Chapter 1.12
E–Democracy:
The Social Software Perspective

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ABSTRACT

The success of the Internet has launched McLuhan's idea of the global village. Over the years, the Internet has become a real political medium which has inspired the emergence of the concept of e-democracy. Despite some successful applications, many limitations prevent its wide expansion. Some of these limitations can be solved with social software, in particular with the emerging Web 2.0 applications. This kind of applications may contribute to a better application of e-democracy processes for local political decisions.

to allow citizens to participate in the democratic process, is a natural evolution of this situation. Several examples demonstrate that e-democracy can be deployed for local decision purposes. The experiences have also shown several limitations, in particular concerning the on-line tools currently offered. We argue that solutions exist to overcome these limitations and that their integration in social software environments may enhance the concept of e-democracy in order to apply it to more complex decision-taking situations.

INSIDE CHAPTER

The Internet is today a widely used platform to exchange information and share knowledge. In this chapter, we propose a prospective study of the use of the Internet as support for e-democracy processes. The history of the Internet shows that social software has always been developed to support knowledge sharing among net surfers. Since participating in political issues implies knowledge sharing, the Internet was rapidly used as a political medium. The concept of e-democracy, i.e. the use of information and communication technologies

INTRODUCTION

With the expansion of available information and the diversity of communication and information technologies, the Internet is a medium support that cannot be ignored. Limited to scientists during its early days, the Internet became a platform for knowledge sharing and collaboration for a variety of domains due to the multitude of social software developed. In particular, the political domain was always present on the Internet and political movements have often used this medium to support their actions. Today, with one billion net surfers around the world, many people claim that the idea of "global village" popularized by

Marshall McLuhan in the late 1690s (McLuhan & Fiore, 1967) is a reality. Now that it becomes possible to engage in discussions with everybody around the world across geographical and temporal boundaries, many people believe in the Internet as a virtual place where different cultures may peacefully coexist. From this dream there emerged, in the late 1990s, the concept of **e-democracy**. The main idea is to use the information and communication technologies to make citizens participate more directly in the democratic process. Several examples of the application of this concept for local decision-taking (decisions concerning a part of a city or a town) seem to demonstrate that the idea of e-democracy is no longer utopian. Moreover, with the emergence of the "Web2.0" concept, there is an increased use of social software by net surfers. This chapter proposes a prospective view of the application of social software to support e-democracy processes. In fact, we argue that social software can already be useful in this context. Moreover, we believe that it may be enhanced by integrating existing technologies to overcome certain limitations related to the current tools supporting e-democracy processes. Concretely, the second section proposes a short historical overview to show how the Internet, initially developed to support knowledge networks, was rapidly used as a political medium. The third section presents the concept of e-democracy, some examples and the main limitations of the current applications. The fourth section proposes an overview of how modern social software can be used in the context of e-democracy, and which technologies should be integrated to propose on-line tools enhancing the application of e-democracy processes. Since these evolutions solve some of the e-democracy limitations, the fifth section briefly analyses in which context the concept of e-democracy should be deployed. Finally, the sixth section proposes some conclusions.

FROM KNOWLEDGE NETWORKS TO POLITICAL MEDIA

The history of the Internet studied in section 2.1 shows that new collaboration tools and methodologies were continuously developed to increase knowledge sharing among social networks (scientific ideas, software, electronic resources, ...). Based on these emerging social networks, communities of net surfers have collaborated through the Internet on many different projects (section 2.2). As soon as the Internet allowed net surfers to freely exchange ideas, it was rapidly used to discuss political issues. The result is the evolution of the Internet to a real political medium (section 2.3).

Internet as Knowledge Networks

The Arpanet computer network, the ancestor of today's Internet, was designed to help researchers to collaborate. Tools such as e-mail and newsgroups were developed in the late 1960s to allow researchers to discuss their ideas, present their results and take scientific decisions. Initially limited to the military research area, the access to Arpanet was rapidly extended the whole research community. In the 1980s, Arpanet became the collaboration platform for many research teams around the world. The result of this evolution was the creation in the late 1980s of the Internet as known today. The main problem with the communication tools existing that time was their asynchronous dimension which strongly limits the interactions between people. With the increased use of the Internet during the 1990s, new synchronized communication applications were developed: instant messaging tools and chat rooms. These tools provided a new level of interactions in the communication process between net surfers. As studied by Rheingold (2000), this technology has permitted the emergence of **virtual communities** of net surfers sharing similar interests. Once

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