

How to create friends and influence politicians

or, How social media can unravel the social fabric

THE IMAGINARY FRIENDS PROJECT

We're well and truly into the pre-election vote-luring season. Lobby groups are using the promise of votes to get politicians to dance to their tune. Politicians are desperate to align themselves with the pressure groups and special interest factions in their constituency. There's nothing new in this – it happens at every election. However, what is new this time around is just how easy it is to present yourself as a pressure group with a cast of thousands behind you by making canny use of social media.

Let's be honest - most politicians don't understand how social media works. When you tell them that a few thousand members on your Facebook group is a big deal, they tend to take you at face value. Most of them don't understand how a Facebook group is built. They should. If they don't educate themselves on this one soon, they're going to be very, very disappointed when their votes are actually counted in May.

There's a prime example of the gap between Facebook membership and the potential for votes in North and South Thanet at the moment. Interest in Thanet South in particular shot up as soon as Nigel Farage confirmed that he would contest the seat. Given that the sitting Conservative MP, Laura Sandys, will not be standing again this year, the seat is definitely up for grabs. Almost every political candidate around here, whether standing as an MP or as a local councillor, is desperate to find a cause that will give them a platform. One such bandwagon trundled into view last year.

In May 2014 the old MoD airport at Manston closed after fifteen years of commercial failure. In private ownership since 1999, it had languished, unwanted, on the global market for almost two years before being sold for £1 to Ann Gloag. A small number of people, motivated by a mixture of nostalgia for Manston's days as a World War airfield, and romantic hope that it could still cut it in the word of commercial aviation, are keen to see it compulsorily purchased and re-opened as an airport.

That's where our political bandwagon creaks slowly onto the stage.

A number of groups formed to "save" Manston airport, the best known of which is the Save Manston Airport group (SMA). They claim that 98% of local people want a CPO so that a cargo airport can be developed on the site of Manston Airport. As evidence that it is representing local public opinion, SMA points to the 9,000 members of its Facebook page. Sounds impressive, doesn't it? Local politicians seem to think so. But it isn't.

The SMA Facebook group is a "closed" group, i.e. you can't just join it. On 19th March 2014, the group's founder created the group and added a number of his friends to it. Now, here's what politicians need to understand about adding people to your Facebook group – it's

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something that you can do to other people without having their permission. They have to notice that you have “joined” them to your group, and then they have to undo what you have done if they don’t want to be a part.

You can add as many Facebook friends to your group as you like. You can add people from around the globe. If any of your friends has more than one Facebook account, you can add all of them. You don’t need to limit yourself to people – you can add businesses, services and other groups. Some of the friends that you add to your group will see that they have been added and will be happy to remain as part of your group because they believe in what the group represents. Some of them will see that they have been added and will stay in your group because they don’t care either way about your group, but they like you and are happy to support you as a friend. Some of them won’t even notice that they have been added (not everybody reads the notifications that Facebook sends). A few will ask to be removed.

We wondered how easy it is to do what the SMA group did and create a group of 9,000 members over the course of a year, so we set up an experiment. On 6th March 2015 one of us set up a closed Facebook group. We chose a closed group so that what we were doing would be a good match for what the Save Manston group had done. Here’s the message with which we launched our experimental group:

“There's nothing wrong with a Facebook group having thousands of "friends". The trouble starts when people start believing it's true.

In my corner of the world (Kent, UK) some people are using their imaginary friends as leverage to get councillors and MPs to change or make policy. That is simply wrong.

The Imaginary Friends Project aims to show that not all these "friends" are real, and the numbers shouldn't be taken seriously.

I've added people to this group, and each of them will appear as a member (unless they delete themselves). I've asked each of them - and I'm asking you, too, if you're new here - to add people as well. A bit like a chain letter, but without the magic spells or promises of money.

Please don't go crazy, and spammy, and haphazard - stick to people you know who you think will go along with this. You'll see a "Suggested Members" list on the right of the screen, automatically generated by Facebook from your contacts. Do keep an eye on the group, to see how long it takes to get to a hundred, a thousand, or even ten thousand imaginary friends.

I won't be using this group for anything else - there are no strings or hidden sales pitches. I'll leave it to run for a month or so, or until the point has been made, and then take it down.

