Traditionally under-served by mass media, North Omahans desperately need an outlet for their collective voice. The NOMA project provides an opportunity to fill this need in the community. NOMA utilizes innovative social media to engage youth from disadvantaged circumstances in civic engagement service-learning assignments. To fulfill the educational goals of the service-learning assignments, NOMA leverages the social networking site *Ning*.com to coordinate activities and link to social media outlets (i.e. *Facebook, Twitter, Vimeo* and *YouTube*) to promote the project and display student work. These sites allow NOMA youth to present their perspective of current national and community issues and become producers of internet content. A description of *The North Omaha Media Alliance* (NOMA) project along with an analysis of project outcomes will address the question how can social media encourage youth from disadvantaged circumstances to participate in civic engagement?

The paper shows how the use of social media facilitated the NOMA civic engagement goals and outcomes. In addition, a list of best practices/lessons learned about integrating social media into service learning projects is provided to encourage the development of other projects with a similar focus. Overall, this paper will help scholars and community members understand the opportunities and limitations of social media for civic engagement, recognize diverse perspectives on the use of social media in service-learning from the perspectives of student participants and community partners, gain insight into the successful integration of social media into service-learning projects, and learn about best practices for using social media to coordinate and promote civic engagement focused service-learning activities.

Case Description: North Omaha Media Alliance

NOMA, operating each fall and spring semester since Fall 2008, is an after school project focused on social media, media literacy, and civic engagement. The project is a collaboration among the University of Nebraska Omaha (UNO), two Omaha Public Schools (OPS), and Girls Inc of Omaha. UNO faculty, staff, and students from the School of Communication and the Service Learning Academy provide mentorship, meeting structure, and technical guidance. UNO serves as the site for approximately eight group meetings each semester and the Service-Learning Academy coordinates the refreshments and transportation for the high school students. Two high schools from North Omaha, Omaha North High School Magnet (ONHSM) and Benson High School Magnet (BHSM), along with Girls Inc of Omaha

have had staff and students participating in the project. The educational goals of both the OPS schools and Girls Inc of Omaha align with the main project goals of NOMA. Each semester NOMA has approximately 7-20 high school students and 7-20 college students working with the project.

The NOMA project goals include 1) teach high school students about social media and citizen journalism through the guidance of university students, 2) reflect on issues related to local civic engagement as well as larger political issues, 3) combat current misrepresentations of North Omaha by reporting local news and speaking out about community issues. These goals are achieved through the critical evaluation of media; mentorship on the use of technology in creating mediated messages from UNO School of Communication faculty, staff, and students; and the use of social media such as blogs, social networks (ning.com and Facebook), and video sharing sites (*YouTube* and *Vimeo*). In the beginning of the project there was a focus on creating a recognizable image for the NOMA project.

At first, NOMA utilized committees of high schools students facilitated by faculty and students at UNO to create this image. The logo committee included students from the student run PR firm Maverick Solutions working with a team of high school students to create a logo that would represent the NOMA location of North Omaha, speak to high schools students and community members, and create a unique logo to unite the different members of the collaboration. The photo committee focused on a photo essay project portraying North Omaha from the high school students' perspective. The website committee worked on creating a basic design for a NOMA website. The blog committee created blog topics for the other students in the project to comment on, brainstormed ways to encourage blogging, and evaluated blogs for awards.

Along with the basic structure committees, NOMA participants also worked on the NOMA VOTE 2008 project. UNO students facilitated discussion with the high school students on the qualities that a candidate for President should possess, the issues they feel are critical to this campaign, and analyzing media coverage of the candidates and campaign statements. Additionally, NOMA students participated in the *Election Night Blog* hosted by the School of Communication and experienced the *Election Night* news coverage by *UNO TV*. NOMA students also had the opportunity to talk with the director for "18 in 08," a documentary focused on the youth vote in the election, before seeing the documentary.

In the spring 2009 semester, NOMA focused the Obama's First 100 Days project. Meetings explored different topics by showing media clips and reading magazine and newspaper stories. Topics included

inauguration and its meaning, different presidential mentality, President Obama's priorities, Iraq/Afghanistan mission timelines, Obama's Budget and the Economy. After each guided reading and discussion with UNO faculty, staff, and students, NOMA high school participants would blog about their reactions by answering a series of questions as well as providing their own reactions and reflections on the issues.

The final structure working for the last three semesters focuses on the Critical Issue Investigation projects. NOMA high school students chose issues critical to their lives for further investigation. With the help of college student mentors as well as technical instruction from UNO faculty and staff, the high school students conduct research, interview relevant sources, and then design a presentation of that information with an audience in mind. Choices for the presentations include radio programs, powerpoint shows, or PSA-length video presentations. Some of the critical issues investigated include gang violence, teenage pregnancy, high STD rate, dangerous driving due to distractions, the negative perceptions of North Omaha in the mainstream media, Emmet Till, quality of drinking water in Omaha and around the world, the Humane Society, cyberbullying, strategies for a successful freshman year, public vs. private schools, and many more.

NOMA plans to revisit the importance of voting with the 2012 election campaign. In addition, there are plans to unite more directly with local non-profit organizations to provide a stronger tie to local issues. Finally, the investigation of critical issues will continue to be driven by the perspectives and interests of the high school student participants.

