Chapter 14
Web 2.0:
Harnessing Democracy's Potential

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ABSTRACT

Democracy shares many of its core principles with Web 2.0: it is participatory, interactive, individual-centered, host to and tolerant of multiple voices and opinions. They even have some common polemics: wisdom of the crowds vs. ignorance of the crowds; and the fact that everyone voicing an opinion may constitute both noise and debate. The emergence of the term e-Democracy 2.0 results from an alliance between Web 2.0 and democracy. This chapter intends to demonstrate that Web 2.0 has the potential to improve democracy. For this purpose, it begins by providing an overview of the core benefits and challenges of e-Democracy 2.0, then focuses on the importance of social technology for citizen participation. More specifically, this chapter conducts a content analysis to assess the role that Facebook plays in terms of encouraging and facilitating citizen participation.

INTRODUCTION

Democracy in its conception was based on self-government and dependent on citizens' participation (Meskell, 2009). The internet introduced the power of organization, providing citizens with an important instrument to assert their role in society (Meskell, 2009). Social networks, blogs, wikis and other tools are being used today beyond their social purpose to engage citizens in several domains of the public sphere. Web 2.0 technologies have revolutionized not only the way people connect, but also how they perceive their power to form and voice an opinion and to make a significant contribution. The interactive

and collaborative nature of this new age of the Web provides opportunity and means for people to become actively involved members of their communities and well-informed citizens. Web 2.0 empowers individuals by providing them with the tools they need to become dynamic participants in society. Citizens have achieved an empowering voice.

Since the dawn of its primary social use, Web 2.0 has been flourishing in various sectors of society including the political. The internet brings noise, but it also brings extended possibilities and an alternative to other sources of information, such as the traditional media, that in some cases can be controlled by political powers or limited by bias. The internet represents a platform of free thinking and sharing (Panyarachun, 2008) and these characteristics can be optimized to develop democratic participation. Despite the numerous advantages of the deployment of Web 2.0 technologies to improve democracy, there are also perils that need to be considered. The majority of the evidences of the actual impact of these tools to the democratic process remains informal and lacking scientific value, hence, it is imperative to insist in the development of metrics to formally assess it.

This chapter begins by presenting the advantages and disadvantages of the general application of Web 2.0 technology to democracy. This initial section serves as a preface to a more detailed examination of the citizen participation element of democracy. Facebook as the most popular social network site is often mentioned for its potential to engage citizens in diverse causes. Here, it is used as an illustration of how social technology can facilitate citizen participation. The content analysis of several online news articles, provide evidence of the growing impact of Facebook in several domains of society.

WEB 2.0 AND DEMOCRACY: THE BENEFITS OF AN ALLIANCE

Democracy is a political philosophy in which the people decide, by voting who represents them. The government has always been an identity separated from the people. Although it is the people that elects and empowers the government, it has remained a distance authority, a distance figure of political power that could not be easily reached. With the development of communication technology, this distance has been decreasing. In the Web 2.0 age individuals are no longer constrained by a motionless role of information consumers. The interactive web allows them to assume a different part, one of proactive authors of content (Eikelmann, 2007). Web 2.0 stands on principles of ease of use, network effects and the centrality of the role of the user (Constantinides & Fountain, 2008). Web 2.0 is evolving and propelling civic participation, by making it possible to a mounting number of people (Caplan, 2008).

The idealization and prediction of a digital democracy is not a new phenomenon (Westen, 1998) and it now seems closer to reality, despite some expected skepticism. Ideally, e-Democracy will have a central part in fostering participation and improving politics. It's core benefit is the reengagement of citizens with their public representatives and its feasibility is intrinsically connected with the emergence of tools that assist people with the challenge of having to manage the amount and intricacy of information required to produce highly informed citizens. "The digital age is creating an information and communications renaissance." (Knight Commission on the Information Needs of Communities in a Democracy, 2009).

Furthermore, e-Democracy is believed to return power to individuals (Mejias, 2004). Since Web 2.0 uses collective intelligence and its expansion is innately dependent on the users' collaborative activity (O'Reilly, 2005), it helps to maximize

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