8 The Public Sphere and Online Social Media: Exploring the Use of Online Social Media as Discursive Spaces in an Irish Context

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Abstract

Online social media have become integral to individuals' media and communication repertoires globally. They provide spaces to meet with friends, reconnect with old acquaintances and gather around shared topics of interest. This chapter presents findings from a qualitative study into the role of online social media in the lives of 25 to 30 year olds in Ireland. The wider research project asks how these sites are enmeshed into everyday life. This chapter focuses on the use of these online social media sites for discursive practices associated with Habermas's (1989) conception of the public sphere, as a space of rational debate among private individuals. Here I report on empirical research carried out between 2008 and 2012 drawing on insights gained from semi structured interviews and online observation carried out with eleven participants. The study aims to gain an insight into their use of online social media focusing here on their attitudes towards posting, online discussion and conceptions of online social media as a discursive space.

Keywords: online social media, citizenship, public sphere, media and everyday life, audience studies, internet research.

1.   Introduction

Web 2.0 and social media in particular have come into sharp focus within debates surrounding public engagement and citizenship as possible elixirs to a perceived democratic deficit in contemporary society. However, it is all too easy to valorise technology, viewing it as a 'magic bullet' which will alter greatly the way in which citizens engage with public life. If we examine only the technical features or the content of such media and eliminate the user from the equation an incomplete picture may be formed. Following research which emphasises the need to examine the role of the internet in civic participation (Dahlgren, 2000; Dahlgren & Gurevitch, 2005; Hirzalla & Van Zoonen, 2010; Wellman & Haythornwaite, 2002) this study investigates how online social media is utilised by citizens in everyday life to engage with civic life in an Irish context. This chapter focuses on one aspect of a wider research project, namely participants' use of online social media in discussion of formal political events.

The context for this particular study is Ireland. The past ten years have seen major changes for the generation of Irish citizens now in their late twenties. The highs of the Irish 'Celtic Tiger' economy have given way to a phase of economic meltdown where the confidence and expectations of prosperity and stability have been replaced by mass unemployment and a resurgence of emigration[1]. Members of this age group are often cited as being disengaged from politics and public issues; this research asks whether online social media sites play a role in this group's participation in discursive civic practices?

Running parallel to this, the dissemination of vast amounts of information of various genres and questionable quality is often viewed as a distraction to citizens, corrosive to the public sphere. The structure of the home as a private space can be seen as increasingly permeable through the use of media technologies. Just

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1. Unemployment figures published by the CSO put the unemployment rate in Ireland at 14.4% for October 2011 (Quarterly National Household Survey: Quarter 3). This is an increase of 9.6% since January 2008 when this research began when the rate was calculated at 4.8%. This reporting period was deemed of most relevance to this research as it corresponded to the period of empirical research. In terms of emigration the CSO released figures in September 2011 which show increases in the level of emigration from Ireland, especially among Irish nationals (Population and Migration Estimates April 2011). In the year from April 2010 to April 2011 76,400 people emigrated from Ireland in total with 40,200 of these being Irish nationals, a rise from 27,700 in the previous year. In terms of age 25 to 44 year olds were the largest cohort to emigrate with 34,400 leaving the country in this period.

as the public sphere has infiltrated this once perceived private space of the home, its inhabitants have gained power to influence events within the public sphere through the use of information and communication technologies (ICTs). In terms of more recent ICT development, new forms of social reality are emerging: where national, regional and cultural boundaries are breaking down, technology is the only remaining boundary, and it allows for forms of social reality whereby shared experience is permitted across thousands of kilometres (Morley, 2007). Online social media in their different incarnations allow for a variety of interactions among users. From 'one to one' interactions in an instant messaging session, email and private messages on social networking sites; 'one to many' interactions through blogs, social media posts and comments on various media websites through to 'many to many' interactions on forums, group and community web pages. These sites create spaces where people can connect with each other, gather together and where discussion can occur (Baym, 2000). Boyd and Ellison (2007) identify the power in these interactions for users as the ability to collapse time and space, reflecting McLuhan's (1964) ideas on the impact of technology on society. In what can be held as a technological determinist stance these interactions are seen to alter practices of communication, collaboration, information dissemination and social organisation (Benkler, 2006; Castells, 1996; Rheingold, 2000). Negroponte (1995) thus described how internet technology would create a new "global social fabric" which would replace any technology which went before it (p. 183).

