Do Social Networking Groups Support Online Petitions?

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Purpose
EPetitioning has been emerging as arguably the most important eParticipation institutional activity. This paper aims to provide some insights into how ePetitions are perceived and supported by social networking sites.

Design/methodology/approach
The paper investigated the connection between the UK government's ePetitioning system and social networking groups linking to governmental petitions. Online data from Facebook were collected and analysed with respect to numbers of supporters compared to official signatures.

Findings
The results indicate that although the process of signing an official petition is not more complex than joining a Facebook group, the membership of respective Facebook groups can be much higher. In particular, certain topics experienced very high support on Facebook which did not convert to signatures.

Originality/value
The paper's added value lies in the questions raised about the potential uptake of citizen-government interactions in policy making mechanisms.

Keywords eParticipation, eDemocracy, ePetitions, Social Networks, Facebook, Web 2.0

Paper type Research paper

1. Introduction

"The e-petition shows that my government is listening" was the title of Tony Blair's article (2008) in response to an online petition against road pricing signed almost by two millions. He stated that, although he did not agree with views of the ePetition, it showed a clear case of the web being healthy for democracy. A few months later Gordon Brown also had to respond negatively to another online petition supported by 72,000 people calling him to resign! Thus, the UK government's

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ePetitioning system [2] has had an ambiguous role and its current and potential impact on public policy making has helped shape discussion on the future of eParticipation research and practice.

EPetitioning is simultaneously emerging as one of the top eParticipation priorities internationally and is a highly popular, yet controversial, example of the eDemocracy idea (Chadwick 2009). Whilst it attracts on average much higher citizen engagement numbers than other citizen-government interaction areas, such as consultations, there are concerns about the quality of this interaction and its use as a "point and click" form of participation (Dutton 2009). Although ePetitioning has not yet gained such increased attention in the eParticipation literature (Saebo, et al., 2008), it raises important questions on the potential uptake of online governmental initiatives by Internet users.

In many cases, it is thought that Internet users will embrace eParticipation technologies with the same enthusiasm that they tend to demonstrate when adopting Web 2.0 technologies, such as blogs and social networking sites. Indeed, it is believed that governments need to find citizens where they are online and engage with them in new ways, e.g. (Chadwick, 2009; Saebo, et al., 2009; Osimo, 2008). Following such ideas, research is needed to explore possible connections between formal eParticipation initiatives and everyday Web 2.0 Internet practices such as social networking. In order to address this gap, we examine how social networking groups appear to support the online petitioning process. Our empirical results show that although positive support of digital campaigning would be expected to covert to official signatures, this is not always the case in practice.

In the next section, we introduce the topic of ePetitioning and the way it has been perceived particularly in the UK, following the launch of the government's ePetitioning system. After briefly discussing the political role of social networks, in Section 3 we explain our research approach in collecting online data exploring the connection between governmental petitions and social networking groups campaigning to support them. After discussing possible interpretations and limitations, we summarise and present issues for future research.

2. Background

2.1. Petitions and ePetitions

Petitions have traditionally and historically, especially in the UK, been a process of official political participation in the form of documents addressed to public authorities asking to consider a particular issue. A petition is a formal request to a higher authority signed by one or a number of citizens (Macintosh, 2004). Most petitions are addressed to parliaments or governments and concern issues related to legislation, public policy change or even personal issues or requests for grants. In some cases, petitions need to be sponsored by an official representative or supported by a minimum required threshold of citizens. According to the British National Archives (2009), the earliest petitions date from the middle of the 13th century.

Figure 1 provides a general overview of the petitioning process. First, interested eligible actors raise an issue to be considered. Then, they delegate their concerns through campaigning aiming to attract supporters, while also in many cases discussing the issue and/or the petition format and practicalities with representatives of the appropriate policy making body. After producing the final petition, this is then submitted, and in some cases presented, by the petitioner

[2] http://petitions.number10.gov.uk/

or sponsored by an elected representative. Next, the petition is discussed and judged according to internal processes (e.g. council agenda meetings). After a decision has been made, the petitioner receives the official feedback.

