Chapter 6
Enabling User Participation in Civic Engagement Web Sites

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ABSTRACT

Despite high hopes and large investments, existing efforts at designing and implementing Internet Web pages and systems for civic engagement have met only marginal success, suggesting a need for careful thought and application of research on how to get people to interact using technology. This paper develops and presents a theory for designing effective online civic engagement systems. The theory draws from several decades of work in the group support systems literature as well as the historical context of civic engagement in the United States to identify seven key dynamics (the kernel) to address and include when designing such systems. These seven dynamics include five focusing on promoting individual-level interaction: authentication, authorization, masking, interests, and expertise. Two focus on group-level interaction: local access and timeliness. The author analyzes existing systems in light of these seven dynamics and identifies two additional design accommodations that would specifically promote youth engagement.

INTRODUCTION

The need for new approaches to enabling democracy is strongly reflected in trends among U.S. citizens of all age groups. This paper addresses this need by examining the current situation and developing and presenting a *kernel* theory for guiding the design and development of successful new Internet civic engagement systems. In addressing this need and creating a design theory that will generate more participation and interaction, this paper also considers the needs of young people, as they are more likely than older population segments to interact through the Internet. Due to interest in youth engagement, this paper also analyzes and presents specific design considerations for engaging youth in a civic engagement Internet system.

American citizens, especially those younger than 30, show signs of increasing ignorance about and disengagement from rational, civic involvement despite increased education budgets and gov-

ernment investments in "democratic" information technology (Bauerlein, 2008; Jacoby, 2008). These investments in education and information technology were supposed to increase educational reach and enable more efficient and effective learning and civic involvement. For example, in his State of the Union address February 4, 1997, President Bill Clinton indicated that, "we've only begun to spread the benefits of a technology revolution that should become the modern birthright of every citizen." Goals such as his echo decades-old calls for democratic technology enabled by the Internet in sources such as *Network Nation* and *Megatrends* (Hiltz & Turoff, 1978; Naisbitt, 1982).

The lack of knowledge includes what government is, how it works, and how votes and civic actions affect changes to support personal issues. For example, the Intercollegiate Studies Institute American Civic Literacy Program analyzes trends in citizen knowledge of their government and their capacity to answer basic questions about how it functions. The level of disinformation and ignorance concerning key responsibilities of officials, details of the constitution, and other information about the U.S. democracy has increased, particularly among youth (ISIACLP, 2008). Data indicate that the number of civics courses taken in public schools has declined by two-thirds since the 1960s and that college graduates today appear to know as much about politics today as high school students knew 50 years ago (Macedo, 2005). Now, as Americans face an economic downturn, the risk of disenfranchisement and disengagement for poor, rural, minority and even middle class individuals increases not only due to lack of financial resources, but also due to increasing ignorance of civic processes and means.

Disenfranchisement and disengagement from key personal issues such as health, education, wealth production, or safety decreases well-being and increases likelihood that citizens will be marginalized and manipulated. For example, Ray studies health issues, and, using a variety of studies, shows how economic hardship harms middle class and rural individuals and produces disproportionately large negative impacts on women and minorities. She suggests that improved communications and reliable information sources accessible from within the dispersed communities are critical for enabling enfranchisement and improvement (Ray, 1996). Somin analyzes increases in voter ignorance and how democracy becomes threatened by manipulation and bias when voters become ignorant of what politicians are doing, what citizen responsibilities are, and how to get involved and affect change. While Somin suggests smaller government is the key solution, he indicates there is a need for trusted access to the issues and information needed to reduce voter ignorance (Somin, 2004).

The Internet offers a largely untapped opportunity for civic engagement (Smith, 2009). Accessing this opportunity will require the careful thought and design, since prior efforts have failed. Existing attempts at applying Internet and Web capabilities have either removed participant interaction or made it free, relying on citizens interacting with each other to post their concerns and responses to each other. Perhaps this is why some argue that usage of Internet social media tools automatically leads to ignorance, disengagement and, thereby, disenfranchisement (Keen, 2007a, 2007b). Of the successful attempts most have only been able to enable interaction at the national level, though interaction at the local level is most likely to overcome heavily politicized jargon and engage users in personally meaningful civic action. Existing efforts to digitize voting systems as in proxy votes for companies or union votes appear to retain old models presuming broadcast of information and central control with no feedback. Perhaps that is why one study of voter mobilization indicates that digital media underperform face-to-face contacts (e.g., Nickerson, 2006) while another indicates less costly, more effective results (e.g., Middleton, 2006).

Due to the particular dependency on, and usage of, Internet and World Wide Web (WWW) sources by youth, this opportunity particularly applies to youth (Lenhart, Kahne, Middaugh,

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