Within this research the conception of the public sphere emerges from Habermasian theory as a space where a collective of private individuals can gather to share information and ideas and engage in debate surrounding matters of public concern. Habermas (1989) saw the bourgeois society of the late 17th and 18th centuries as providing a model for the ideal public sphere where issues relating to the state and public policies could be discussed in accordance with Kantian ideals of procedural rationality[1]. Utopian perspectives view the internet as having a potential for the enhanced provision of such a space, where people can construct their identity independently of their demographic

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1. Procedural rationality posits that where discussions take place the emphasis is on the strength of an argument as opposed to a person's social status and background.

profile, providing a potential for debate irrespective of the social situations of the individuals involved (Benkler, 2006; Negroponte, 1995; Turkle, 1996).

Habermas (1989) tends to idealise the public sphere of the 17th and 18th centuries in his work, defining the public sphere as "the public of private individuals who join in debate of issues bearing on state authority" (cited in Calhoun, 1992, p. 7, emphasis in original). The origins of this idea can be seen to stretch back as far as Classical Greece[1]. The Grecian model of a public sphere coupled with Immanuel Kant's idea of 'procedural rationality' can be seen as the foundations of Habermas's (1989) formulation of the public sphere. This ancient model of the public sphere resurfaced during the Renaissance period and Habermas (1989) sees this template for society as surviving in some form through the Enlightenment to the emergence of contemporary democratic society. Critiques of Habermas's (1989) concept of the public sphere have come from a variety of standpoints, and point out the exclusions evident in the structure of Habermas's (1989) romanticised vision of the 18th Century public sphere where access was limited to upper class, property owning, white males. Fraser (1985, 1992) has argued for a broadening of access and an expansion of the scope for valid topics of discussion, to include the politics of everyday life as well as formal politics at the level of the State. She argues that the public sphere is not a singular entity but is constituted of a multitude of public-spheres or 'counterpublics' made up of those members of society excluded from Habermas's (1989) conceptualisation of the public sphere.

Democracy and citizenship require the provision of a space where citizens can gather and discuss public issues, a fact which continues to be drawn on in much of the literature concerning the potential for the internet to play a role in the strengthening of citizenship and democracy (Dahlgren, 2009; Hirzalla & Van Zoonen, 2010; Livingstone, Couldry, & Markham, 2007; Rheingold, 2000). In contemporary society there may be the potential to establish this type of public sphere through the internet. Thus, Habermas's (1989) concept

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1. In the Greek instance society was demarcated along lines of the state (*polis*) and the private realms of free citizens (*idia*) and also public life (*bios politicos*) and home life (Habermas, 1989, p. 3). The public sphere in the Greek sense was formed on the basis of discussion where heads of households could engage in discussions of all aspects of public life. Their status as the head of a household was the criterion for gaining entry to the public sphere (Habermas, 1989).

of the public sphere becomes an ideal reference point within which to examine the use of online social media in an Irish context. These sites provide spaces where discussion can take place. They are spaces which have the potential for groups of private individuals to come together and examine the actions of public figures. However it would be naive to posit that this type of discussion is taking place based solely on the structural features of these technologies (Papacharissi, 2011).

The united public sphere envisaged by Habermas (1989) may have given way in the 'information age' to arenas of public debate which are based on the discussion of shared interests and the sharing of information. Gitlin (1998) hypothesises on the fragmentation of the public sphere into a collection of 'public sphericules' made up of a variety of interest groups. He views the development of computer technology and in particular the personal computer and the internet as contributing to the emergence of these sphericules of distinct interests. Public discussion is viewed as focusing on local and personal issues and displaying them to the world. These developments can be viewed as creating a sense of a 'globally interconnected world' relating McLuhan's (1964) conception of the 'global village'. The structure of this online mediascape is problematic, from a production perspective niche audiences are defined with content tailored and directed accordingly. Within this type of environment the chances for the development of a unified arena of discussion are slim. While online social media often enable the easy development of distinct interest groups it is unclear whether the emergence of a multitude of publics can lead to the creation of a singular public defined by Gitlin (1998) as

> "an active democratic encounter of citizens who reach across their social and ideological differences to establish a common agenda of concern and to debate rival approaches" (p. 173).

In terms of the media consumed in contemporary society, the perceived danger is that the creation of highly distinct niches of interest can have a cocooning effect, wrapping people in the areas of their own passion and interest with little exposure to alternative viewpoints and debate; this could eventually manifest in

the loss of a sense of the 'imagined community' (Anderson, 1991) of the nation, which authors such as Morley (1996) saw as a central function of shared media experiences.

