

Chapter 11

Web 2.0 Technologies and Authentic Public Participation: Engaging Citizens in Decision Making Processes

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ABSTRACT

In this chapter, the authors evaluate the use of Web 2.0 technology to engage citizens in the transportation decision making process. They evaluate the potential of Web 2.0 technology to create effective participatory environments to enable authentic participation; provide an inventory of the current tools and technologies utilized, identify barriers faced by administrators in the implementation of these tools, and summarize universal lessons for public administrators. Based on a review of 40 cases of collaborations, the authors find that Web 2.0 technology is predominantly used as a complement rather than a substitute for traditional approaches. Furthermore, the review suggests that the full potential of Web 2.0 remains untapped, and additional tools and technologies can be utilized to overcome barriers to implementation.

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INTRODUCTION

The objective of the chapter is to answer the following questions: What barriers are reported to *authentic* citizen participation? What is the *potential* of Web 2.0 technology to address the barriers to authentic participation? How are they currently used to *reduce the barriers* to authentic participation? And, what untapped potential exists?

We first consider the conditions of authentic participation. King, Feltey and Susel (2008) provide a critique of public participation, arguing that effective participation is participation that is sought early, often and ongoing and utilized at multiple phases of the decision-making process. When authentic participation exists, more effective and efficient decision-making can occur. The ideals of authentic participation resonate with the philosophy of Web 2.0 technology—to use Internet enabled tools to foster interaction and deliberation between multiple stakeholders. In addition to fostering more effective participatory processes, there is some evidence that the use of Web 2.0 technology has the potential to reduce the costs of citizen participation in the long run. For example, in 2009, the U.S. General Services Administration (GSA) recognized the Centers for Disease Control (CDC) for saving taxpayers \$6 million dollars by consolidating several toll-free numbers into a single line and using a mobile version of its website, podcasts, videos and a MySpace page to promote the new toll-free number (GSA, 2009c).

Despite the potential of Web 2.0 technology, more remains to be known as to how it is used to enhance citizen participation. In this chapter, we evaluate the use of Web 2.0 technologies to foster authentic participation, focusing on the creation of effective participatory environments. To accomplish this, we define the components of effective participatory environments, identify actions administrators can take to achieve it, and evaluate the internet-enabled information and communication technologies (ICTs) administra-

tors use to take action. We apply the criteria to 40 cases of collaboration in the transportation and public health communities, both of which have been targeted by federal legislation to engage in collaboration and engage citizens in the decision-making process. Using these cases, we identify a set of recommendations and generalizations applicable to administrators in a wide variety of organizational contexts.

Overall, we find that internet-enabled tools are rarely used alone, but rather they are used to complement the use of traditional tools and technologies such as face-to-face meetings, community events and small group workshops. The most comprehensive use of Web 2.0 technologies was found in the design of particular systems to enable flexibility in project decision-making between key stakeholders. However, while these have the potential to include citizen participation, gaps and barriers remain. We conclude the chapter with a set of lessons for administrators on how to create a set of tools and technologies to facilitate effective participatory environments.

AUTHENTIC PARTICIPATION AND WEB 2.0 TECHNOLOGIES

Authentic Participation and Effective Participatory Environments

Prior to a discussion of authentic citizen participation and an analysis of the potential of various tools to foster such conditions, it is necessary to define the word “authentic”. We borrow the definition provided by King, Feltey and Susel (2008) and define authentic participation as “deep and continuous involvement in administrative processes with the potential for all involved to have an effect on the situation” (p. 388), and includes public engagement from the very beginning stage of issue framing and identification to the very end stage of decision-making.

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