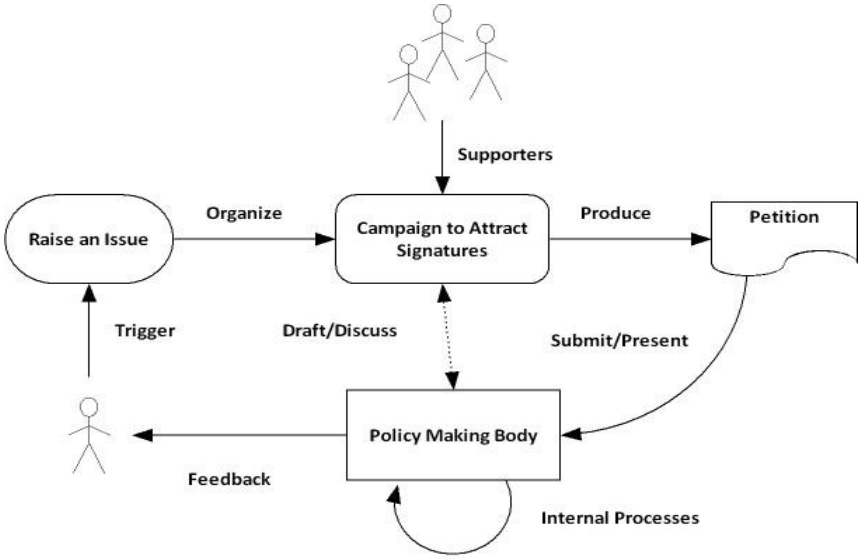

Figure 1: Petitioning Process Overview

EPetitioning as the online conduct of this activity is believed to facilitate and add transparency to the existing structure which is considered in some cases inefficient due to its practical complexity. An overview of ePetitioning as an eParticipation area in terms of tools, characteristics and application examples can be found in (Demo Net, 2006, p. 34). EPetitioning systems usually address the agenda setting stage of the policy making lifecycle, they can integrate other tools, such as forums for discussions, and require adequate administrative personnel to overview and manage the process. Online petitioning is also one of the first practices that emerged from Internet users, mainly through mailing lists or websites which act as hosting portals[3].

EPetitioning is criticised for its common absence of deliberative mechanisms over public policy topics (Chadwick, 2009). Combined with its ease of use, it results in a lack of participation quality characterised as "point and click" (Dutton, 2009), which doesn't take into account the background debate over important issues. Furthermore, the process doesn't bond governments with any particular actions and in some cases it might not take into account minority voices in favour of more popular issues.

Supporters see ePetitioning as a useful and low cost tool, indicative of how technology will capture public sentiment and strengthen citizen participation (Macintosh, et al., 2002), as well as make authorities more responsive to the public without challenging their established power. EPetitioning recognises the public's preference for quick and easy forms of engagement in an attractive, feasible and practical way of tackling the significant problem of massive scale. It is a fact that, by digitising and facilitating a traditional process, ePetitions have attracted much higher numbers of supporters than other eParticipation exercises. Apart from widening the audience of politics, it seems to be an open process, particularly attractive to young people.

As far as the UK government's system is concerned, the volume of users arguably makes it the most successful eParticipation project globally: "8m signatures from over 5m unique email addresses, representing something like 10% of the entire UK population" (mySociety, 2007).

[3] For example see http://www.petitiononline.com/ and http://www.gopetition.com/

According to the Oxford Internet Survey (Dutton, et al., 2009), petitions are the most frequent form of online civic participation by Internet users.

Miller (2009) discusses the momentum towards developing an ePetitioning system at the Westminster Parliament by presenting cases, statistics and official views from the UK government's system. She examines the difficulties and concerns expressed in attempting to align ePetitions with the traditional institutional processes, high public expectations and controversial views expressed by politicians. A well known pioneer in experimenting with ePetitioning since 2000 has been the Scottish Parliament (Macintosh, et al., 2002; Seaton, 2005). At the local government level, a few councils in the UK have implemented ePetitioning facilities since 2004 (Kingston and Bristol). It should be noted that according to legal arrangements, all local authorities in the UK are expected to develop such online systems complimentary to their offline petitioning channels (Local Democracy, Economic Development and Construction Act, 2009).