2.   Methods

There are a number of approaches which researchers can take in qualitative studies of internet use. Research can be situated in the online setting examining the interactions of users and content created by them (Baym, 2000; Goode, McCullough, & O'Hare, 2011; Markham, 1998; Turkle, 1996). Research can be situated offline, engaging with users and examining how online media fit into their lives generally or relate to specific aspects of it (boyd, 2007, 2008; Livingstone, 2002, 2008; Livingstone et al., 2007; Olsson, 2006). Another possibility spans these two approaches examining both online and offline spaces, examining users' activities online and connecting them with offline routines, exploring how these activities fit into their lives (Bakardjieva, 2005). The third approach is the path taken in this research[1]. Like any methodological approach this has an impact on the data gathered and the conclusions which can be drawn. This methodological decision complemented the aim of the research project which was to explore the use of online social media within the context of participants' everyday lives.

A multi-method approach was taken, encompassing a number of qualitative methods which would provide different insights into the role and use of online social media in the lives of the participants. The methods employed included a week long media diary, a semi-structured interview, a recorded online session, a period of online observation and an online survey. This chapter will report on findings relating to the use of online social media as discursive spaces by participants, drawing on data gathered in the interview and online session stages of the research.

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1. This is by no means an exhaustive list of approaches to a qualitative study of internet use, it illustrates some of the decisions made over the course of this research project. This research project situates itself within the audience studies paradigm of research and draws on the ethnographically inspired empirical research carried out by authors such as Baym (2000, 2010), boyd (2007, 2008), Livingstone (2002), Livingstone et al. (2007), Markham (1998), Morley (1986), and Wellman and Haythornwaite (2002).

The recruitment of participants included people with varying levels of interest in political and public issues, from those who were members of political parties to those who expressed no interest in formal politics at all. To recruit the eleven participants I utilised a snowball approach, making contact with individuals in a number of different workplaces, political parties and civic groups. While eleven is a small number of participants and therefore results from this study are not generalisable to the population at large, the combination of methods utilised in this research leads to a set of descriptive data which sheds light on the ways online social media are embedded into everyday life for these individuals.

Table 1.   Summary table of Participants

Name	Gender	Age	Location	Education	Occupation	Civic Engagement (key below)
James	M	25	Rural	3rd Level Degree (Arts)	Unemployed	TP(MPP,M,V), CuC, P
Eoghan	M	26	City	Masters Degree (Arts/Business)	Project Manager	TP(MPP,M,V), P
David	M	27	City	Post Graduate Diploma (Arts)	Researcher	TP(L,M,V), CuC
Kevin	M	27	City	3rd Level Diploma (Business)	Public Sector	TP(M,V)
Michael	M	27	City	3rd Level Degree (Arts)	Marketing PLC	TP (M)
Patrick	M	28	Rural	3rd Level Degree (Business)	Air Steward	TP(V,M), CoC, P
Adam	M	29	Provincial Town	Apprenticeship	Mechanic	TP (V)
Joan	F	28	City	3rd Level Diploma (Hospitality)	Retail Manager	TP (M, V)
Cathy	F	28	City	3rd Level Degree (IT)	IT Analyst	TP (M, V)
Anne	F	29	Provincial Town	3rd Level Degree (Arts)	Public Councillor/ Carer	TP (MPP, M, V), P, CC
Joanne	F	29	Provincial Town	3rd Level Degree (Science)	Underwriter	TP (V, M, L), P

Key for Civic Engagement: TP: Traditional Political, MPP: Member Political Party, M: Media, V: Voting, CuC: Cultural Citizenship, P: Protest, L: Lobbying, CoC: Consumer Citizenship

For the participants, all in their late 20s, this stage of life is characterised by searching for jobs, building careers, purchasing houses, entering into married life and planning for or raising families. The increase in responsibilities associated with these aspects of life is reflected in some of the conceptions of citizenship which participants shared relating to their status as taxpayer, obeying the law and voting[1]. In terms of gender breakdown, the study included four female and seven male participants. Table 1 above provides an introduction to the participants including the predominant ways in which they engage with civic life in Ireland.

