

Chapter 72

Web 2.0 for eParticipation: Transformational Tweeting or Devaluation of Democracy?

Elizabeth Tait

University of Aberdeen, United Kingdom

ABSTRACT

Recent developments in social media allow people to communicate and share information instantly and have led to speculation about the potential for increased citizen participation in decision making. However, as with other developments in ICT, social media is not used by everyone, and there is a danger of certain groups being excluded. Further, if social media tools are to be used by government institutions, there needs to be new internal processes put in place to ensure that the participation is meaningful. This chapter will critically evaluate and analyse the role of Web 2.0 tools (such as social networking services) for facilitating democratic participation, investigate and evaluate the development of Web 2.0 tools for eParticipation, and determine how they can be used to facilitate meaningful political participation.

INTRODUCTION

The growing popularity of Web 2.0 technologies has led to intense speculation about the potential impact for engaging citizens and facilitating participation in politics (Saebø *et al.* 2009). New technologies have been developed including: social networking services, location-based services, crowdsourcing, modelling and visuali-

sation and semantic web tools (Millard, 2010). These developments have arisen at a time where there is a widely reported public disillusionment with formal political structures (Dalton, 2004) yet public participation in informal politics has increased. In particular, the growing popularity of cyberactivism has led some to think that Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) could be a solution to the problem of disengagement with politics (Anderson, 2003; Berman and Mulligan, 2003).

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Social media technologies provide a platform for groups of citizens and Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs) to share information, campaign and communicate with each other on issues that are important to them (Yang, 2009). It is recognised that online campaigns are more likely to be successful if a large number of people are engaged (Saebø *et al.*, 2009) and social media technologies can play an important role in this by facilitating the rapid ‘viral’ dissemination of ideas and issues and creation of networks for campaigns. Recent examples of the use of social media for political activism include anti-government protests in Iran whereby social networking technologies were used to coordinate protests and facilitate communication with reporters, human rights activists etc outside the country (Shangapour *et al.*, 2011). The apparent success of online activism has led to speculation that social media may facilitate democratic transition in authoritarian political systems (Xie and Jaeger, 2008) and during the ‘Arab Spring’ protests of 2011 social media was reported to have been crucial to the coordination of protests and raising awareness. It is important not to regard cyberactivism as a homogenous activity, however, Boyd (2005) argues that online social networks attract collections of like-minded people who communicate with each other but that these networks may be virtually invisible to those who do not share their interests. Further, it is important to bear in mind that there are complex political, economic, social and cultural factors that influence political activity and that cyberactivism is one element of many that can contribute to political change.

While the radical claims made about the revolutionary capacity of social media are unproven, the use of web 2.0 technologies continues to grow and governmental organisations are increasingly utilising social media as a means of communicating and engaging with the public. As these new technologies become more widely used by government organisations with ever increasing

numbers of ‘Apps’, Twitter feeds and Facebook fan pages it is important to critically reflect on these technologies and determine what role they can play in facilitating meaningful participation between citizens and government organisations. As has been indicated so far in this chapter, the development of ICT and Web 2.0 technologies in particular has led to a great deal of speculation about the implications for political participation. However, few empirical studies have been undertaken (Schlosberg *et al.*, 2007) and there is a dearth of studies that try to make a meaningful contribution to theoretical developments of eParticipation within the context of public participation theory. Much of the literature on eParticipation examines the phenomenon in isolation rather than attempting to evaluate what role, if any, social media can play in the overall consultation and engagement strategy of government institutions.

Unlike some other research in this area this chapter does not contain original empirical research on the development of Web 2.0 systems, nor do I attempt to present an audit of all possible web 2.0 interventions. This is because the systems are developing so rapidly that it would be impossible to provide examples of all systems because the developments in ICTs have been so fragmented that it is difficult to find one system that is representative of democratic innovation (Smith, 2009). Instead this chapter addresses the gap in the literature about the challenges of integrating web 2.0 technologies into the broader governmental strategies for citizen engagement and participation. I will discuss the development of eParticipation with particular focus on those that utilise social media. An analytical framework will be outlined and the benefits and drawbacks will be discussed along with their potential impact on democratic institutions. The chapter will go on to propose solutions and recommendations for the successful adoption of web 2.0 in government institutions and proposals for future research will be outlined.

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