The online transfer of the traditional petitioning process raises the issue of how ePetitions can be disseminated and campaigned. In fact, there is a fundamental difference to the approach shown in Figure 1: ePetitions are first publicly produced and then campaigned to attract signatures. This key process allows ePetitioners to explore their own online promotion channels, as well as find potential deliberative mechanisms. One of the most important and widely used among them is social networking. Social networks seem indeed to become more and more influential in the political sphere. In the next Section, we briefly review this connection.

2.2. Social Networks

Boyd and Ellison (2007) generally define social networks as web-based services that allow individuals to construct profiles, share connections with other users and view other connections within the system. Medaglia et al. (2009) examine the functionality of Facebook, MySpace, Second Life, and Twitter in order to provide an initial account of six characteristics. These include virtual identity, network building, network maintenance, network interaction, user generation of virtual content and network self-governance.

Social networks are becoming more and more influential in the political sphere, especially when it comes to campaigning and electioneering. Around 10% of all Americans used social networks to engage in political activities during the 2008 USA presidential elections, a figure increasing significantly among young people and Obama supporters (PEW, 2008). Their potential for civic participation, beyond electioning, remains to a large extent an open issue. Valenzuela et al. (2009) investigated the use of Facebook by college students and discovered that Facebook groups have a positive effect on civic participation. However, the authors argue that social networks might not be the most effective solution for youth disengagement from civic duty and democracy. They conclude that measuring the ways social networking users might engage in a type of political participation may be problematic and requires careful consideration.

This conclusion reveals some important issues concerning the increased attention social networks receive as means of political expression. Saebo et al. (2009) discuss their role and increased potential for eParticipation. They observe that social networks enable the dissemination of ideas and issues when citizens, gathered around specific interests, attempt to influence the political agenda-setting. This is also the case with ePetitions and their connection with social networking groups created to assist their campaigning. We explore this connection in the next Section.

3. Research Approach

Guided by the need to understand the uptake of ePetitioning by Internet users, we collected and analysed data from Facebook groups created to support official petitions from the UK government's ePetitioning system. The choice of Facebook was due to its large use and as the most popular social networking site and also because it had already been identified that there were examples of groups being formed around specific petitions[4]. Another reason was that Facebook has been discussed as a possible official extension of ePetitioning, inducing petitioners to create campaigning groups[5].

Collecting and analysing online data is not a simple research process. Ethical, legal and technical considerations and guidelines were adhered to in line with precedents set in previous studies (Thelwall & Stuart, 2006; McKee & Porter, 2009). A special program was developed to query Facebook for all groups containing a link to a petition on Number10.gov.uk (the UK government's central petitioning service). The study was performed on 29th July 2009 and retrieved 538 Facebook groups created to support petitions from Number10.gov.uk. Not all the groups provided usable data. Five had to be removed, since they required joining before the number of supporters was known. Government moderators can reject petitions for repeating previous topics or in case the topic is unsuitable, offensive or solely humorous. Eleven petitions were rejected on Number10.gov.uk for one of these reasons, and therefore were also removed from the study.

This study is based on the remaining 522 usable Facebook groups that linked to 300 unique petitions on Number10.gov.uk. The fact that there were more than one groups created to support the same petition proved to be an important factor. Table 1 (below) presents the 13 petitions having more than 4 different supporting Facebook groups. The group titles are very variable and the petitions can also have quite lengthy statements. The first column is the author's summary of the sentiment expressed in the petition. The most extreme case of multiple group support was the petition created to oppose introducing sound limiting devices in entertainment venues[6], which had linked support from 83 different groups. Although many of them were small (<200), several run into thousands and the largest two are 13 and 16 thousand. The degree of fragmentation suggests that campaigning on Facebook was sporadic and disorganised. A further 41 petitions were supported by 2, 3 or 4 groups but the remaining 246 petitions had only a single supporting group.