3. Findings and discussion

The findings presented in this chapter relate to the use of online social media by participants, specifically examining the role of these sites in discursive practices of citizenship. Four areas are examined here; online social media sites used, attitudes towards posting and discussion, online social media as discursive spaces and the potential for the development of a public sphere through online social media. The findings presented in this chapter are drawn from interviews and online sessions with the eleven participants in the study.

3.1. Online social media sites used

All eleven participants had multiple online social media profiles. These varied from social network sites such as *Facebook*, *Bebo* and *Twitter* to video sharing sites such as *YouTube*. A number of participants described how they had migrated from social networking site *Bebo* to *Facebook* in recent years, often retaining their *Bebo* account but rarely, if ever, accessing it.

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1. When discussing their conceptions of citizenship all participants included ideas and activities associated with the sphere of public authority. This occurred in two modes. Firstly, for participants who were members of political parties or civic society groups, connection with this sphere was maintained on a regular basis through participation in collective forms of action both on and offline. For participants who were not involved in such groups, connection with this sphere was maintained through regular consumption of news and current affairs media. As for participants who were in employment, their conception of citizenship was bound up in their status as taxpayers and their interest in politics linked to this role. Community was a recurring and strong theme in participants' conceptions of what citizenship entailed, from those who worked on single issue campaigns in their community to those who felt respect and friendliness were duties to be carried out as citizens in their everyday lives. Ideas of community and the local were at the centre of tangible practices which they could engage in as citizens.

Facebook was the most popular online social media site used among participants; however the use of this site fluctuated between those who logged in daily to those who rarely logged into their profile at all. James, Eoghan, David, Thomas, Cathy, Anne and Joanne logged onto *Facebook* most days, had updated their profile information, posted photos and engaged in conversations on the site. While Joan, Kevin, Michael and Patrick all had profiles on *Facebook* with some personal information and profile pictures they used the site less frequently, sometimes less than once a week. For Joan and Kevin this was due to lack of access at work while Michael and Patrick had concerns about their privacy.

Facebook was viewed by participants as accessible and easy to use as well as being a space where the majority of their friends went online. This was in contrast to their views on *Twitter*, Cathy, Anne, Joanne, Eoghan and Michael, had accounts on *Twitter*. Of these participants Michael and Cathy could be classed as readers or 'listeners'[1] using this site to follow breaking news stories and celebrity life respectively. Anne, Joanne and Eoghan had created profiles but rarely, if ever, used them.

3.2.   Attitudes towards posting and discussion

There were varying views towards posting among participants in this study. While all participants posted on social media sites there were divergent attitudes towards and practices of posting. All of the participants replied to friends' posts and had online conversations with them, however a number were reluctant to post, and on some occasions only posted if they felt they had something valuable to add. Attitudes towards posting varied depending on the type of site being used by participants from online social network sites, to forums and news media sites.

Cathy, Joan and Kevin, saw posting on social network sites such as *Facebook* as an activity reserved for interaction with friends and often those who they were in contact with offline on a regular basis.

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1. 'Listener' describes *Twitter* users who do not send out tweets but follow others. In a survey conducted in 2011 40% of active *Twitter* accounts were found to be listeners (http://blog.Twitter.com/2011/09/one-hundred-million-voices.html?m=1).

"I wouldn't really post pictures of myself, I'd post up group photos... things that people can share or that other people can relate to" (Joan, 28, online session, January 2011).

"I wouldn't comment on public things. I'd comment on my friends things" (Cathy, 28, online session, January 2011).

"I have a lot of my own opinions but I don't go shouting them out to other people on social networking sites I just tend to keep to myself and if people do write up I'll study their opinions but I'd never really put up my own. I'm kind of reserved in that sense" (Kevin, 27, Interview, January 2011).

Anne who has two profiles on *Facebook* described the different uses she had for each of her profiles:

"On my private [profile], I post daft comments like, 'god I'm wrecked' or 'I'm starving' or 'I want a Mars bar'... you leave a comment and that's it and then you can go into your friends and talk about nothing, well not nothing but happier, everyday stuff about your lives and things that you have in common. So that's what I like about Facebook... on my [councillor profile] it's political issues or the photos on it would just be PC photos" (Anne, 29, online session, January 2011).

The images on Anne's councillor profile depict her raising money for local charities and participating in local campaigns and events.

