

Puget Sound Off: Fostering Youth Civic Engagement through Citizen Journalism in a Local Community Context

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ABSTRACT

Social media technologies provide unique channels to empower youth to become more civically engaged. Puget Sound Off is an online blogging and networking site focused on helping youth connect, collaborate, and take action around local community issues. We performed an evaluation study seeking lessons learned from a real world deployment. We found that a core group of youth became highly engaged with Puget Sound Off, and that both usage and identification with the community was positively correlated with civic engagement. Youth reported an appreciation for the opportunity for meaningful discussion around issues that mattered to them. We found however that growth of Puget Sound Off was slow, in part due to the constraints of deploying to youth in a real world context with concerns about inappropriate use. We end with recommendations for fostering growth and civic engagement in related social media technologies.

Author Keywords

Youth, Internet, civic engagement, Puget Sound Off, PSO, blogging, blogs, citizen journalism, community action, civic efficacy, social participation

ACM Classification Keywords

H5.3. Information interfaces and presentation (e.g., HCI): Group and Organization Interfaces – *Asynchronous Interaction, synchronous interaction.*

INTRODUCTION

In the modern age of social media and user generated content millions of teens go online to connect with each other, share media, and play games. According to the Pew Internet and American Life Project [21] 74% of Americans and 94% of teens go online. 45% of boys and 55% of girls create original content, in the form of blogs and webpages, or personal media such as photos or videos. Around 65% use social networking sites such as Facebook, which now has over 500 million active users [8].

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The rise of the Internet was predicted to have a positive effect on *civic engagement* [22] – those civic and political activities motivated by a desire for social change either in local communities or national contexts. As noted by Bennett et al. “the Internet offers exciting possibilities for reconnecting young people with civic life [2, p. 1].” They argue that the more democratized nature of Web 2.0 technologies provides an avenue for a more participatory model of citizenship, with greater levels of peer-based information sharing and collective action. This opportunity for having an online civic voice is of particular importance to youth, who are historically disenfranchised in large scale, cultural conversations [22].

The blogosphere in particular has emerged as a prominent vehicle for the voices of heretofore disempowered voices seeking social change. Through blogs people are empowered to engage in *citizen journalism* [13] -- speaking in their own voices about issues that are important to them, and developing audiences outside the editorial control of mainstream media. In a recent survey report of the Pew Internet and American Life Project [18], it was found that 4% of online Americans write about a political or social issue in their own blogs, 8% in social networking sites, and 12% via comments. While powerful, the blogosphere is still dominated by adults, and the discourse of the prominent social media applications adopted by youth -- social networking sites -- tend to be focused on more lightweight, playful social interactions [9].

To address this issue in their local neighborhoods, in 2007 the City of Seattle [7] -- together with the Metrocenter YMCA [24] and the University of Washington’s Center for Communications and Civic Engagement [5] -- started an initiative with the goal of creating a digital commons for youth to have their own voice. They hoped to develop an online venue for youth, designed by youth, that provided an environment for meaningful discussion that fostered civic engagement. In 2008 they launched Puget Sound Off [PSO], a web site that incorporates both blogging and social networking tools, oriented around social and political causes that mattered to local youth. See Figure 1.

In this paper, we present the results of a study assessing the impact of PSO and youth blogging on civic engagement

through a combination of usage analysis, questionnaire results, and focus groups. An examination of the impact of PSO and its deployment in a real world context affords the opportunity for unique insights into the challenges of designing social media systems to have meaningful, real world impact on youth civic engagement.



Figure 1. PSO Home Screen, with call to “Connect! Collaborate! Take Action!”

RELATED WORK

Consistent with early hopes [22], there is some evidence that the Internet has had a democratizing impact on civic participation. Political bloggers were more likely to report the Internet helped them to become more involved in local issues [15], were more civically engaged, and had a higher sense of community collective efficacy. In reviewing hundreds of web sites in 2004, Bennett and Xenos [3] found that the youth web sphere had “come of age” with resources for political participation targeting youth. They characterized the more democratized, participatory model of Web 2.0 civic behaviors as *actualizing vs. dutiful* citizen engagement. In another survey of 264 web sites focused on youth civic engagement, Bennet et al. [2] found the sites that were online only (not associated with a more traditional offline organization, service, or activity) had much higher levels of *actualizing* features such as opportunities for sharing peer knowledge, training in participatory media such as blogging, joining peer groups or networks created by peers, and peer-generated calls to actions. While there is evidence that youth in the United States still have higher levels of political apathy, a telephone survey study [17] found that youth were also more involved in online civic activities than their elder counterparts, particularly for more local civic or political groups.

A recent report by the Pew Internet and American Life Project [22] found that both online and offline, political activity is positively correlated with socio-economic status, such that lower income corresponds with less online political activity, in part due to disparities in Internet access. Nonetheless, younger Americans are more likely than their elders to be participating online in political discourse. As they note, “there are hints that forms of civic engagement anchored in blogs and social networking sites

could alter long-standing patterns that are based on socio-economic status [22, p. 5]”.