Facebook group membership is the most indicative popularity measure. However, multiple supporting groups present a challenge because it was not possible to identify multiple group membership and determine the total number of unique individuals making up the membership of all supporting groups. However, we can say that the actual number of individuals is bounded by the largest group size and the sum of all group sizes. The sensitivity of picking the top 20 petitions based on different assumptions about the number of unique supporters was tested by ranking the petitions on the sum of the groups, then examining the effect of discounting 20%, 50% and 100% of the members added by the smaller groups. The top 14 petitions were almost always the same and only discounting 100% of the extra membership cause the rankings to change.

[4] See Chadwick (2009), note 76.
[5] See for example the upcoming Facebook widget for the EuroPetition project (http://europetition.eu/technology/how-users-will-use-the-europetiton-service). The EuroPetition project aims to transfer the idea at Pan-European level.
[6] One of the most popular UK government petitions with 86,000 signatures.

Table 1: Top Petitions by Number of Linked Facebook Groups

Petition sentiment	Number of groups	Largest group	Total members	Signatures	Top 20 members	Top 20 signatures
Against sound level limits in clubs	83	16327	69111	86576	Yes	Yes
Against higher university fees	14	185448	247887	33600	Yes	Yes
To introduce sanctions against Israel	13	4940	12892	31463	Yes	Yes
Against proposed 50 MPH speed limit	11	605	2420	38995	No	Yes
To make St George's day a holiday	10	193907	372478	11477	Yes	Yes
For Gordon Brown to resign	8	2387	3856	69475	No	Yes
To stop sending weapons to Israel	7	296	1127	38381	No	Yes
To reduce age for smear tests to 16	6	23296	39702	13359	Yes	Yes
To save live music and scrap form 696	5	31619	49105	17556	Yes	Yes
To investigate the Hillsborough disaster	5	2010	3896	15970	No	Yes
Honour all soldiers killed by terrorist action	5	775	1200	21525	No	Yes
To stop the building of an animal laboratory in Camden	5	534	1113	612	No	No
For student loan interest to follow deflation	5	149	552	14910	No	Yes

In Figure 2 (below), the top 20 supported petitions, as determined by total membership, are presented. The total membership for the top ranking petition (*to make St George's day a holiday*[7]) is off the scale at some 372 thousand members. In all but two cases the number of signatures (under the group size) falls well below the apparent level of support on Facebook. In 10 cases there are 12 or more Facebook members per signature achieved with two cases exceeding 100 to 1. There are 3 more cases where the ratio is at least 4 members to 1 signature. Even on the most pessimistic assumption about the number of extra individuals, these 13 multiple group cases still significantly outnumber signatures by the same orders of magnitude. In all but three cases (85%), Facebook support exceeds the number of signatures by a factor of at least 2.8 to 1 and if we make the most pessimistic assumptions about the effect of multiple groups the ratio remains above 1.8 to 1.

[7] Although St George is the patron Saint of England his day is not recognised as a national holiday.

