

Chapter 22

Open Governance, Civic Engagement, and New Digital Media

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ABSTRACT

The objective of this chapter is to highlight and discuss the concepts of e-governance, open governance, and civic engagement enabled by technologies such as Web 2.0, social media, and user-generated content. The focus of discussion is placed on common founding premises and adoption factors that are reproduced at multiple levels, from that of the underlying technology up to end services and interaction patterns. A number of governance initiatives and services are used as working examples, with a view to providing readers with an improved understanding of technological principles and functional capabilities that can attract citizen participation and encourage civic engagement.

INTRODUCTION

In this chapter, we discuss how ICTs (Information and Communication Technologies) and especially technologies like Web 2.0, social media, user-generated content can be used to promote social collaboration, enable e-government and open up governance and citizen engagement.

Context and Reasons for this Chapter

One of the main reasons behind the current discussion for democratic deficits at various administrative levels and political contexts, even in the presence of political will for citizen engagement, is what can be termed a “black box” perception of citizens for political and decision-making processes, which often extends to politics and politicians in general. Given the complexity of today’s public issues within a globalised agenda, the flux

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of unrated information and opinions concerning these issues, as well as the lack of communication with elected representatives, citizens are more often than not left with the feeling that all important discussions are being held in the background, thus depriving them of the opportunity to intervene and influence decision-making processes which concern their everyday life. This perception – and up to a certain extent, reality – coupled with insufficient accountability mechanisms for political and administrative officers, as well as with phenomena of corruption, inevitably leads to loss of trust in political processes.

New digital technologies, at the same time, empower abundant and omnipresent communication capabilities, easy to use and available at a more and more affordable cost. Social technologies like blogs, wikis, tweets, networks and tubes build on these capabilities and the overall Web 2.0 approach to create new peer-to-peer communication and collaboration spaces, where users effectively exchange messages, generate content and, above all, collectively construct the idea that an entire era of experts, intermediaries and representatives is over.

As shown by market research and statistics, social media have clearly gained an important role in everyday life. People use them to communicate and organize themselves in informal as well as formal ways, for pure fun, everyday and more serious matters. Their potential to be used for more than entertainment and informal social networking becomes more and more apparent, which also explains why businesses, mass media and, lately, governments, also try to use them for their own purposes. It would be interesting to note at this point that, in a way much reminiscent of the patterns along which WWW and the internet itself started to gain popularity and use, social media have emerged as a privileged technology for the non-expert, non-empowered ordinary consumers, audiences and citizens. Still, once their potential has given proof of concept, the market, mass

media and governments, in turn, have set out to put them into their own use.

Governments and administrations worldwide are striving to open up their discourse, visions, practices and policy-making lifecycles towards more transparency, accountability and citizen involvement, with a view to gaining operational effectiveness, political consensus as well as democratic legitimacy. This effort inevitably encounters the premises of social media for peer-to-peer collaboration and crowdsourced contribution, which emerge as a natural fit for a next generation of open public services and deliberative processes. More importantly, however, social media also give to citizens the same capabilities at the same time, allowing in a more practical and sustainable way grassroots movements to be organized and discussion agendas to be formulated bottom-up.

At the crossroads of these developments, a number of applications and services emerge in many countries all over the world for opening up governance and democracy through citizen engagement, building on social technologies. Technology, on the other hand, is itself first and foremost the result of social processes, which brings forward a number of significant non-technical issues that will affect the success of social media-based e-governance and e-democracy. In this line of thought, it seems quite important to review emerging applications alongside an analysis of the founding premises of enabling technologies, with a view to gaining more insight into the ideas and ideals that these technologies carry along in their social constructions. This is the objective of the research reported in this chapter, which aims at providing a more coherent view of the paths leading from the origins to the applications of digital social media for e-governance and civic engagement, thus supporting a more critical discussion for their potential and use.

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