While there is evidence for increased participation by diverse groups in political discourse online, and that online civic discourse is correlated with offline civic behaviors [6], it remains to be seen if online discourse actually mobilizes people toward *increased* levels of civic engagement. For example, a study of Taiwanese Internet users [6] found no evidence that participation in online political discourse promotes new real world civic behaviors.

In addition to increased civic engagement, we further look to the Internet to provide opportunities for civic learning that would translate into *effective* offline civic behaviors. Bennet et al. [2] outlined four civic learning goals that foster effective civic engagement: the **knowledge** necessary to be an effective citizen, the **skill to communicate** effectively, the ability to **join public groups or networks** that can emerge and organize around an issue, and the **skills to take action** in a public manner, including participating in voting, fundraising, running for office, or protests. Thus a key component toward effective civic engagement is the ability to join groups and networks that may engage in collective action. Online, communities require both networking features that enable everyday encounters and connections, and more group-based tools that facilitate community activism [12].

There have been few examples of real world studies examining the impact of specific communication technologies on civic collective efficacy. A notable exception is a case study [10] of the impact of video blogging on a rural community in Brazil using semi-structured interviews. The study found clear examples that video blogging led to community empowerment, where participants were documenting topics with the goal of mobilizing the community to action. For example, one user blogged about the proper manner to dispose of waste, with a call to action to citizens and local government for proper trash disposal.

To aid in this line of research, Carroll et al. [4] developed a measure of community collective efficacy – beliefs that the shared capacities of the group may lead towards accomplishing joint outcomes. Through a questionnaire study they developed a model of Internet use and activism, illustrating that general Internet experience corresponded to the civic use of the Internet, which further corresponded to real world activism.

For this study, in addition to examining PSO usage, civic engagement, and the role of community collective efficacy, we were interested in exploring the role a sense of community -- a feeling of belonging and loyalty to a local community -- has on civic engagement and community efficacy. A recent study [19] illustrated that a place-based social networking tool could increase sense of community, loyalty, and participation in a community hub – a coffee shop. Similarly we expect a place-centric community

technology may meaningfully impact civic behaviors through increased loyalty and attachment to the community.

PUGET SOUND OFF

The Puget Sound Off [20] website is a joint project of the City of Seattle [7], University of Washington's Center for Communication and Civic Engagement [5], and the Metrocenter YMCA [24]. In developing PSO, they adopted a participatory design approach. "The PSO website was created in Seattle, Washington by youth for youth. 18 Puget Sound area teens came together in the summer of 2007 to design it after gathering input from 180 teens [20]."

In the spirit of citizen journalism and a more bottom-up, peer-based, democratized approach to civic participation, the goal of PSO was to empower youth to express themselves, connect to local resources, discuss issues important to them, and engage with each other and policy makers in taking action [1]. In addition, PSO is a tool to help youth develop media literacy to achieve those skills that enable *effective* civic engagement: skills for knowledge, communication, joining groups and networks, and taking action. The primary message on the home page focuses explicitly on the transition from having a voice to taking action:

*Take action! One voice makes a world of difference!
It starts with one voice speaking out on an issue, then
finding others to collaborate with and taking action.
You can be that voice. You can get involved. You can
make change happen. Puget Sound Off is the place to
find your voice!* [20]

When users join, they create a profile, and through their profile can declare their school, neighborhood, and important causes. As members, they may post blog entries, comment on each other's blog entries, share photos, videos, events, polls, and so forth. On the home page, the content is structured according to primary cause categories (e.g., animal rights, education, and environment), and includes top blogs, top groups, most active members, and new members. See Figure 1. A take action image links to a page that guides members to specific actions, such as "contact the mayor" or "register to vote". A calendar provides lists of events that again help members transition from online participation to offline participation.

For the most part, users were recruited into PSO through partnerships with schools and a free summer program at the YMCA called Digital Connectors [24]. Youth are referred to the Digital Connectors program through the youth unemployment referral services if they have expressed an interest in improving their technical skills. The Digital Connectors program serves the purposes of a) training youth who care about their community to improve their technology and writing skills, b) seeding the PSO web site with content that sets the tone of conversation and c) recruiting further participation. An important goal in recruiting users and seeding initial content was to assure

that a diversity of voices from various ethnic groups and neighborhoods were represented on the site.

In the following sections of this paper, we first provide an overview of PSO usage through the first two years of its deployment. We then examine the relationship between the use of PSO and civic engagement through a questionnaire. Finally we describe some of the lessons learned from two focus group discussions involving youth participating in the Metrocenter YMCA Digital Connectors summer program.