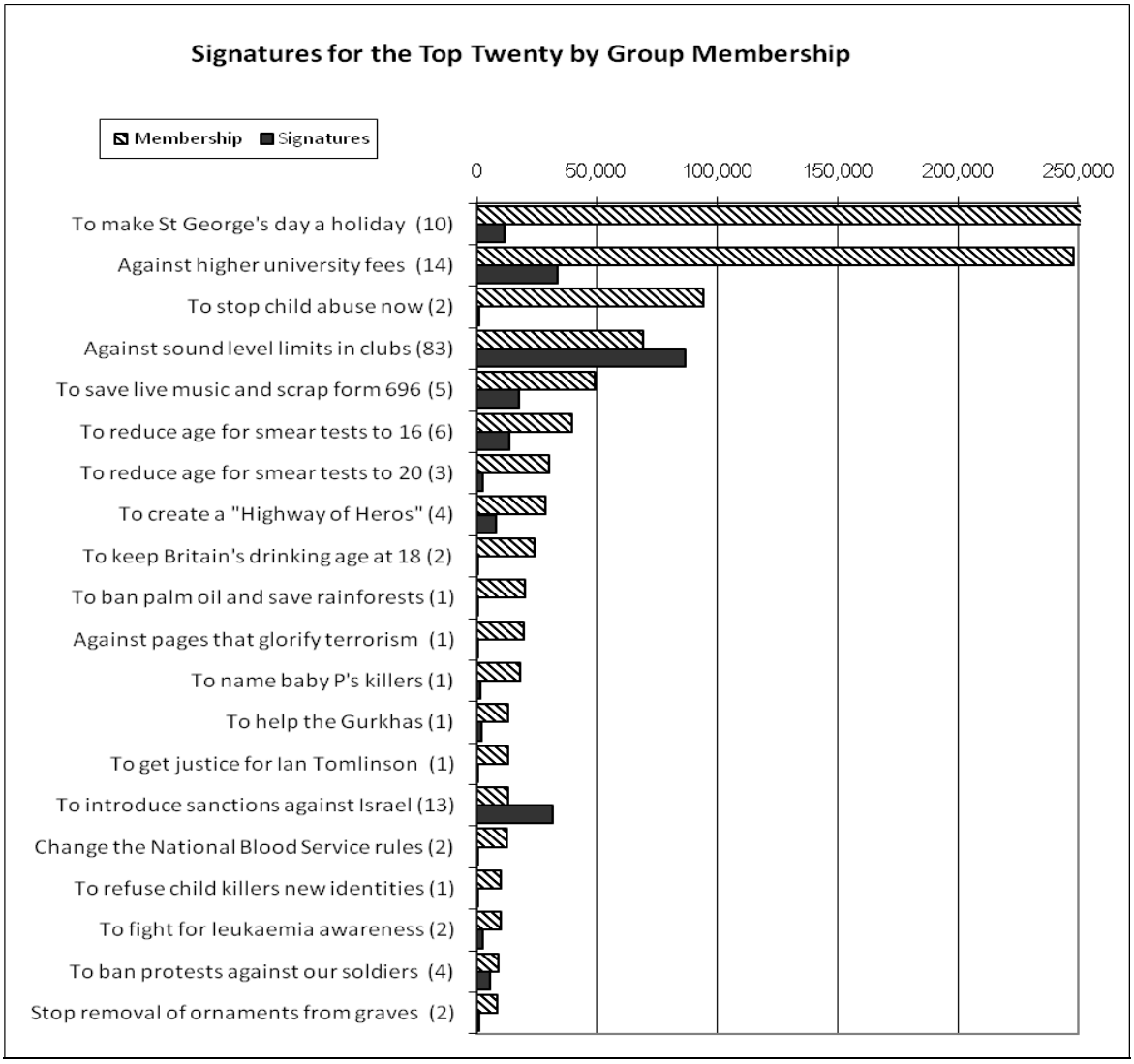

Figure 2: Top 20 Facebook Groups Linked with Official Petitions by Membership.

Number of Total Groups Shown in Parenthesis ().

Figure 3 (below) depicts the top 20 petitions linked with a Facebook group according to the number of their official signatures. For 12 petitions, Facebook support is less than 10% of the number of official signatures and in the most extreme case there are over 361 times as many signatures. In 4 cases, the membership of groups on Facebook is between 24% and 80% and in another 4 Facebook membership exceeds the numbers of signatures. All 4 of these cases appear in the top 6 cases of Figure 2.

