Engaging Politicians with Citizens on Social Networking Sites: The WeGov Toolbox

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ABSTRACT

Governmental policy makers can use social networking sites to better engage with citizens. On the one hand social networking sites are well accepted by citizens and a familiar environment where discussions are already taking place and social networking sites are also more important for politicians. Thus, a need for information retrieval (the policy maker gathering information), dissemination (the policy maker broadcasting information) and two-way dialog between the policy maker and citizens over these platforms. The idea is to connect both the policy makers and the citizens. In fact social media is a mass medium and it’s difficult to sieve through multitudes of comments to get to the crux of a debate. The authors’ approach to address this is to use automatic analysis components to summarise and categorize text. To be able to place successful tools that can be used in the policy maker’s everyday life within the design process is important. This paper describes the phase of combining the policy makers’ requirements with the technical feasibility to develop a software prototype, where the analysis tools can be validated within the domain of policy makers and policymaking. This paper sets up the environment for evaluating this approach and to address the question of usefulness with respect to a dialogue with citizens.

Keywords: Citizens, Government, Policy Makers, Politics, Social Network, WeGov

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1. INTRODUCTION

This paper describes an overview of WeGov - Where eGovernment meets the eSociety (http://www.wegov-project.eu). This is a three-year project supported by the European Commission under the FP7 ICT programme that aims to enable engagement between citizens and governmental institutions by utilising social networking sites as the communication channel. The project is currently in the latter part of its development phase, with evaluation about to start.

The target user for WeGov is a “policy maker”: a governmental representative who is responsible for policy decisions and needs to understand citizens’ reactions to policy and discussions on related issues. The aim of the project is to enable them to easily use the new social media to interact with citizens – to find out what citizens are discussing and so better to engage in dialogue with them.

We begin by describing the background and the problem the project aims to address. We follow this with our proposed solution (including justification and a case study), as well as technical details. An important aspect of our solution is that we wish to respect the privacy of citizens and we discuss our approach as part of the proposed solution. We then describe our methodology for eliciting requirements and making a design to address them, together with an iterative cycle with external end users to present prototypes and to gather feedback. We conclude with a brief section on impact and future developments.

2. BACKGROUND

The explosion in use of social networking sites (abbreviated to “SNS” here) such as Twitter, Facebook, YouTube, LinkedIn and Flickr throughout society provides unprecedented opportunities for policy-makers (eGovernment) to engage with citizens (eSociety) using tools and channels the citizens already use and are familiar with. This is in stark contrast to a previous approach of using dedicated, bespoke, constrained and very often underused web-based opinion soliciting platforms. In a sense, these existing sites are very much like ‘walled gardens’: they are carefully constructed and can look very inviting, but they have rigid boundaries, limited admission, restrictive rules of use, and more often than not they are empty of visitors!

In contrast, WeGov uses existing and popular public SNS that function much more like municipal parks – large, unconstrained spaces where many people come together for a diverse set of reasons where discussion is far more open, wide reaching and representative of the community.

Some of the approaches already tried for eParticipation are reviewed in Miller and Williamson (2008). In particular, the case study of No10 Downing Street is an exemplar of the problems that WeGov set out to address. This case study reviews what happened when a discussion website (DebateMapper) was set-up to support Tony Blair’s series of lectures when he left office. There were 309 invitees to the site (e.g., journalists), with 240 invited via Reuters and 69 invited by the Hansard Society. 7% of the invitees registered, including 25% of the Hansard Society invitees and 2% of the Reuters invitees. Only 2 of Hansard Society invitees contributed to the map – via edits and comments. None of the media invitees contributed directly to the map. So, in short, almost nobody added information to the bespoke DebateMapper website. This was primarily because many of those invited to participate were from the media and already had alternative and favoured ways of airing their views, e.g., in newspaper columns. The comments and blogs attached or linked to these other established channels was where the discussion really took place. This is a prime example of discussion taking place where it is most natural and using the tools that are most familiar to those involved – with an attempt to move the location and structure of the discussion, i.e., to DebateMapper, resulting in little impact.

Just from the viewpoint of members of parliament there is a gap of engagement. Mem-
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