USAGE ANALYSIS

Over the course of its first 22 months use (through December of 2009, at which time we took a snap shot of usage statistics) 1125 unique accounts were created in PSO. Of those who reported gender, 45% were male, and 55% were female. About 45% reported their race in their profile, showing a very diverse ethnic background. See Figure 2. The average age was 22, however the majority of participants (62%) reported being under 18. 12 reported being 80-100 years old, suggesting participants were inflating or masking their age, introducing a bias to the average. Nonetheless, there are a number of adults in PSO, in the form of counselors, teachers, and technologists working on the system.

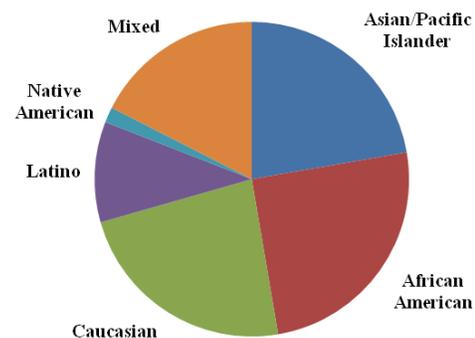


Figure 2. PSO has a very diverse population.

Through the first 22 months of use, a total of 624 blog entries were posted into the system, with 2234 comments. Many blog entries had long threads of comments, indicating that blog posts often served as instigators of conversation.

Contrary to expectations around social media, the growth of users in the system was linear, rather than exponential, over time. See Figure 3. This linear growth is probably because youth join the system as a part of youth educational programs, or as teachers introduce them to PSO in their classes. PSO does not aggressively promote participation using viral techniques common to social networks (e.g., tools for importing all your contacts from email). It should be noted however that the site has generated a reasonable number of non-registered user visits. Over the ten months leading up to the end of this study, during which Google

Analytics was enabled, the site receive a steady 148 visits a day, cumulating in 33,788 unique visitors from February through December of 2009. While steady, these traffic levels showed no or slow levels of growth.¹

An important question is whether users tend to stay within the system after initial exploration, or tend to drop out. To address this question we examined how many days they stayed -- the time between when they joined the system, and their last log in date. 38% of users were one time users. However, of those who returned, the average length in days between first and last use was 101 days, with the proportionate life span (days in PSO/total days possible from start) being .31 (*SD* = .31). In other words, a sizeable proportion of users both returned to the site and became loyal members, participating over an extensive period of time.

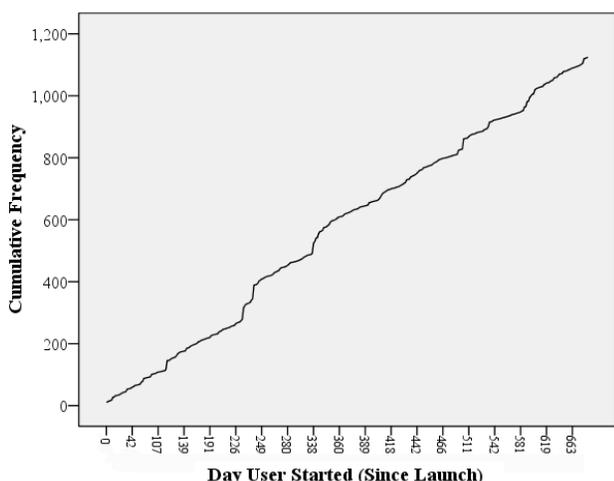


Figure 3. Growth of PSO users over time was linear.

Cause categories are a very important feature of PSO, orienting conversations around civic issues. When posting blog entries, members may select one or more predetermined cause categories for that post. The number of posts by cause category indicates that the topics of government and politics, social justice, and education inspire the most content and conversation. See Figure 4.

To further assess the civic content of the blog posts, we reviewed the last blog post of the 100 most recent posters, coding each one for whether it belonged to a cause category, and whether it had civic content. 53% were associated with a cause category, and 61% had civic content, including posts about civic issues in their schools, their neighborhoods, immigration, and local politics. Those

blog posts without civic content were primarily personal posts, photos, or links to music. Of the 47% of the posts not associated with a cause category, many were associated with teen groups instead, such as Voices of Iraqi Youth and Black Achievers 2011 Senegal Trip. Many of the groups were created for specific teen programs (e.g., Youth Summit, The Leadership Project) or cause campaigns (e.g., Teens Against Distracted Driving), where it was clear teens were encouraged to post entries in PSO as an educational aspect of the program.

Of the blog posts reviewed, we found no evidence of inflammatory or antagonistic commentary, suggesting a strong norm for pro-social behavior. Three of the 100 posts inspired an in-depth conversation. For example, one person posted a “cyberbullying” question in a blog post asking the community members their feelings about the Seattle public schools’ new policy giving school administrations the power to discipline students based on off-campus speech online. Eleven people responded, expressing very divergent views, which the original poster synthesized as the twelfth comment off the blog post.