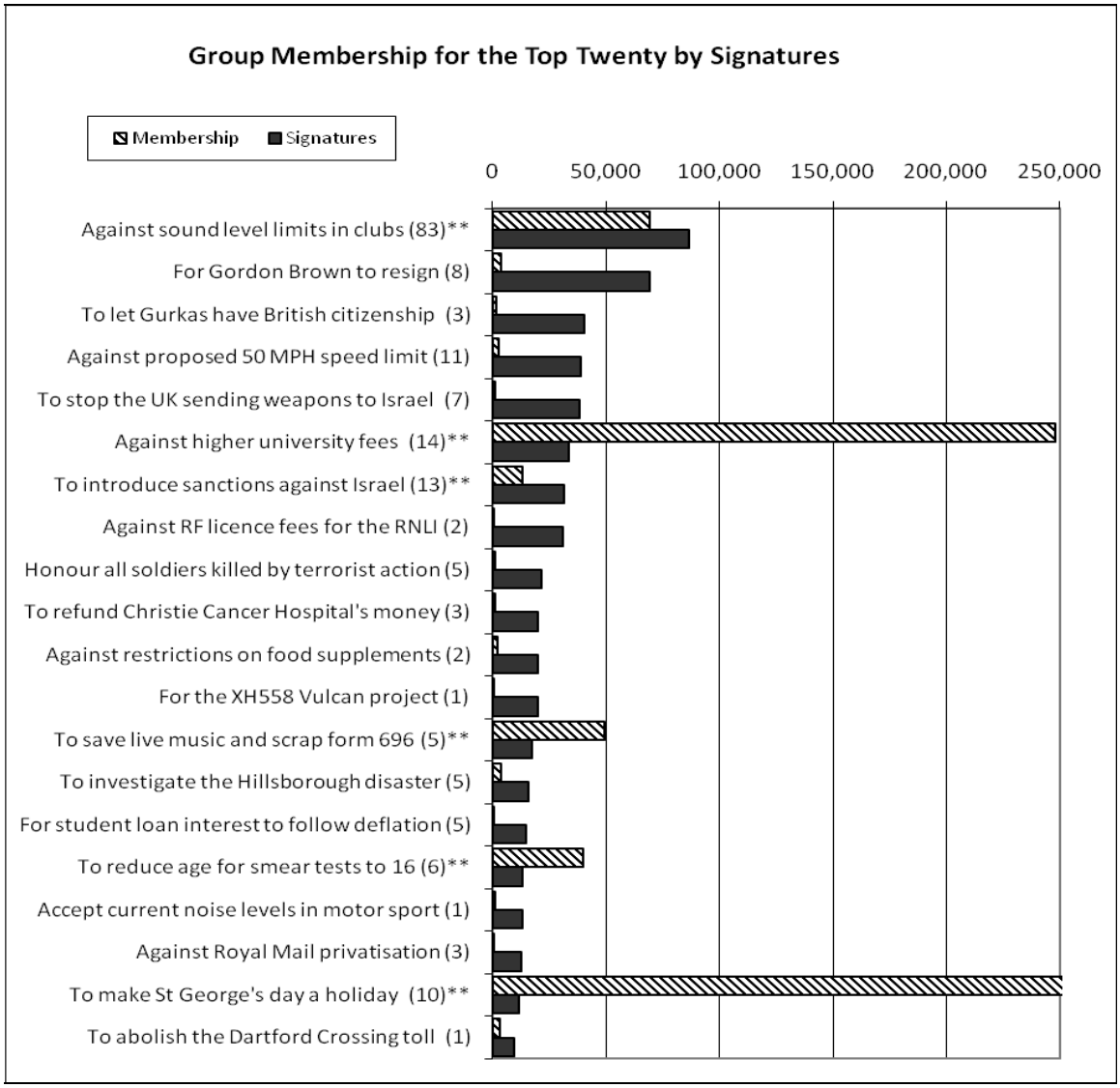

Figure 3: Top 20 Petitions Linked from a Group on Facebook.

Number of Total Groups Shown in Parenthesis () - ** also in Figure 2

The final step in the analysis was to consider the ratio of the total Facebook group membership compared to petition signatures achieved and categorise each petition by the order magnitude for this ratio as a rough measure of group effectiveness. The ratio distribution, as shown in figure 4, differs significantly among different petitions with both ends of the scale exceeding ratios of 100:1. At the lower end of the scale there are 43 petitions running between 10 and 50 times as many signatures as members. This low impact group represents about 15% of all petitions. Above this level, there is a large group of 137 petitions (46%) with reasonable Facebook numbers running from just over 1:10 to groups which exceed the number of signatures by less than 50%. This leaves 109 petitions, over one third that had at least 1.5 times more supporters on Facebook groups than signatures. Within this group, there are 54 petitions (21%) which have over 10:1, while in the most extreme cases there are about 110 members per signature and six other cases have 58 to 98 members per signature.

