Chapter 8

Innovation in Democratic E-Governance:
Benefitting from Web 2.0 Applications in the Public Sector

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ABSTRACT

This article provides a brief introduction to Web 2.0 and its gradual adoption in public services and governance. Web 2.0 refers to the second generation of Web-based communities, networks and hosted services, which facilitates interaction between users. Since the invention of the concept of Web 2.0, version numbering has been attached to various activities and organizations, including government. Government 2.0 opens a horizon towards post-modern governance, in which government utilizes in its governance and stakeholder relations open and pluralist interactivity, community-centeredness and citizens’ own content production and networking, following the logic of Web 2.0. The promise of Government 2.0 lies in the idea that the more direct citizen involvement there is in public affairs in Web 2.0 style, the more reason there is for people to take a constructive view of public policies, governance and organizations.

INTRODUCTION

Online communities, social networking and user-generated content production are bringing new elements to the development of electronic government. These new features are based on a new logic of the Web, referred to as Web 2.0. When applied to the public sphere, this idea has been labeled as Government 2.0. This is a new trend that challenges governments to assess their role in society and especially their relationship with citizens.

This article provides a brief introduction to Web 2.0 and its gradual adoption in public services and governance. Attention is directed to the concrete ways of utilizing Web 2.0 applications, on the one hand, and the identification of tensions and challenges associated with this new trend, on the other.

Methodologically this article is a descriptive and heuristically oriented discussion of a novel phenomenon, thus having basically an exploratory nature. Early forms of Web 2.0 applications in
government are presented as exemplifications of how social networking and user-generated content production have been utilized by public organizations.

BACKGROUND

The core service of the Internet, the World Wide Web (WWW) or more briefly the Web, emerged in the 1990s essentially as the global publication and exchange network utilized by organizations. In the 2000s new forms of online communities, social networking and peer-to-peer content sharing started to change the logic of the use of this global network. These new forms became known as Web 2.0, a concept that was launched by consultants who aspired to map out the then new trends revolving around the Internet. The term appeared for the first time at the O’Reilly Media Web 2.0 Conference held in 2004 (O’Reilly, 2005).

Web 2.0 refers to the second generation of Web-based communities, networks and hosted services, which facilitates interaction between users. It does not refer to technology as such – i.e. a new technological version of WWW – but rather to the way software developers and end-users use the Web. There are conceptions or approaches to Web 2.0 that emphasize the set of technologies that enable the new forms of interaction within the Web and those that associate Web 2.0 with the semantic Web (Breindl & Francq, 2008, p. 19). Our conception, however, draws on collaborative practices and visions of the Web, thus emphasizing the social dimension of the current trends in the development of the Web. This is the most fruitful approach when assessed from the government perspective.

An indication of the revolutionary nature of Web 2.0 is the nomination of “You” as the person of the Year 2006 by Time magazine, referring to ordinary people who form social networks and provide primary content for social networking and content sharing sites with a magnitude that reached new historic proportions (Grossman, 2006; Dutton, 2007). It was in 2003-2004, roughly ten years after the so-called Great Internet Explosion, when the numbers of subscribers to Web 2.0 applications started to grow exponentially. This shift has created pressure on government to follow the Web 2.0 trends more carefully and to start considering how to utilize the available Web 2.0 applications and particularly how to utilize the wisdom of crowds in the public service and governance processes, which are expected to increase the responsiveness of public organizations (Anttiroiko, 2009).

There is a need to point out that the use of the concept of Web 2.0 has been criticized on various grounds. The research tradition on Web 2.0 has generally been fairly technology-oriented, even in such socially oriented areas as social network service (SNS) research, the bulk of which has focused on impression management and friendship performance, networks and network structure, online/offline connections, and privacy issues (Boyd & Ellison, 2007). This together with the novelty of the phenomenon explains why critical views are usually generated in blogs and other electronic media rather than in academic journals. Beside the generally held view of the fuzziness of the concept of Web 2.0, there is a lot of social and political criticism on it. For example, some sociologist bloggers and media critics have criticized it for being just another new feature of exploitative capitalism, sometimes labeled Web Capitalism 2.0. Some have also pointed to the underlying undemocratic features of Web 2.0 and the regressive nature of wisdom of crowds propagated by Web 2.0 enthusiasts (e.g., Carr, 2005; Wilson, 2008). In addition, there have been reservations and concerns among experts, public managers and politicians about the risks of too deep involvement in the Web 2.0 trend in the public sector due to privacy and security risks and capacity problems of public administration (Sternstein, 2006). Even if Web 2.0 provides a lot of opportunities, it may also pose risks that we
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