The Teens against Distracted Driving group provides the best example of a conversation around blog entries leading to youth taking action. The group started by defining the problem (driving using a cell phone) and sharing statistics about distracted driving and accidents. They then decided to campaign to increase awareness in their schools and brainstormed methods for reaching fellow students. They took action by setting up tables in their schools and passing out bracelets to those who signed a commitment letter to not drive distracted.

Blog Posts and Comments by Cause Category

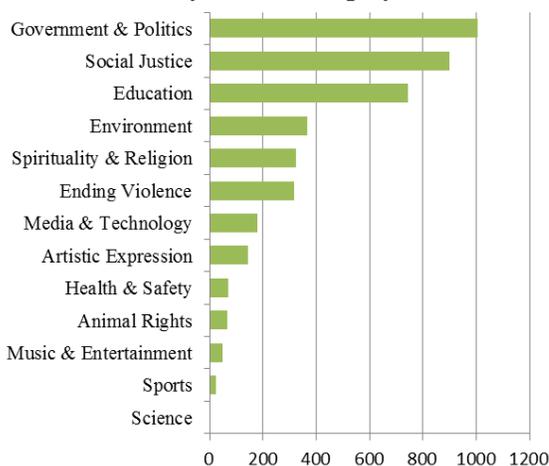


Figure 4. The number of blog posts plus comments by cause category, indicating conversational activity around causes.

QUESTIONNAIRE

We distributed a questionnaire to gain a deeper understanding of PSO usage, its impact on technology experience, and its impact on sense of community, civic engagement, and civic self-efficacy.

¹ We report usage through 2009 to correspond with the timing of our questionnaire and focus groups. However, at the time we write this paper in May of 2011, the unique visitors a day is 267 – indicating an ongoing slow and steady linear growth in traffic. Similarly, the number of blog posts has grown to 2287, with 6592 comments.

Procedure

We recruited PSO users to participate in a questionnaire both by posting an advertisement within PSO, and by sending an email invitation to all members. To add an incentive to complete the questionnaire, we entered each participant in a sweepstakes for a 50\$ gift certificate.

Participants

Over two weeks a total of 26 participants completed the questionnaire, 56% male and 42% female, with an average age of 18. Five out of the 26 were over 18, and were removed from the analysis. 15% were Asian or Pacific Islander, 27% African American, 39% Caucasian, and 19% other or mixed. These numbers are more diverse than the City of Seattle population as a whole, which is about 70% Caucasian, 14% Asian, and 8% African American. When asked how long ago they had joined PSO, 11 participants indicated over a year ago, suggesting the questionnaire respondents tend to be more engaged users than the average. They had largely joined PSO through a group or a program (46%) such as the YMCA or the Urban Family Center. As noted earlier youth are often referred to these programs as a part of youth unemployment referral services. Some joined PSO through the recommendation of a friend (19%) and some joined through a school (19%). Two joined from an advertisement, and no one joined from Facebook or MySpace. Questionnaire participants were active Internet users, with 100% indicating they were online at least several times a week, and 62% indicating they were online several times a day.

Puget Sound Off Self-report Usage

When asked how often they used various PSO features, we found that reading blogs, browsing profiles, and browsing pages about causes were the most frequent behaviors, followed by adding comments to blog posts and writing blog posts. Clearly the blogs were a central feature of the system. See Figure 5.

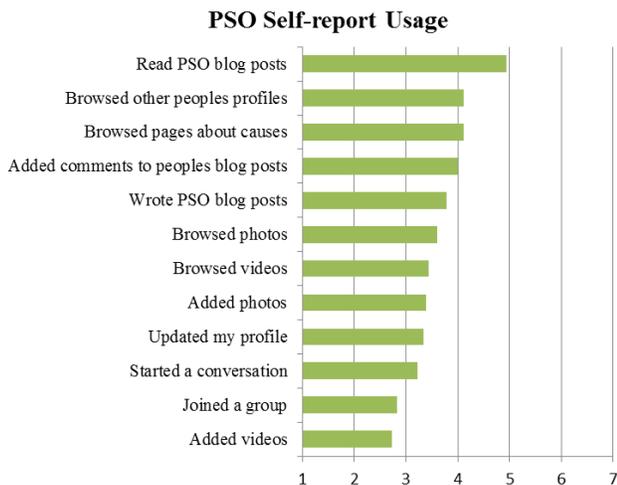


Figure 5. Self-report usage of various PSO features, where 1 = not at all, 7 = all the time.

We then then asked participants to indicate how much PSO helped them achieve any of a list of goals. As can be seen in Figure 6, the most highly rated goals achieved in PSO were having something to do that was positive, learning how to express themselves better, and having fun. See Figure 6.

