Chapter 15

The WAVE Platform: Utilising Argument Visualisation, Social Networking and Web 2.0 Technologies for eParticipation

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ABSTRACT

The growth of Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) offers governments advanced methods for providing services and governing their constituency. eGovernment research aims to provide the models, technologies, and tools for more effective and efficient public administration systems as well as more participatory decision processes. In particular, eParticipation opens up greater opportunities for consultation and dialogue between government and citizens. Many governments have embraced eParticipation by setting up websites that allow citizens to contribute and have their say on particular issues. Although these sites make use of some of the latest ICT and Web 2.0 technologies, the uptake and sustained usage by citizens is still relatively low. Additionally, when users do participate, there is the issue of how the numerous contributions can be effectively processed and analysed, to avoid the inevitable information overload created by thousands of unstructured comments. The WAVE platform addresses what the authors see as the main barriers to the uptake of eParticipation websites by adopting a holistic and sustained approach of engaging users to participate in public debates. The WAVE platform incorporates argument visualisation, social networking, and Web 2.0 techniques to facilitate users participating in structured visual debates in a community environment.
INTRODUCTION

Nowadays, Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) are widely deployed across many sectors, for example the health sector, the education sector, and the government sector. The utilisation of ICT in the government sector offers opportunities to efficiently provide government information and public services to citizens in profound ways (Dutton, 2007; Anttiroiko, 2003). Democratic institutions now face the challenge of adapting to these modern methods of governance which catalyzed the emergence of eDemocracy (Hague & Loader, 1999). eDemocracy is defined as the use of ICTs to support the democratic decision-making processes, and may be further divided into two distinct areas: eParticipation and eVoting. eParticipation soon emerged as a research area in its own right, as it opens up greater opportunities for consultation and dialogue between government and citizens (Macintosh, 2004).

Participation generally implies ‘joining in’, either in the sense of taking part in some communal discussion or activity, as in deliberation, or in the sense of taking some role in decision making. The ‘e’ in eParticipation refers to the use of ICTs, in particular the Internet and Web 2.0 technologies, in the participation process, with the implication that technology has the ability to change and transform citizen involvement in deliberation and decision-making processes (Sæbø, Rose, & Skiftenes Flak, 2008). The focal point of eParticipation is the citizen, i.e. the purpose of eParticipation is to increase citizen’s abilities to participate in the government’s decision making process (Sæbø, Rose, & Skiftenes Flak, 2008; Tambouris, Liotas, & Tarabanis, 2007). However, the number of citizens joining and contributing to online participation sites is minimal. Possible explanations include a lack of awareness of the existence of these sites or a digital divide, which creates a gap between those that are familiar with technology and those that are not (Fang, 2002).

Therefore, of utmost importance is motivating citizens to engage in the government policy-making process. Merely providing typical ICT solutions is not the answer to improving citizen participation in government policy-making proceedings (Macintosh, 2007). In saying this, governments have already embarked upon a new wave of initiatives to actively engage citizens in the democratic processes, which is illustrated by the increasing number of eParticipation projects, tools and technologies (Tambouris, Liotas, & Tarabanis, 2007). Many of these existing sites use Web 2.0 technologies for easy publishing of information, information sharing and user collaboration. Some examples of popular Web 2.0 applications are blogs, wikis, podcasts, RSS feeds, tagging, social networks, search engines and multiplayer online games (Osimo, 2008).

However, the majority of existing eParticipation websites, are not successful in engaging large numbers of general public (Heeks, 2003). We believe that a major obstacle to sustainable user engagement is a lack of impact. A lack of impact refers to the absence of visible action resulting from eParticipation. eParticipation requires the committed contribution of all stakeholders in the decision making process. When citizens, businesses, and other organisations are willing to dedicate time and effort into voicing their opinions, it is the responsibility of the policy makers to acknowledge these opinions and respond accordingly. eParticipation websites that are not established by a government body, or that do not involve policy makers from the beginning are at an immediate disadvantage, as they need to first build up trust and acceptance from citizens for the content that is generated. But even in governmental eParticipation sites, the opinions expressed by citizens are rarely used in any visible way. This discourages citizens from further contributing to this site.

Another barrier to eParticipation is how to process and analyse the numerous user contributions effectively. Many opinions expressed on current eParticipation websites are structured in
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