Posts relating to everyday life were most frequently made by participants. This included text and photographs depicting events in their lives. On posting about everyday life Joanne considered why she posted these types of comments. Social media sites are often critiqued by the media in particular for the level of trivial or unimportant content. However, the insights given by participants here demonstrate that these sites and this type of content play an important role in connecting with friends, family and the wider community. The banalities

of daily life and the phatic communication practices engaged in online can be viewed as a source of cohesion for these connections.

> "I honestly couldn't tell you why. It's not like I want people to know what I'm up to but it's more like 'isn't this lovely, I want to say how lovely this is' that kind of thing. Like last night I was there on the couch watching that film [Forest Gump] and I was thinking about us going [on holiday] and I was just [thinking] isn't this brilliant so I just put it up" (Joanne, 29, online session, June 2011).

> "You can just put your thoughts down, the other day I posted 'The painting and decorating of the house is complete roll on Thursday because my wooden floor is coming' because my house is just upside down and it's an absolute mess so it's kind of a way, because I'm so mad with the state of it. Someone else that you know has the same problem as you and feel a bit better and he feels a bit better and then you go your separate ways again" (Anne, 29, online session, January 2011).

Cathy and Adam expressed a reactive form of communication in so far as they tended to reply to comments made by others predominantly. Cathy only posted comments when she felt she had something of interest to say relating to an unusual event or if she was going on holidays.

> "I would respond to things rather than leaving up comments and things like that. You know some people leave up messages four or five times a day and I'm not like that, I do it maybe once every two or three weeks. I do it when I have something to say basically" (Cathy, 28, online session, January 2011).

Adam also tended to reply to comments but when conducting online observation on his *Facebook* profile he did post a substantial amount of photos relating to his keen interest in motorbikes and cars, an area in which he had a considerable level of expertise. Relating to comments he said:

> "I wouldn't put up any under my name. See the way [friend] there she wrote up a comment then I'd put something up under that" (Adam, 29, online session, June 2011).

For others such as Joan, content posted on *Facebook* was aimed at her friends and was intended to provide light relief for them.

> "I'd post, funny videos from *YouTube* if I find something that makes me laugh, I'd post them for my friends… just silly little things that might amuse other people, that I kind of get a bit of fun out of" (Joan, 28, interview, January 2011).

The use of social networking sites by participants can be seen to reflect what boyd and Ellison (2007) describe as 'ego-centric' online spaces. They are used primarily to support offline social networks, to connect and maintain relationships with friends as opposed to meeting new people around shared interests; therefore they become closely linked with life and identity offline (boyd & Ellison, 2007). For participants, social networking sites and in particular *Facebook*, were the first and, for the heavier users, most frequently visited site when they went online. This framing of online interaction as predominantly 'ego-centric' can be seen to influence participants' conceptions and use of online social media more generally as discursive space. In the following sections this is addressed relating specifically to participants' attitudes towards online discussion of public issues.

3.3. Online social media sites as a discursive space

As with posting, there were varying attitudes towards discussions on online social media sites among participants. Those who entered into discussions about public issues on a regular basis tended to be those participants who were already active in spaces of discussion offline. Those who were members of political parties, Eoghan, Anne and James, regularly entered into discussions with people who shared their ideologies.

While Eoghan did display his political beliefs online and often entered into debates with friends through his *Facebook* profile he was critical of the medium, viewing face-to-face debate as a much better format. He felt that the nuances of political argument were lost in online discussion.

> "Political discussions I would tend to avoid having on *Facebook* because it's a crap form to do it… it's fine to put arguments forward but at the end of the day it doesn't really bring anything forward. All you get out of that is that other people that may not be in the party and aren't willing to read through everything, unless your argument is correct and hugely thought out… actual physical interaction you've body language, you've all those things which are taken away in the format of interaction online" (Eoghan, 26, Interview, January 2011).

James' profile contained many expressions of his political affiliations and beliefs, from status updates to his profile pictures, and the groups he joined displayed a sense of his party allegiance. He talked about using his profile picture as a canvassing tool during the election. Members of his party used the election poster of their local candidate for their profile picture. This practice was also demonstrated by Anne and Eoghan for their respective parties.

> "Well as you can see we're in election mode! Again especially in election mode including the last local election you tend to go a bit overboard on *Facebook*. As you can see people who have commented, likeminded people as you can see we all have the same profile picture" (James, 25, Online session, February 2011).

Anne talked about a change in her use of online social media since she joined her political party. She noticed a transformation in the way she talked about issues and the frequency of her posts. Since joining the party she tended to post more comments on political issues than she had before. She also noticed that the mode in which she addressed issues had changed from comments relating to her personal situation to comments which related to a wider societal concern.