It was considered very important when designing PSO and recruiting participants that it reflect the interests and diversity of the users and their communities. When asked specifically about these issues, respondents rated it fairly highly as reflecting their interests ($M = 4.9, SD = 1.59$), the interests of their community, ($M = 5.0, SD = 1.78$), and the diversity of their area ($M = 4.7, SD = 1.76$, where 1 = not at all and 7 = extremely so). For later use, we aggregated and averaged these items into one “PSO Reflects Community” measure.

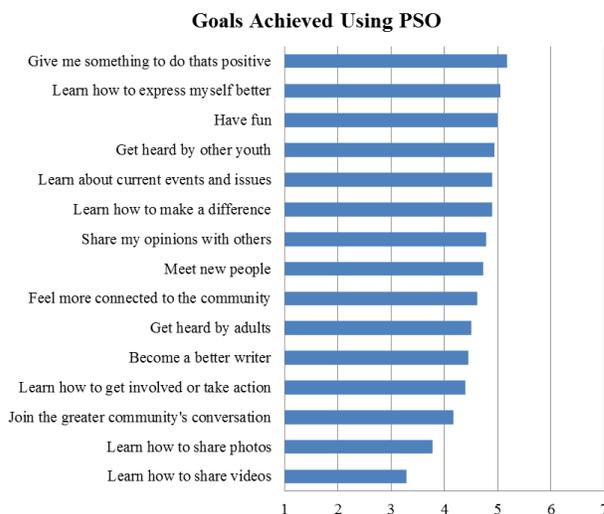


Figure 6. Extent to which PSO helped users achieve specific goals, where 1 = not at all and 7 = extremely so.

Puget Sound Off and Technology Experience

One of the primary goals in having youth use PSO was to give them an opportunity to develop their level of experience with Internet technology. To assess whether use of PSO had any impact, we first asked our respondents to indicate their overall level of experience with various technologies. See Figure 7. We then computed a general PSO usage score by averaging across types of usage.

To assess if PSO usage levels corresponded with general technology experience, we then measured the correlations between PSO usage and level of Internet experience. As can be seen in Table 1, PSO usage had a statistically significant impact on Internet experience levels in writing blogs, group emails, adding comments to blogs, making and sharing videos online, making and photos online, and text messaging. Given the correlational nature of this data, it should be noted an alternative explanation is that people with more Internet experience are more likely to use PSO from the start. To assess if this may be the case, we looked

at the relationship between time since joining PSO and technology experience, and do find a trend that technology experience goes up with time since joining PSO, but this trend is not statistically significant.

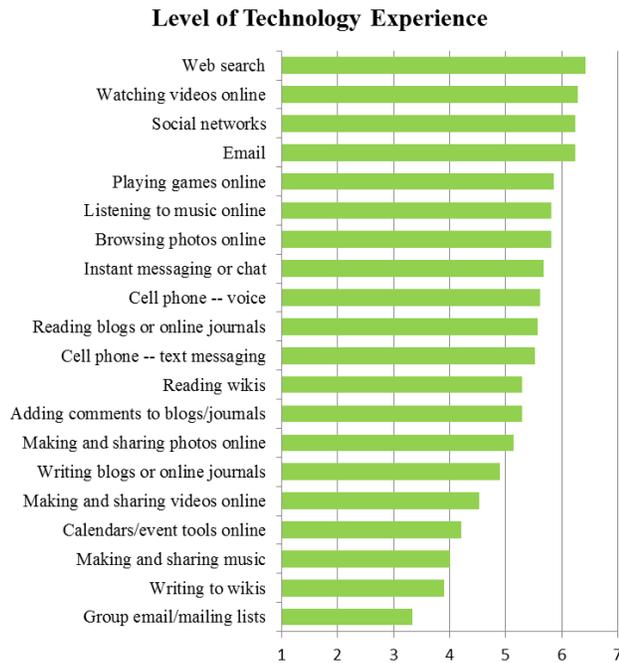


Figure 7. Self-reported technology experience, where 1 = none, never used and 7 = extremely experienced.

We asked participants several questions addressing whether they considered technology a viable tool for expressing their opinion and being heard. As can be seen in Table 2, users who had more general technology experience and PSO usage reported that the Internet was an effective tool for communicating opinions. Interestingly, PSO usage correlated much more highly with whether participants felt they had forums to be heard by local decision-makers, perhaps because of the local community nature of the web site and the fact that it is hosted by the City of Seattle.

Puget Sound Off and Civic Engagement

Another important goal of PSO was to provide a venue through which participants could become more engaged citizens, crossing the line from expressing their opinion on civic issues to taking action. To assess the relationship between PSO usage and civic engagement, we included a few measures.

Civic engagement. Civic engagement was measured using items from the Civic Engagement Questionnaire [16], a standard measure asking how often respondents had engaged in various civic activities such as 'Spending time participating in any community service or volunteer activity', 'taking part in a protest, march, or demonstration', and 'playing a leadership role at school (such as student government or leadership in a club).' Internet-related items were not included in this measure to assure it reflected civic behaviors outside of PSO usage.

