

Chapter 70

Democratic Potentials of UN Climate Change Conference Host Government Websites

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ABSTRACT

E-government discourse implicates state-produced Websites to enable opportunities and citizen spaces on policy issues, subject to demands to be inclusive, engaging, and free from commercial interests. Policy-making for a global issue like climate change takes place at the inter-governmental United Nations Climate Change Conference (UNCCC). It becomes critical to examine if and how the governments hosting this restrictive global policy-making space may engage citizens through their online presence—host country conference outreach Websites. The chapter explores relational underpinnings between states and citizens in such Websites by examining the values privileged by designers using mixed methods. Among UNCCC Websites from 2007 to 2009, the Danish government Website’s enhanced features may have contributed to potential inclusivity for the inter-governmental process online compared to previous government’s efforts. However, findings have shown such interactive Website’s inherent design aspects may potentially shape the manner that climate conversations are limited in an assumed democratized space online.

INTRODUCTION

E-government applies information communication technologies (ICTs) mainly for public sector’s benefit and improvement (Heeks, 2004). Bekkers and Homburg (1997) found in their multi-country study of government policies, ‘ICT’s contribution to a better government’ is one of the underlying myths that propel e-government discourse. As a contemporary anecdote, it is no surprise, for

example, for one to see a new United States government’s web-portal, USA.gov, from the Obama administration claim “Better websites. Better government” (USA.gov, 2009). ‘Better websites’ understood by the GSA office of Citizen Services, the division responsible for U.S. Government’s online presence includes social media or Web 2.0 (platforms such as blogs, social networking sites, etc.). Applications of Web 2.0 technologies found in various agency websites such as Environment

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Protection Agency's (EPA) Facebook page and National Aeronautics and Space Administration's (NASA) wiki were listed side-by-side with potential outreach gains for better government: blogs, for example, were cited to provide a 'human face' for government with an 'informal tone' (Table 1).

As an illustration, the U.S. government's own web redesign efforts implicitly heralds the

potentials of interactive websites for governance purposes, and that such can do no wrong. In fact, studies note that growing rhetoric sees promising directions for e-government (de Kool & van Wamelen, 2009; Horrocks, 2009). With governments rallying behind the democratic potential of enhanced interactivity with online audiences, it is worthwhile to assess the democratic potential of

Table 1. Online Web 2.0 use of U.S. Government at USA.gov (2008)

Technology	Simple Definition	Examples	Opportunity/Potential in Government
Blogs	Journal or diary with social collaboration (comments)	33 federal agencies have public blogs, USA.gov_government.blog.library Webcontent.gov.advice GovGab.gov	Govt info to new audiences. Puts human face on govt using informal tone. Opens public conversations. Surface issues & solve them.
Wikis	Collaborative authoring & editing	GSA.Collab.Environment, Core.gov, MAX, NASA, US Courts, Intellipedia, PTO, Diplopedia, PeaceCorps, Utah Politicopia	Workgroup or public collaboration for project management, knowledge sharing, public input. Contributions to 3 rd party sites e.g. Wikipedia
Video Sharing (and Multimedia)	Videos, images, & audio libraries (YouTube, AOL Video, Yahoo Video, tubemogul, heyspread...)	USA.gov_multimedia library, NOAA & NASA YouTube, Coast Guard, CA&VA YouTube Channels, Americorps contest, Tobacco Free Florida contest	Public outreach, education, training, other communication for "connected" and on-line audiences. How-To videos & audios to improve service and achieve mission.
Photo-Sharing	Photo libraries	USA.gov.fed/state.photo.libraries, LoC & USGS galleries, Flickr, API EPA contest	Cost savings potential. New audiences awareness.
Podcasting	Multimedia content syndicated out for use on iPod™ Mp3 players, & computers	White House, NASA, USA.gov.federal.podcast.library. Webcontent.gov, PeaceCorps, Census daily podcasts	More ways to get message out. Build trust with conversational voice. Use for updates, live govt deliberations, emergencies, how-to messages
Virtual worlds	Simulations of environments & people (Webkinz, Club Penguin, Neopets, Stardoll, Whyville, Second Life, Active Worlds, Kaneva, ProtoSphere, Entropia Universe, uWorld)	NASA, NOAA, CDC in SL & Whyville, VA, Natl Guard, Wnergy, DoD, National Defense Univ Federal Consortium for Virtual Worlds, Real Life Govt in 2 nd Life Google group	Public outreach & other communication for kids and niche Internet audiences. Virtual Town Halls, Education, Training. Ability to bring people together worldwide for meetings, lectures, etc.
Social Networking Sites	Connecting people globally	EPA.Facebook group, NASA colab, USAgov Facebook page, Myspace, LinkedIn	Intranet use to cross internal stovepipes. Cross government coordination. Public communities. Viral impact, Knowledge mgmt. Recruitment. Event announcements.
Syndicated Web Feeds	Automated notifications of frequently updated content (think RSS)	USA.gov Federal RSS library, NOAA Watch	Do more with RSS, SML/Web feeds. Expand reach. Pull content together across government. Authoritative source. Reduce duplication.

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