> "Before I was in [political party] I probably wouldn't have [posted] politically as in commenting on particular Fianna Fáil or Fine Gael or the state of the country. If there was a budget cut I would have said that is ridiculous, now I probably would put it up on *Facebook*" (Anne, 29, Interview, October 2010).

A second level of discussion became evident among a number of other participants who were not members of political parties or civic society groups: both Joanne and Michael talked about commenting on issues or events if they felt a sense of outrage about them. Michael talked in general terms saying that he entered into discussions very rarely but if he did it would be relating to

> "something I'm very very bitter about or if something hilarious happens I'll jump on and do it. But it'd have to be one of those two things which are admittedly very rare occurrences" (Michael, 27, Interview, June 2011).

Joanne went into some detail about an event which caused her to post a news article and begin a discussion. This incited a discussion with a number of her friends on *Facebook*.

> "One thing I remember lately, probably the last kind of current affairs topic, it was a while ago about a woman in Dublin and she was in council apartments and she froze to death[1]… I came across that somewhere on some news website and I posted it on *Facebook* because I was just disgusted, because I just couldn't believe that in this day and age that that kind of thing was happening and that actually caused a lot of people to comment on it… there was a lot of talk about the effectiveness of the country's politics and stuff like that" (Joanne, 29, Interview, June 2011).

A third level of discussion became apparent among another group of participants:

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1. Joanne refers to the case of Rachel Peavoy a single mother who was found dead in her Dublin city flat on January 11th 2010 due to hypothermia. An inquest was held in Spring 2011 into her death. There was public concern that Dublin City Council's suspension of the centralised heating system in the area had contributed to her death (Newenham, 2011).

Joan, Cathy, Kevin and Patrick expressed no interest in entering discussions on *Facebook*. They viewed these sites as spaces for leisure and often expressed annoyance at people who used these sites to express opinions on public issues or politics.

> "I wouldn't feel the need to push it other people's faces all the time. It's something I'd discuss with friends, boyfriend or family but I wouldn't feel the need to push it out there… if you want to join a page fair enough but put your comments on that page keep each subject related to each subject" (Joan, 28, Interview, January 2011).

These attitudes towards online discussion of public issues revealed a sense that the online space is constructed in different ways for participants in relation to their offline civic practices. For participants who are engaged in civic practices offline, online social media profiles are utilised for the discussion of politics. While for those who are not engaged in these types of activity offline, online social media is a space in which the political should not be addressed. There is a sense here that boundaries are drawn around spaces where the discussion of public issues should take place and these should be adhered to. This provides an insight into the creation of 'public sphericules' (Gitlin, 1998) at a micro level, where participants can either participate in discussions or wish to ignore them completely.

3.4.   Public sphere 2.0

Anne, James, David and Eoghan regularly engaged in online discussion of public issues on *Facebook*. James and David also utilised other more specialised sites to engage in more in-depth discussion. Anne's *Facebook* pages were the main site for discussion of public issues online. She found that discussions often involved people who were members of her political party and rarely friends from outside the party. She also browsed the *politics.ie* online political forum, reading different opinions and following threads using her partner's account. She had yet to set up her own account but felt she would get involved in debate on this site in the future.

> "I'd probably see a discussion between my [political party] friends… there would be discussion, but my friends that would be outside of a political party, not really" (Anne, 29, Interview, October 2010).

James utilised his *Facebook* account to engage in discussion with a local radio current affairs programme. He also had an account on the more specialised *politics.ie* site where he engaged in more in depth debate of public issues and politics. He used these opportunities to discuss his party's policy and his views on history and political theory.

David also used his *Facebook* profile to discuss politics and public issues with friends. He described how discussion on *Facebook* was limited, often revolving around 'one-liners' and little in depth analysis.

> "Usually there's one or two people who will comment on bigger political issues, they'll post a one liner usually, because of the nature of *Facebook* they are just one or two liner things. Because *Facebook* isn't conducive to discussion, [it's] sound bites. And equally if you are friends with somebody on it you are going to be preaching to the converted, everybody is going to be on the same wavelength anyway… in that sense *Facebook* can be a bit exclusive to some extent because inevitably you do focus in on people with similar interests. So in some cases it narrows your views or consolidates your point of view" (David, 27, Interview, February 2011).