Type of Technology	r	p <
Writing blogs or online journals	.69	.003
Group email/ mailing lists	.62	.007
Adding comments to blogs	.59	.012
Making and sharing videos online	.54	.024
Making and sharing photos online	.53	.030
Cell phone -- text messaging	.49	.047
Making and sharing music	.47	.055
Cell phone -- voice	.46	.065
Browsing photos online	.45	.072
Reading blogs or online journals	.45	.009
Listening to music online	.40	.110
Writing to wikis	.36	.102
Web search	.35	.173
Instant messaging or chat	.31	.230
Calendars/event tools online	.26	.322
Email	.26	.324
Social networks	.25	.342
Playing games online	.24	.361
Watching videos online	.22	.390
Reading wikis	.10	.740

Table 1. Correlations² between PSO usage and kinds of overall technology experience. Bolded items are statistically significant at p < .05 level, two-tailed.

Technology Attitudes Questions	Technology Experience	PSO Usage
What is the effectiveness of the Internet to communicate opinions?	.59	.50
What is the effectiveness of Internet to communicate with elected officials?	.25	.30
Do you have forums to express your opinion to other youth?	.45	.48
Do you have forums to be heard by local decision makers?	.39	.64
Do you like to participate in forums with diverse opinions?	.59	.58

Table 2. Correlations between technology usage and attitudes toward technology. Bolded items are statistically significant at p < .05, two-tailed.

² Correlations between .4 and .6 are considered moderate to large in size. Note the p values reflect a small sample size.

Civic competence. Civic competence, or the perceived ability to engage in civic action, was measured using items adapted [11] from the California Civic Index [14]. These items ask to what extent the respondent feels capable of accomplishing various tasks around a problem in their community, such as 'call someone on the phone that you had never met before to get their help with the problem', 'organize and run a meeting', and 'contact an elected official about the problem'.

Civic self-efficacy. Civic self-efficacy, or the belief that one can make a difference civically, was measured using items adapted [11] from the California Civic Index [14], including 'I believe I can make a difference in my community' and 'by working with others in the community I can help make things better'.

Civic accountability. Civic accountability, or the sense of personal responsibility towards being involved, was measured using items from the California Civic Index scale [11, 14], including 'working on local problems/issues is important', and 'being actively involved in community issues is my responsibility.'

Community efficacy. Community efficacy, or the belief that one's community has the ability to work to solve its own problems, was measured using items from the Community Collective Efficacy Scale [4], which included items such as 'as a community, we can handle mistakes and setbacks without getting discouraged' and 'I am convinced that the people in my local community can improve the quality of life for the community, even when resources are limited or become scarce'.

Sense of local community. We measured psychological sense of local community, or the feeling of connection, belonging and loyalty to a local community, using items from the psychological sense of community scale [23] adapted to refer to local community. We asked respondents to think about the local community that is important to them, and consider that community when answering these questions. Items included 'I feel loyal to the people in my local community', 'I really care about the fate of my local community', and 'I would work together with others on something to improve my local community'.

For each measure, we averaged across items. We found that while respondents reported reasonably high levels on the more attitudinal measures (civic self-efficacy, community efficacy, or civic accountability) they reported lower levels on the more behavioral measures of civic engagement and civic competence. See Figure 8.

We then examined the correlation between a) these measures of civic engagement and civic efficacy, and b) levels of participation within PSO including writing blog posts, overall PSO usage, and the extent to which PSO reflected the interest and diversity of the respondent and his or her community. As can be seen from Table 3, writing

blog posts and overall levels of PSO usage has a significant positive correlation with civic engagement. Thus the more users wrote blog posts and the more their overall PSO usage, the higher their levels of civic engagement.

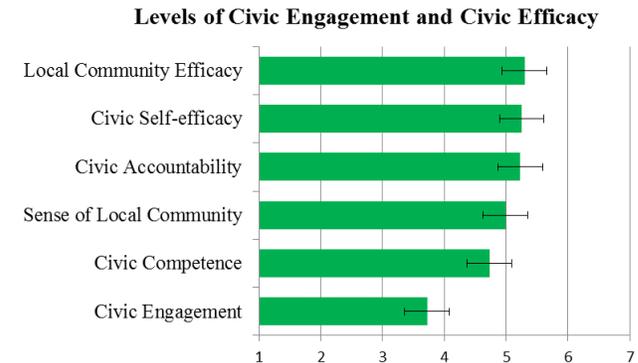


Figure 8. Psychological measures of civic efficacy and sense of community were higher than behavioral measures of civic competence and civic engagement, where 1 = not at all and 7 = extremely so.

Civic Engagement and Efficacy	Wrote PSO Blog Posts	Overall PSO Usage	PSO Reflects Community
Civic Self-efficacy	.29	.39	.52
Local Community Efficacy	.23	.38	.65
Civic Accountability	.21	.36	.56
Sense of Local Community	.08	.36	.56
Civic Competence	.39	.47	.57
Civic Engagement	.56	.54	.47

Table 3. Correlations between measures of civic engagement and PSO usage, where bolded items are statistically significant at p < .05, two-tailed.