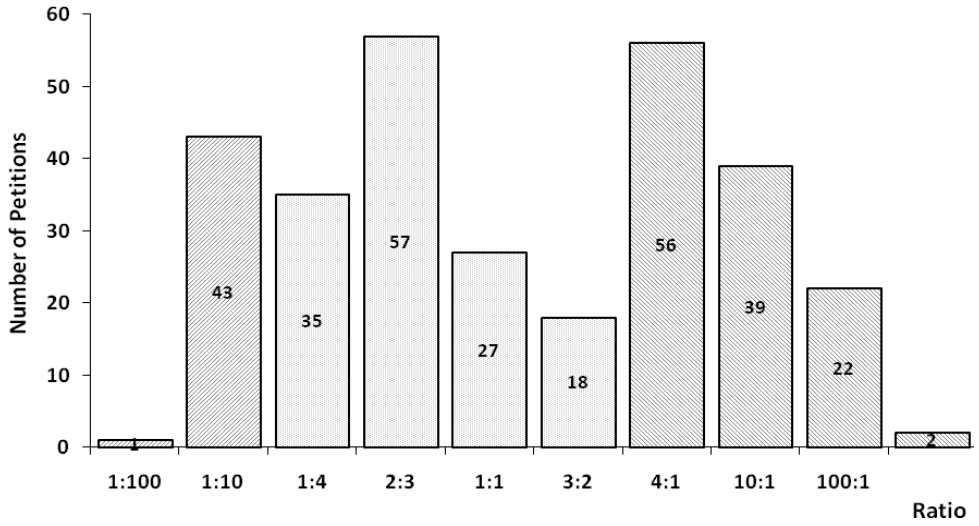

Figure 4: Ratio of Group Members to Signatures

The average number of signatures a petition received is 2779 with a standard deviation of 8541. However, the distribution is skewed with a large number of small petitions making the median number of signatures much lower at 409. The average of Facebook supporters depends on how multiple groups linked to the same petition are handled. If all members of groups supporting the same petition are added together, the average number of supporters per petition is higher than signatures at 4291. However, the distribution is even more skewed with a lower median of 252. Thinking the pessimistic position and only counting the largest support group gives an average of 3137 and a median of 303. In both cases, there is significant variance among different petitions. However, in terms of Facebook support there are a significant number of petitions where the apparent level of support far outweighs the number of signatures achieved.

4. Discussion

Since its inception in 2006, the UK government's ePetitioning system has handled 30471 petitions and in November 2009 some 4665 remained open for signature. Facebook is just one of the online spaces where support might be canvassed and we can expect this figure to rise in the future. Since Facebook's popularity has been raising significantly from 2008 and at the time of the study it has indisputably been the most popular social network, we can reasonably expect the success of this petitions' subgroup to be indicative of the wider effectiveness of social networking in campaigning for petition signatures. In July 2009, when the data were collected, there were around 19 million Facebook users in the UK, with more than 11 million of them being below the age of 30 (Clickymedia, 2010).

The comparison between the number of signatures ePetitions receive and the numbers of Facebook group supporters reveals some interesting results for the 522 groups linking to 300 unique petitions. For most ePetitions, Facebook group support would be expected to reflect a certain amount of signatures. If almost all Facebook supporters sign the petition then it should have more

signatures than supporters. That is, Figure 4 should have almost no petitions to the right of the 1:1 mark. Also, if the Facebook campaign has made a reasonable contribution to a wider campaign using other channels it should still contribute a reasonable proportion of the final signatures. If this is the case, then Figure 4 should have very few entries to the left of the 1:10 mark. However, Figure 4 has 44 petitions falling below 1:10, as well as another 63 petitions exceeding 10:1. The group of 56 petitions between 3:2 and 4:1 are less clear, but 47 have single support groups and are not affected by the ambiguities of group aggregation. That gives 154 (51%) of the 300 petitions where there is clear evidence of an ineffectual or failing campaign on Facebook.

