Chapter 8

Enhancing Democratic Participation:
The Emerging Role of Web 2.0 and Social Media

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ABSTRACT

The Internet and Information and Communications Technologies (ICTs) have long been seen as potentially contributing to a solution to the problem of voter disaffection and disengagement that has occurred in many western liberal democracies over the past couple of decades. The success of Barack Obama in the 2008 presidential campaign in the United States has highlighted the role that ICTs, in the form of Web 2.0 technologies and social media, can play in enhancing citizens' democratic participation and involvement in political campaigning. This paper examines the nature of Web 2.0 technologies and social media and analyses their role in political campaigning, particularly in the context of the 2007/8 presidential primaries in America and the 2007 federal election in Australia. While broadcast television is still a dominant political player, the empirical evidence suggests that a viable campaign needs to integrate diverse communication strategies tailored to citizens' interests and the political environment. The interactive and participatory technologies of the online world are increasingly key components of such integrated campaign strategies.

INTRODUCTION

During the last decade, and even earlier, e-government researchers have investigated and analysed the role that Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) might play, or are playing, in numerous aspects of governmental and political processes, including democratic participation. One catalyst for this investigation has been the decline experienced by many liberal democracies in the participation of citizens in the civic and political spheres, particularly as indicated by factors such as diminishing membership in political parties and falling voter turnout at elections (Breindl & Francq 2008; Millard 2009).

An effective election campaign is a key element in any political system that is based on the representative model of democracy since an election is the phase where voters are able to directly influence the political process. Consequently, if this trend of disengagement of voters from the political process continues, it threatens to undermine the very legitimacy of representative governments. People are the sovereign that gives legitimacy to the institutions of democracy (Dahrendorf cited in Fraunholz & Unnithan 2008, p55). However, to date, implementations of ICTs in support of democratic goals, such as enhanced participation, have generally failed to live up to expectations (Lusoli & Ward 2005; Breindl & Francq 2008).The reality of online deliberation . is far removed from the ideals set out in the mid-1990s (Chadwick 2009, p3).

The rise to prominence of social media sites such as MySpace and Facebook, along with related Web 2.0 technologies, has revived hopes that ICTs will encourage greater citizen participation in all aspects of the democratic process. The stunning success of the online features of the Obama presidential campaign in the Unites States of America during 2007/08 has highlighted the manner in which an innovative online strategy can contribute to citizen engagement and effective campaigning. As Millard observes Obama's intelligent use of ICT in political fundraising and campaigning has opened a new chapter in eParticipation (Millard, 2009).

The popularity of social media, even in the political arena, provides a counterpoint to the numerous well-intentioned efforts over several years to encourage citizen participation in e-government - projects which generally had limited results. Against the slow growth of eGovernment usage it is somewhat ironic that a new wave of applications, which now go under the name of web 2.0, were launched with very little investment and encountered dramatic success in terms of take-up (Osimo, 2008b). This paper considers the nature of Web 2.0 and social media and provides a pre-liminary examination of their emerging role in enhancing participation in political campaigning.

WEB 2.0

The label Web 2.0 is not, as the name might imply, a newer version of underlying Web technology. It is rather a label that has been applied to recent developments in the manner in which online users interact with the Internet and related technologies. The term was popularized by O'Reilly Media (O'Reilly, 2005). Tim O'Reilly identifies several characteristics which, although not definitive, he considers distinguish Web 2.0 from the manner of earlier uses of the Web, such uses now being labelled Web 1.0. One such characteristic is the use of the Web as a platform for running applications and storing data, rather than simply delivering web pages. O'Reilly acknowledges that some earlier applications, such as Doubleclick, the advertising online placement firm, were already using the web as an application platform. Every banner ad is served as a seamless cooperation between two web sites, delivering an integrated page to a reader on yet another computer (O'Reilly, 2005). Later a raft of popular applications such as the Google search engine and Ebay, built on this idea of the Web as a platform and thereby acted as .an enabler or middleman between the user and his or her online experience (O'Reilly, 2005). Over time, these web-based applications developed more sophisticated user interfaces with many becoming equivalent to the interfaces supplied with personal computing applications, thereby simplifying the user's interaction with the web site. . Web-based applications can now be made to work much more like desktop ones (Graham, 2005).

The emphasis for Web 2.0 was moving from publishing to participation, building the network of users and thus having their collaborative activity improve the site and its utility (O'Reilly, 2005). However, this also was not a completely new phenomenon, since Amazon had always encouraged

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