Perhaps more interestingly, the extent to which respondents felt that PSO reflected their community had an even stronger relationship with these same measures. The more PSO reflected their community, the higher participants were on measures of civic efficacy and engagement. This suggests that identification with the PSO community is a mediator of the impact of PSO usage on civic engagement and efficacy. In other words, in order for a users' civic engagement to increase through use of PSO, they must identify with the PSO community. We further found that the measure of whether PSO reflected their community correlated with overall PSO usage ($r = .61, p < .05$), that accomplishing the goal of feeling more connected to the PSO community correlated with civic engagement ($r = .55, p < .05$) and that a general sense of local community correlated with civic engagement ($r = .52, p < .05$).

To provide a better overview of PSO usage and civic engagement, we split the respondents into two groups of high and low users to generate a bar graph. As can be seen from Figure 9, users who actively used PSO reported much higher levels of civic engagement.

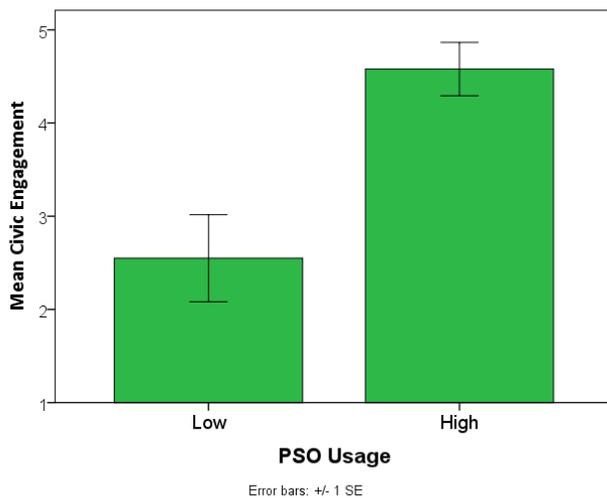


Figure 9. People with high PSO usage had much higher levels of civic engagement than people with low PSO usage, where 1 = not at all, 7 = extremely so.

Open-ended Responses

At the end of the questionnaire we provided respondents an opportunity to comment on what they liked about PSO, or what they disliked or would recommend changing.

Consistent with our usage analysis and questionnaire scale items, participants mentioned liking the opportunity to express themselves or be heard around topics that were important to them.

It really let me express myself and let me be heard.

It's an outlet to address issues in the community and allows your voice to be heard.

Being able to discuss topics that I was passionate about and having the modem [sic] to reach out to others about political issues.

They did not care for posts that were off topic, and wanted to maintain the community's culture of conversation around issues that matter.

Because of the targeted outreach the past few months for PSO, a great deal of younger youth have been posting blogs on topics that aren't very serious and don't affect the community really. ... While we want all youth to have their voices heard, it should be taught what topics are appropriate- this isn't another Myspace or Facebook.

If this is a civic engagement site then why are there posts about boyfriends and girlfriends, about what fieldtrips people just went on? The culture needs to go from pop culture/personal life to civic engagement and

press the issues so that people actually start to take action.

In addition to appreciating the more serious, civic topics of conversation, users indicated an appreciation for the opportunity to learn.

i like how some important people tell you what going on in you or close to your area.

i am more informed about whats going on around my community and where to look for information's.

Several participants mentioned the importance of connecting with similar others, particularly others their own age.

Being able to connect and interact with teens that are around my age, in my state, and where I live.

Being able to say and discuss my opinions and get feedback from other people around my age.

A few mentioned wanting better tools for inviting or adding friends or receiving updates, indicating a) an awareness that PSO was not leveraging some of the more viral features of many existing social networking systems, and b) a desire to have more people in the system. One person mentioned wanting less of a presence of adults.

And, a final comment from one of the teachers shows appreciation for its impact on his or her students.

PSO provides a badly needed service to teachers and students (from my perspective as a teacher). The writing that my students are doing has increased tenfold through the use of blogs and comments. PSO takes 'issues' far beyond the static pen and paper and allows my students to enter into a discussion of a particular subject and forces them to really think about their own values and ideas.

FOCUS GROUPS

In August 2009, fourteen teens from the YMCA summer program participated in two focus group sessions. The goal of the focus groups was to provide further insight into how youth experienced PSO. For each focus group we asked a series of questions to assess if they understood and appreciated its core mission, how did their usage relate to their existing real world communities, and how would they recommend improving the user experience. Each focus group was transcribed and reviewed for emerging themes.

The focus group teens were a reasonably Internet savvy group, with 78% having Internet access at home, 71% having a Facebook account, and 71% going online at least several times a week.