Social Media Opportunities and Limitations

Social media has offered several opportunities for the coordination of the NOMA project and dissemination of final presentations. The nomanetwork.ning.com site allowed all NOMA participants to communicate with each other, brainstorm, report on progress, and post meeting details in a protected space. The site was deliberately setup to control access from those outside the project. Since many of the students involved in the project are in potentially dangerous and certainly vulnerable positions, it was decided that an online space was needed where they could go without concern for who might be on the site. The design of the site did allow for the dissemination of three early outcomes of the project. The logo (Figure 1), the photo essay project, and the blog posts about 'Obama's First 100 Days'.

Figure 1: NOMA logo.

The outcomes of the NOMA VOTE 2008 project included discussion outcomes on candidate qualities and characteristics as well as important issues for the election. Candidates for president should speak well; be fair, influential, genuine, honest, a leader, smart, resourceful, strong, healthy, bold and spiritual; have a firm stance and morals, a self-sacrificial predisposition, experience, energy, and have plans for the future and a way to make them work. Issues for the election include lower taxes, war in Iraq, food and gas prices, health care, stable economy, employment, financial crisis, dependence on non-domestic fuels, drugs, abortion, animal rights, education, oil drilling, and economic security. Students also analyzed media coverage concluding that the ads should focus more on issues, be honest, and include more recent information rather than old sound bites and quotes. The improved media literacy and critical thinking skills demonstrated by the high school students were put on display when the participated in the Election Day 2008 School of Communication Blog (School of Communication, 2008).

Students used social media to post content that they created in the Critical Issue Investigation projects. Each of the projects is presented at the end of each semester at a celebration for the project participants. After the celebration, each of the projects is posted to *YouTube*, *Vimeo*, or *Blogger*. The results can be found at the following sites:

- NOMA Blog main site: http://thenomablog.blogspot.com/
- NOMA MEMBER BLOGS (Spring 2010): Ronnyece's blog provides facts and stories on a key issue for teens and North Omaha at http://teenpregnancys.blogspot.com
- Denai investigates the need for clean water around the world and blogs about her findings at http://inthekno-h2o.blogspot.com
- NOMA videos at http://www.youtube.com/TheNomanetwork and http://vimeo.com/channels/162416

While social media did provide opportunities for the project, there were a number of limitations. First, there is difficulty working with public schools and social networking sites. OPS, like many K-12 institutions, has a policy to block sites like *Facebook* at school. At first the Ning.com site was considered different, but as the project moved forward social network restrictions were extended to it. When working with students from disadvantaged circumstances, access to technology outside of school can be difficult. Most of the students do not have high speed internet at home and many do not have access to a computer. This limited the use of sites as the project moved forward and shifted the focus from blogging between NOMA meetings, to an activity during meetings. However, the excitement of creating multi-media projects soon outstripped the interest for blogging and now most students choose photo, radio, or video projects.

Second an increased interest in photo, radio, and video projects increased the need for technology. This required substantial resources. Grant writing became a key focus for the continuance of the project. Luckily grants were awarded and the project was able to purchase Kodak Zi8 video cameras, Cannon Powershot cameras, and Olympus digital recorders. Both the cameras and the recorders have worked well in the project, surviving the use of a number of high school students over five semesters.

Third, considerable time is spent on training to use both the cameras and the recorders in accordance with standard practices in media production and editing as well as the basic tenets of media literacy. UNO faculty, staff, and students in broadcasting and radio production provide an invaluable service. Without their experience this project would not be able to achieve its goals.

Lessons Learned

Lesson one: Despite some popular notions to the contrary, it is possible to get high school students excited about local and national issues. Even the most indifferent students were willing to engage once they received the training and mentorship from faculty, students, and staff. Students reported that they gained confidence from working with the project. They felt that their voice was heard, especially during the blogging on election night for the UNO School of Communication's election blog and end of semester celebrations. Students appreciated the exposure to different social media outlets and the chance to create online content.

Lesson two: High school students from disadvantaged circumstances benefit from projects that expose them to higher education institutions. One of the most mentioned reasons for participating in the project was the chance to spend more time on a college campus and work with diverse groups of

university students, faculty and staff. One student mentioned that what he really liked about our meetings was talking about smart, important things with smart people. Others said they just enjoyed hearing about the lives of UNO students and realizing that maybe university is something they could do. Most saw it as a chance to express parts of their personality and focus on issues that really mean something to them.

Lesson three: Coordinating a project with faculty, staff and students from a university, two public schools, and a community partner is a huge undertaking. NOMA would not be possible without proper resources in terms of technical experience, material resources, and institutional support.

Best Practices

Over the last six semesters, NOMA leaders have identified several keys to success that serve as a list of best practices for those wishing to create a similar project. These include:

1) Create a safe, respectful environment conducive to discussing difficult or controversial topics.

2) Provide background information on issues to facilitate informed discussion and critical analysis.

3) Include time to think and reflect with an open mind on the issues.

4) Encourage students to present their perspective on all issues. Do not shy away from topics that are important to them. Make sure they all know their voice is important.

5) Utilize whatever technology is available to the fullest extent, but be aware of potential limitations in terms of access.

6) Celebrate accomplishments and provide an outlet for others to see the achievements of project participants.

(Leonard, Smith-Howell, Martin, & Baxley 2009).

Conclusions

Social media may hold the key to increasing youth civic engagement. The excitement surrounding social media is hard to deny and connecting that excitement to issues that might seem out of reach for the average high school student could reverse the trend of declining interest. NOMA serves as an example of

the successful integration of social media with civic engagement to empower high school students from disadvantaged circumstances.

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