I hope that you, and all the rest of my imaginary friends, will enjoy helping me show that sometimes you shouldn't take Facebook at face value.

Many thanks in advance for your help.”

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The person who set up the group then added nine of his Facebook friends to the group and asked them to add their friends.

In just 23 hours our closed group had acquired 1,634 members. That's 23 hours; only nine people added to the group initially; and 1,634 group members generated. This astounded us and really put into context the 9,000 members that the Save Manston group had taken a year to generate. We had originally intended running the project for a month in the hope of getting into the thousands. However, it turned out that we had vastly under-estimated just how easy it is to conjure "support" for a group out of thin air and so we closed the project much, much sooner.

One original member. Less than a day later 1,634 members.

Here's another thing that became sharply clear from this experiment. Members of a Facebook group can live anywhere around the world. Our Imaginary Friends Facebook group acquired members based in the Far East, America and Europe – none of whom are registered to vote in this country. It had people in it with whom we hadn't been in active contact for years. If you were a political candidate relying on us to deliver 1,634 votes on 7th May, you would be bitterly disappointed as many of our members would not have been eligible to vote in your constituency. You couldn't even take our 1,634 members as broad evidence that there was local support for our pet issue because you would have no idea where our members actually live.

To test whether our group was unrepresentatively skewed away from a local population we sampled the SMA Facebook membership. This revealed that fewer than half of them live in the area to which the campaign relates. Many of the members had been added by other people and there was a significant proportion of businesses in there too. Remember, people who live out of the constituency can't vote for the local politicians who are keen to woo the group. And businesses don't get a vote at all.

What point are we making? It sounds grandiose, but this is an issue for our democracy. Politicians and candidates need our votes to get elected. Politicians and candidates pay attention to what they think are big groups of people in their area who might vote for a particular candidate if that candidate espouses the group's cause. They then start taking action to pander to that group's interests.

It's ridiculously easy to conjure up a large Facebook group out of nothing and then use it to persuade local candidates to back a cause. In Thanet we have candidate after candidate falling over himself or herself to promise that he or she will single-handedly re-open our failed airport should we be good enough to vote that candidate into power. And yet those 9,000 Facebook group members have never materialised into more than 150 actual people when attendance in person at an event has been called for by the group's leaders. And they're not all local. And many of them have been "added" and probably don't care one way or the other about the airport.

Does it really matter if politicians are fooled into chasing these imaginary friends for votes? Isn't it their own fault, if they're that daft? We have some sympathy with that view, but the issue isn't just about votes. In our local example this Facebook membership has translated into real outcomes. Thousands of pounds of taxpayers' money have been spent on legal costs to explore the option of re-opening an airport; 50% of the precious oral evidence time of the Select Committee into Smaller Airports was squandered looking at our failed airport without any lessons being drawn from this airport's failure that were applicable to the UK's currently open smaller airports; and now PwC has been commissioned at taxpayers' expense to look at whether or not an investor in American real estate with no aviation experience might be a good bet to fund a compulsory purchase to buy the closed airport and then run it. The phantom "overwhelming local support" claimed by one Facebook group has been very expensive for the rest of us.

So, if you want political support for something dear to your heart, we advise you to set up your Facebook group now and start adding your friends to it like crazy. It couldn't be easier. Ask your friends to add their friends. Graciously remove anyone who asks to be removed (we found that only a miniscule percentage will bother). Then write to your local candidates, telling them that you represent thousands of local people and that you want them to do, well, whatever it is that you want, really.

Happy adding, you influential person, you!

Notes

1. The Imaginary Friends Project can be found here – bit.ly/TheIFP
2. If you want to know more about the failure of Manston Airport, Kent County Council produced a thorough summary on 23rd March 2015. <http://www.kent.gov.uk/about-the-council/strategies-and-policies/transport-and-highways-policies/aviation/manston-airport-position-statement>
3. The final report by the Select Committee into Smaller Airports can be found here <http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201415/cmselect/cmtran/713/713.pdf>
4. There is more background about "local support" in the submission by No Night Flights to the Select Committee <http://data.parliament.uk/writtenevidence/committeeevidence.svc/evidencedocument/transport-committee/smaller-airports/written/18016.pdf> pages 21-22
5. Further information is available from Phil Rose at PhilRoseOnline@gmail.com