Appreciating the Mission

In our discussion of the goals of PSO, the participants showed a clear understanding for the mission of PSO, and listed the mission as a primary reason for liking it.

On Myspace, people talk about a whole lot of nonsense, where here people talk about stuff that has meaning.

They appreciated this higher purpose relative to other networking sites, saying it was more productive, legitimate and authentic than MySpace or Facebook.

Relation to Real World Communities

We found through the questionnaire that the feeling of connection or identification with the PSO community meaningfully impacted levels of civic self-efficacy and engagement. During the focus group we asked participants whether they felt PSO reflected them and their communities. They reported a strong sense of belonging with the site membership, that it was comprised of people “like them” in their real world communities, and that the topics were fairly well representative of their communities’ interests.

Blogger “Types” or Not

Participants indicated the biggest barrier to use was whether they were a blogging type of person, and that furthermore there was not enough of a sense of audience and conversation. The more active blog posters expressed a fair amount of frustration that they spend a lot of time on their blog posts, but then the posts would soon get lost as new blog posts came into the system. Active bloggers wanted more of sense of being read, of having an audience, and of having more active conversation.

Personal Networking vs. Serious, Educational Focus

Participants felt some tension between the mission of PSO and their desire for more casual socializing. An illustration of this tension between PSO’s more educational goals and the more personal networking goals of its users was an adamant request for private messaging. Participants indicated the lack of private messaging was a primary reason for not recommending PSO to their friends. Yet, it was clear from the conversation they understood the reasoning for not including private messaging. They explained that if PSO became too much about personal, lightweight social interactions it may distract from its core mission and subsequently be blocked as inappropriate from use at their schools, as was MySpace and Facebook.

Age Split

The teens were very aware of two age levels within the system, preteen versus teenager. They recommended splitting content, profiles, and blogs based on this age difference, so the conversations were age-appropriate. Nonetheless, the older teens clearly appreciated the opportunity to speak to younger teens, to be a mentor and help them learn what to do or not to do in the community. In order for the older participants to retain this position as mentors, they felt the system should be segmented but not completely segregated by age group.

Overall, it was clear from the focus group discussion that participants were highly engaged by the system, appreciated the mission, had a strong sense of belonging, felt it reflected

their community, and felt invested in its success. Much of the frustration expressed was in not having a sufficient feel for their audience or not having a large enough audience.

CONCLUSIONS

Puget Sound Off was designed to foster youth civic engagement by providing tools for youth to express themselves as citizen journalists in the context of their local communities. In order to evaluate PSO in its second year, we performed a combination of usage analysis, a questionnaire distributed to users, and focus groups.

Although growth has been slow, we found that many users were highly engaged by the system, feeling a sense of ownership and desire for its success. In discussing the site, participants showed strong appreciation for the *meaningful content* of the conversations, compared to MySpace or Facebook. Within PSO, blog posts were organized according to cause categories and groups in the users’ communities, which successfully inspired conversation topics such as government and politics, social justice, and education. As a tool for increasing media literacy, we found that PSO usage correlated with higher levels of self-reported technology experience.

Most importantly, usage of PSO had a meaningful impact on our more behavioral measure of civic engagement, suggesting that engaging in online citizen journalism meaningfully impacted their real world behaviors. We further found that the feeling that PSO reflected the interests of the participants and their communities had the strongest impact on levels of engagement and efficacy. This is consistent with Kim et al. [17], who found higher levels of online civic participation amongst youth in local groups -- presumably with whom they identify more than national groups. In other words, the success of PSO is only in part due to the increased literacy in media and the act of online citizen journalism – it is also because PSO provides a clear path from having a voice, to connecting to others in their local communities, to engaging in civic action.

Setting the right tone is of vital importance in any new community technology, and managing growth to adequately assure its continued focus can be challenging. Having created an environment with clear goals and expectations for topics of discussion, PSO is in a better position for expanding its audience. Its biggest challenge is how to increase opportunities for more voices to be heard, while retaining its ability to connect members to their local communities, and while still being considered appropriate for use in educational environments. One approach would be to include the viral features of social networks, while also further categorizing blog posts by neighborhoods. Other approaches would be to increase access to diverse groups by incorporating methods for posting content using the mobile phone, and increasing participation by enabling a limited number of private messages.

LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH DIRECTIONS

The correlational nature of our study creates some ambiguity around the causal relationship between PSO usage and levels of civic engagement. Nonetheless, the moderately strong correlation between PSO usage and civic behaviors, the high degree of civic content in the site, the participants' appreciation for its meaningful content, and the presence of constructive dialogue leading to taking action, converge on a picture of PSO meaningfully impacting civic engagement. Because of the large effect sizes we observed our small number of participants showed a significant impact. However, to perform more sophisticated analyses examining the relationships between technology usage, sense of community, and civic engagement, we will need a much larger number of study participants – again quite challenging in a local community site.

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