

Engaging Youth in Social Media: Is Facebook the New Media Frontier?

A NewsCloud – University of Minnesota Research Report

Comparing Hot Dish and The Daily Findings

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Research Goals

Our research goals were to examine whether and how the Hot Dish and The Daily social media application could do the following:

- 1) Engage youth in news and information
- 2) Build community
- 3) Develop users' knowledge about the topic
- 4) Generate real world impact
- 5) Promote reading and writing practices (e.g., new media literacy).

Hot Dish Study Sample

In all, Hot Dish attracted ~5,016 monthly active users (at peak); 2,174 total users, including nearly 150 Facebook fans -- impressive numbers for a site studied so quickly after its launch. **346 participants** completed the requirements to be included in the research study.

The Daily Study Sample

The Daily attracted ~1,749 monthly active users; 867 total users. **183 participants** (ages 16-25) completed the requirements to be included in the research study.

Therefore, Hot Dish had about twice as many young people in its study sample and nearly 2.5 times as many total users.

Comparison of Hot Dish and The Daily Applications

Several unique advantages of social media innovations were present in **both** applications:

1. **Use of the application OVERLAPPED with young people's pre-existing SNS routines:** Both applications showed promise in providing young people with a daily scannable dose of news and integrating with previously established Face-booking routines.

2. Hot Dish was most successful at attracting a base of users who actively participated in reading, posting and commenting on stories. The Daily sample size was smaller than that of Hot Dish, most likely due to the staffing turnover and timing of implementation. A late start to the project overall (at the end of the Fall 2009 semester) meant that we were launching The Daily during spring break through the end of the semester.
3. **The applications TAPPED INTO young people's PRE-EXISTING EXPECTATIONS for participating in SNS sites:** young people were more motivated to use Hot Dish and The Daily to **(a) interact with like-minded peers, (b) express opinions, and (c) persuade others than they reported for traditional news sites**. Users of both sites reported motivation to use the social media publications in ways similar to online news sites – such as browsing headlines, scanning story summaries, etc; however, they saw social media publications as much more participatory.
4. Both sites seemed to stimulate **DIGITAL LITERACY PRACTICES** (e.g., content consumption and production). Hot Dish users contributed **over two-thirds (69%)** of the content (i.e., posted stories, comments and blog entries) available on the Hot Dish site. The majority of stories available on both sites were read.
5. **Users became MORE INTERESTED in the topical focus:** After only 6-8 weeks of using the application (at most), young people's interest in the application's topical focus (e.g., environmental issues and climate change in Hot Dish and University of Minnesota community issues in The Daily) increased. The greatest increases in interest for both applications occurred among the low users. Perhaps users also felt comfortable in SNS with like-minded peers, vs. traditional open sites.
6. **PUBLIC RECOGNITION** of one's contributions (displayed as points for participation) and the **GAME-LIKE COMPETITION** were highly motivating in both instances: In Hot Dish, the *Action Team* competition was much more effective at creating a highly engaged segment of active participants online and especially offline activism. Online media creation activities seemed to seed more authentic forms of participation and interaction. In the Daily, the Action Team competition was much less emphasized, although users reported enjoying participating in the few challenges that existed.

Comparison of Activity Levels

Hot Dish Facebook Application	The Daily Facebook Application
<p>Stories read:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • ~3350 stories available during the study period • 64% of stories read at least one time (n=2153) • 54.7% of active users read at least 1 story • Articles related to environmental consumerism and local interest were the most read <p>User-generated content and interactions among ALL users in the study group:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 2353 comments written • 4320 votes • 1557 stories posted • 4589 stories shared • 3498 friends invited • 345 friends invited signed up (10%) • 110 blog entries written • 1197 eco-challenges completed which required documentation (text, photo, etc.) were submitted <p>Overall snapshot of active users' engagement:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 62% of people completed at least 1 submitted challenge (15% completed 5 or more) • 54.7 % of people read at least 1 story • 54.7% of people voted at least once • 66% of people invited at least 1 friend (42% invited 10 or more friends) • 30% of people posted at least 1 story • 31% of people posted at least 1 comment (11% posted 10 or more comments) • 11% of people shared at least 1 story with a friend 	<p>Stories read:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 362 stories available during the study period • 60.2% of these were read at least one time¹ • 34% of active users read at least 1 story • Articles related to University of Minnesota Educational issues were the most read <p>User-generated content and interactions among ALL users in the study group:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 215 comments • 918 votes cast • 187 stories posted • 7 stories shared • 1305 friends invited • 79 challenges which required documentation (text, photo, etc.) were submitted <p>Overall snapshot of active users' engagement:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 30% of people completed at least 1 submitted challenge (2% completed 5 or more) • 14 % of people read at least 1 story • 33% of people voted at least once • 44% of people invited at least 1 friend (23% invited 10 or more friends) • 14% of people posted at least 1 story • 17% of people posted at least 1 comment (7% posted 10 or more comments) • 4% of people shared at least 1 story with a friend

REMAINING QUESTIONS FOR RESEARCH

1. **How do interest, knowledge, civic participation, and a sense of community develop over time?**
If we hope to generate dynamic, networked publics around important problems like climate change and educate a more informed and engaged citizenry, answering this question is critical but merits pre- and post measures and comparison on intended and actual activities within the site over a longer time period.
2. **Similarly, how do we capitalize on the kinds of “influentials”** that these innovative, social media experiments may attract in order to build a larger, more engaged and powerful base of sustained users?
3. **How might design variations improve the amount and depth of online reading and multimedia writing practices?** How might future iterations of Hot Dish or similar sites encourage more dialogue, debate, and problem solving? For instance, the Hot Dish Facebook application was designed in a certain way with some limitations; story pages (level I read) presented comment threads, the poster’s bio, related articles, and a chat opportunity. To read the Full article on the Web site of origin (level II read) required a second click. Changes to this approach might yield significantly different findings. Future improvements to the social media publication might offer publishers (or licensees of syndication services) the ability to show the full text of an article within Facebook.
4. **What is the right balance of incentives** (e.g., extrinsic motivators like points) and more intrinsic, self-sustaining motivators (e.g., peer sharing and dynamic contribution) to build the consumption and production practices we’d hope to see over time?
5. We found that interest in the focal topic was a key factor in site participation, but **what are the levers between the disparate categories of users** (high, medium, low, inactive)? What might move an inactive or low user to high engagement over time? It would be useful to study those participants who reported an *increased interest* in the central topic of Hot Dish to see if indeed they move up (or not) in activity levels.
6. How do we capitalize on spikes in interest to move low users to become more engaged in (or contributing to) targeted content over time?
7. **How do we intensify and transfer the *feeling* of community to actually increase peer-sharing and community involvement?**
8. How do we cultivate the public self-expressions and opinion-sharing that young people reportedly view these as ideal sites for?