While watching news and current affairs programming David often discussed both the production values and the issues being discussed with his friends. As well as these *Facebook* based discussions David also had an account on a specialist architectural site for discussion which often involved discussion of public issues.

Online discussion in these instances occurs between people of similar outlooks or political persuasion. The spaces for discussion on these sites can be seen to tie in with Gitlin's (1998) assertion that the development of ICTs could lead to the

fragmentation of the public sphere into a collection of 'public sphericules' made up of a variety of interest groups.

In opposition to these uses of online social media as spaces where discursive practices can take place Joan, Kevin, Michael, Patrick, Thomas, Cathy and Joanne did not view online social media as a space for the discussion of politics and public issues. They felt that their profiles are not a space for the declaration of political beliefs; this division between the former group and the latter correlates with participants' modes of engagement with offline civic or political groups.

Kevin and Cathy's responses, reproduced here, demonstrate the sentiments expressed by these individuals in relation to the use of online social media for the expression of political opinions and discussion of public issues.

> "I'm not one for commenting to be honest I generally like to read other people's comments just read to see what other people's opinions are" (Kevin, 27, Online session, January 2011).

> "*Facebook* can be a way for people to vent their frustrations with politics, I'm not that type of person, I'll vent it but when you do that you're doing it very publically and I'm not like that I'd be more of a private person and I'd say it to the people that were amongst me but I wouldn't put it out there to the world" (Cathy, 28, Interview, January 2011).

Interviewees indicated a range of attitudes towards social media's potential as a site for a discursive space akin to Habermas's (1989) ideal public sphere. James, David, Anne and Eoghan saw these sites as a space for discussion of varying depth. The members of this group were already involved in offline citizenship activities where they participated in collective activism, political action and public discussion. Other participants, Kevin, Cathy and Joan viewed the discussion of politics as a more private pursuit happening offline among small groups of friends and family. Unlike the first group these participants were not involved in any community civic groups but did demonstrate an interest in keeping up to date with the news and current events.

Utopian perspectives view the internet as having the potential for the provision of a space where people can construct their identity independently of their demographic profile, providing a potential for debate to take place irrespective of the social situations of the individuals involved (Benkler, 2006; Negroponte, 1995) creating a space akin to Habermas's (1989) ideal public sphere. However this research revealed a sense that participation in online debate often correlates with offline collective civic activities. The idea that ICTs are playing a role in fragmenting the public sphere as per Gitlin (1998) is evident here. The online activity of participants who are involved in political parties and campaigning organisations illustrates this idea, through discussions which take place among people with similar outlooks and experiences. For those who do not participate in these types of collective civic activity this fragmentation manifests in the spatial divisions which they impose on their online social media use in relation to what types of content these sites should encompass.

4.   Conclusions

This research illustrates that online social media sites in isolation will not create an online public sphere which is inclusive of a broader range of people. While the potential for the development of a public sphere exists in these spaces, through the technological affordances provided by online social media, this research finds that participation in these spaces by a broader public is contingent on individuals' offline civic activities. The empirical research points towards Gitlin's (1998) hypothesis that the impact of electronic media on the public sphere creates a landscape of 'public sphericules' consisting of disparate groups with little connection between them. Participation in these spaces is contingent on pre-established interests and orientations towards their content.

Online spaces where participants gathered around specialist interests can be seen to provide scope for the discussion of public issues. However it was those who were already engaged in the discussions of such issues offline that viewed these sites as having this potential. These sites were framed as hostile and confrontational spaces by participants who did not participate in discussion

on them. These specialist sites also counter the discursive aims of Habermas's (1989) ideal public sphere as they tend to be populated by individuals who have well established ideological stances and views, visiting to relay their views and not necessarily enter into the reasoned debate which Habermas envisaged in the ideal public sphere.

The conceptualisation of the online space by participants also has an impact on the utilisation of these spaces for the discussion of public issues. Social networking sites such as *Facebook* were viewed by those who do not participate in collective civic activities as primarily a space for connecting with friends and relatives. Spaces were created where it is suitable to discuss certain topics and for some participants these lines were very firmly drawn. They shared activities and insights relating to the private sphere while the discussion of issues relating to the public sphere were cordoned off into specific spaces online. Discussions with participants who were involved in collective civic activities also pointed to this division of space. They moved to more specialised online social media spaces to discuss public issues as the structure of social networking sites was viewed as inconducive to in-depth discussions, reinforcing further the idea of fragmentation.

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