Embodiment and Gameplay in Networked Publics

Karin Hansson, Stockholm University, Stockholm, Sweden
Love Ekenberg, International Institute of Applied Systems Analysis, Laxenburg, Austria & Stockholm University, Sweden

ABSTRACT

Decision-making in self-organized information systems such as online collaborative data production systems can be understood as an autonomous system beyond centralized power of nation-states and their various institutions, mediated by social media tools where crowd feedbacks are aggregated in a variety of reputation mechanisms. These more informal sources are however not without problems. Group biases easily appear and assumed credible sources do not necessarily provide more accurate information, in particular when it comes to more complex problems and when a diversity of perspectives or certain expertise is required. To this adds the practical problem that there is a lack of efficient technology design to support equal representation and analysis of representativeness. This article focuses on the representativeness issue and, while providing an overview over principles and some tools for crowd sourced data production, suggests a framework for making patterns of bias in collaborative information production online more transparent.

KEYWORDS

INTRODUCTION

There has been an underlying enthusiasm in some trends of e-governance, striving to decentralize the information control to broader groups of stakeholders and thereby strengthen democratic decision making in the development of more participatory and innovative governments (Hansson, Belkacem & Ekenberg, 2014). Loosely speaking, the core idea with such deliberative and participatory processes is that a broad public discourse is essential for reaching a shared understandings of the problems at stake. The latter is perceived to be fundamental in the context of semi-public and public spheres, in particular those supported by social media, extended social relations and reputation mechanisms for verifying trustworthiness of information. Consequently, supporters of a so called open government envision a more transparent and deliberative democracy where the civil society, similar to peer production networks online, setting the agenda as well as decentralizing support mechanisms, services and solutions, and where, e.g., open data access facilitates transparency, accountability, general decision making and innovation. The concept of a more collaborative government in this sense have been explored more thoroughly by, e.g., (Heeks & Bailur, 2007; Roy, 2003; Yildiz, 2007) and, particularly during the last few years, a notion of a more fundamental and covering institutional transformation has been developed, where social media applications support various functions and to some extent actually create a new potential within different research areas with overlapping and...
sometimes changing meaning like e-government, e-participation and open data. These concepts sometimes, but far from always, include participatory aspects of government such as crowd-sourcing and distributed decision making mechanisms to make the government more informed and effective as some of the data production, management and use are distributed to a diversity of actors in the public and private sectors (Hansson, Belkacem & Ekenberg 2014). Transparency is recognized as being fundamental in this context. Except for the obvious connection to trust, it is also important in the sense of understanding the whole information process, why, e.g., Bannister and Connolly (2011) suggest that transparency in the online contexts not only should be about data, but also include the information and decision process behind, i.e., who is behind the information as well as where, when, how and why it was produced.

Proponents of a more participatory and decentralized regime sometimes claim that a such does not only imply a stronger democracy, but that it has the potential of being a more sustainable and dynamical way of governing, maintained through broad participation without a central authority, where extended groups of people with comparatively free access in transparent settings, decide the content and measure its quality. (See, e.g. Fung 2013; Parasie & Dagiral 2012.) It is also usually assumed that competing public spheres enable a diversity of available discourses. Unlike traditional public spheres controlled by centralized gatekeepers ‘networked publics’ are performed, shared and reproduced online by crowds of participants, where trust and mutual recognition is central (Hansson, 2015a). These networked publics can be seen as more organic and dynamic ways of establishing public archives and providing alternative decentralized sources of data, enabling another kind of data verification. In particular, communication forms associated with social media and Web 2.0 are examples where technology is supporting a deliberative democracy through mixes of different discussion forms, motivating mechanisms and voting systems, providing possibilities for extending the communication modalities through, e.g., linking, liking, blogging, digging, and tweeting. The evaluation of the information provided is facilitated by the creation of new value systems using various forms of reputation mechanisms for validation content rather than, more traditionally, using the legitimacy of conventional institutional frameworks (Hansson, Karlström, et al., 2013). Well-known examples of the latter are Wikipedia where, usually, a larger group of participants produce and validate the data, or news services such as Digg where extended networks assist the participants in identifying the most interesting things to read and watch. These trends of course increase when the use of such media is becoming more widespread in societies and leads to transformational governments, in the sense of (Irani, Elliman, & Jackson, 2007; Irani, Love, & Jones, 2008; King & Cotterill, 2007; Lindblad-Gidlund & Nygren, 2011; Veenstra, Klievink, & Janssen, 2011), as well as a related concept of open government and associated technologies (Hansson, Belkacem, & Ekenberg, 2014; Janssen, Charalabidis, & Zuiderwijk, 2012; Linders, 2012; Maier-rabler & Huber, 2011; Nam, 2012). The baseline here is that not only should the information be accessible by default, but also being interoperable and open for reuse, by government agencies, the private sector and other relevant entities. In these contexts, collaborative information sharing and deliberative discussions, ever increasingly prevailing in social media on platforms such as micro-blogs, social networks, photo and video sharing sites as well as wikis, are put forward as means for creating a more innovative and collaborative public sector and, in extension, more deliberative and participatory systems.

The trends described above are of course generally positive, but they come nevertheless not without complications. Due to various (many times) technological barriers, lack of security, privacy and trust, lack of resources, digital divide, group phenomena, biases, poor management among other things, the ambitions with a more participatory government are often not fulfilled as supposed and there are still many open problems to be resolved. Below, we provide an overview of how tools for crowd sourced data production are dealing with some prominent ones, i.e., inequality and representativeness, and discuss how patterns of bias in collaborative information production online can become more transparent and avoidable against the background of a theoretical framework for
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