Chapter 7
Democratic Potentials of UN Climate Change Conference Host Government Websites

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ABSTRACT
E-government discourse implicates state-produced Websites to enable opportunities and citizen spaces on policy issues, subject to demands to be inclusive, engaging, and free from commercial interests. Policy-making for a global issue like climate change takes place at the inter-governmental United Nations Climate Change Conference (UNCCC). It becomes critical to examine if and how the governments hosting this restrictive global policy-making space may engage citizens through their online presence—host country conference outreach Websites. The chapter explores relational underpinnings between states and citizens in such Websites by examining the values privileged by designers using mixed methods. Among UNCCC Websites from 2007 to 2009, the Danish government Website’s enhanced features may have contributed to potential inclusivity for the inter-governmental process online compared to previous government’s efforts. However, findings have shown such interactive Website’s inherent design aspects may potentially shape the manner that climate conversations are limited in an assumed democratized space online.

INTRODUCTION
E-government applies information communication technologies (ICTs) mainly for public sector’s benefit and improvement (Heeks, 2004). Bekkers and Homburg (1997) found in their multi-country study of government policies, ‘ICT’s contribution to a better government’ is one of the underlying myths that propel e-government discourse. As a contemporary anecdote, it is no surprise, for example, for one to see a new United States government’s web-portal, USA.gov, from the Obama administration claim “Better websites. Better government” (USA.gov, 2009). ‘Better websites’ understood by the GSA office of Citizen Services, the division responsible for U.S. Government’s online presence includes social media or Web 2.0 (platforms such as blogs, social networking sites, etc.)
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etc.). Applications of Web 2.0 technologies found in various agency websites such as Environment Protection Agency’s (EPA) Facebook page and National Aeronautics and Space Administration’s (NASA) wiki were listed side-by-side with potential outreach gains for better government: blogs, for example, were cited to provide a ‘human face’ for government with an ‘informal tone’ (Appendix 1).

As an illustration, the U.S. government’s own web redesign efforts implicitly heralds the potentials of interactive websites for governance purposes, and that such can do no wrong. In fact, studies note that growing rhetoric sees promising directions for e-government (de Kool & van Wamelen, 2009; Horrocks, 2009). With governments rallying behind the democratic potential of enhanced interactivity with online audiences, it is worthwhile to assess the democratic potential of government-created websites, particularly in the context of an issue with global policy scope and domestic ramifications, where its offline policy process may be inherently exclusive. One such issue and policy-making process to consider is that of climate change. The United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) convenes United Nations Climate Change Conference (UNCCC), the primary venue for states to engage in global climate change governance. The UNCCC is open only to convention parties (members of the state duly part of the delegation), UN system observers, and pre-accredited press and civil society such as business, trade, academic or NGOs groups (UNFCCC, 2009). Due to the restricted and privileged access to UNCCC space subject to UNFCCC Secretariat accreditation, the sessions are not open to public.

Examinining offline state-focused policy context, the study assessed democratic potential of UNCCC outreach websites produced by host governments from 2007 to 2009. Assessment parameters included potential to engage citizens, be accountable to and promote the legitimacy for the UNCCC process. Structural relations between state and citizens implied within the new web design elements were explored also. Due to the location of these government websites representing the year’s UNCCC, it can be said that these websites’ may be exposed to audiences larger than the real-world public with offline-access to the highly restricted policy-making forum. Characterizing the nature of this digital space created by governments, as an online extension of such an exclusive policy process on a shared global issue, is, therefore, of value to examine.

BACKGROUND

ICT’s Democratic Potentials

Participatory democracy scholars have identified that citizen’s engagement and deliberation would invigorate polity, as a response to apathy (Barber, 1984; Pateman, 1970; Fishkin, 1991). Barber (1984; in Wright and Street, 2007) has emphasized the legitimizing function of discussion, emphasizing the value for ‘talk’ on-going between public citizens regarding meaningful issues of the day as constituting the heart of a democratic process. Burt & Taylor (2008) identified the three essential roles for public actors to perform in a democratic context: enabling citizens’ engagement, legitimacy and accountability. They defined “citizen engagement” to include citizens being publicly informed and participating in issue discussions, while being open to divergent points of view, reflective and actively pursuing public issues (Barber, 2003 in Burt & Taylor, 2008). They defined “legitimacy of actors” within democracies as derived from regulation, representation, ethical or moral grounds, expertise, level of autonomy, and independence that may be financial in nature (Varra, E., Tienaria, J. & Laurila, J., 2006; Lister, 2003 in Burt & Taylor, 2008). “Demonstration of accountability” is defined by the authors to include providing citizens information about organizations.