The fact that in so many cases group support is low or doesn't convert into signatures indicates that there is no positive evidence that Facebook supports the process of disseminating petitions. This observation occurs even if some topics seem to be widely influential and highly supported by Facebook users. Unfortunately, neither Facebook nor the ePetitioning site provides sufficient public information to identify members and signatories to track exactly the way group membership maps into signatures. Excluding group members ineligible to sign the petitions could for example affect conversion rates.

The effectiveness of social networking in campaigning for petition signatures seems to be unpredictable and the connection between group memberships and signatures problematic. This conclusion is in accordance with the observation by Valenzuela et al. (2009) that measuring the ways in which social networking users might engage in a type of political participation may be problematic. This kind of ad hoc political online activity might be different from formal participation, while it could be argued that ePetitioning itself lies between the formal and the informal, as a quick and easy, but official form of participation. Furthermore, social networks have been particularly embraced by young people. In our study, an interesting observation is that many groups experiencing very high memberships that did not convert to high numbers of signatures were related to issues concerning the young, such as university tuition fees or the legal drinking age.

Trust in eParticipation technologies is another important issue reflected in our results. Although the UK government's ePetitioning system is one of the most popular eParticipation projects, there have been concerns that citizens still find this process ineffective. According to Miller (2009), the answer for many petitions is a stronger link to governmental policy but in only few cases did the government respond positively to suggestions. In fact, there has even been a petition to free petitions from government meddling by moving the system to a non-governmental website (Kolsaker & Lee-Kelley, 2008).

As a caveat to this research the way Facebook groups are formulated should be noted. In Facebook, when a user joins a group, the information is disseminated to their friends through the form of news feed, also allowing the possibility of inviting them to join the group. Other users might also join the group. Users might not sign the petition, sign the petition but not join the group, join a group after the petition has been closed, join more than one group supporting the same petition or join the group but not be eligible to sign the petition. Another limitation concerns the fact that certain petitions had just been created during our data collection while others had closed months ago. In fact, some groups were abandoned by their administrators after the petition closure, while others remained active around the specific petition topic. All these pose limitations to the study, although it is not thought that they change the main conclusions. It is also important to mention that, as emphasised by Park and Kluver (2009), specific technologies are embedded in different political cultures and this is to a large extent true with ePetitioning in the UK which has been historically popular, but may not be applicable in other cultures.

5. Conclusion

The aim of this paper was to increase our understanding of ePetitioning, arguably the most promising eParticipation area. First, we introduced ePetitioning as an online transfer of traditional petitioning and presented views around its usefulness. Next, we discussed the role of social networks in political activities and their potential for assisting the dissemination of online petitions. In attempting to empirically address this connection, we gathered online data on the membership of Facebook groups created to support petitions from the UK government's ePetitioning system. Their comparison with corresponding official signatures indicated that in many cases very high Facebook support was not converted into signatures while in others, in which signatures were high, Facebook support was limited.

Based on these observations, we conclude that Facebook does not necessarily support the ePetitioning process and that attempting to assess this connection might be highly unpredictable. Popular issues generate significant activity in the social networking sphere that does not translate into petition signatures. In responding to petitions, officials and elected representatives need to consider how representative the petition is of wider public opinion. Traditionally, media activity around a petition has added to its weight but now perhaps social network activity should also be seen as indication of broader public sympathy.

It seems that the fact that Internet users embrace technologies such as social networks for ad hoc political expression doesn't mean that they will demonstrate equal support for formal political initiatives, even if they are concerned about them. Further research is needed to understand this observation, as well as the impact of eParticipation initiatives on Internet users. Such research should attempt to exploit appropriate online data collection and analysis techniques. For example, groups supporting ePetitions are single issue pressure groups, but connections among their supporters through social networking analysis could reveal interesting interrelations between them.

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