Chapter 5
Web 2.0, Neogeography, and Urban E-Governance

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ABSTRACT

Web 2.0 technologies, which allow interactions between the producers and consumers of information, have important implications for how urban spaces are designed and governed. Spatial information on the web has become increasingly wikified, so that non-planners may contribute data, photos, and opinions in a variety of ways, a process that labeled neogeography (and which is closely related to participatory GIS). For example, websites such as GoogleMaps have greatly democratized the process of constructing and using spatial data. This process implies that planners are no longer the privileged producers of information about urban space. A case study of Brión, Galicia, is offered to illustrate this process in practice. Web 2.0 and neogeography have greatly elevated the philosophical significance of planning information: rather than received wisdom, users may construct their own communities of truth. The chapter argues this process resembles Habermas’s notion of an ideal speech situation. The conclusion argues that Web 2.0 and the growth of neogeography imply that planning must be more inclusive and democratic in nature.

INTRODUCTION

As the internet has spread rapidly to encompass more than 32% of the planet’s population at the end of 2012, its applications have multiplied accordingly, including an ongoing reshaping of the interactions between many urban governments and their citizens. This process has been greatly accelerated by the introduction of Web 2.0 technologies. Whereas most governance applications of the internet have allowed only a one-way flow of information, i.e., from the state to users (e.g., downloading documents), Web 2.0 technology allows users to upload information and engage in interaction with web sites. This process has important repercussions for urban planning, including the critical philosophical question as to whose information is deemed valid in the design
of urban spaces. One particularly important type of knowledge, spatial information, including that used in e-governance, has become increasingly “wikified,” created in a “bottom-up” fashion rather than the traditional “top-down” form, a process commonly known as neogeography. In adopting geospatial tools via the web, citizens can produce information about places that is meaningful to them within specific “neighborhoods of truth” rather than on the terms dictated by urban planners.

This chapter explores the linkages between neogeography and urban e-governance in several respects. First, it summarizes the complex relations between Web 2.0 and urban planning. Rather than using data designed for, and usually by, experts in a top-down fashion, Web 2.0 applications have allowed users to access census data, and construct their own maps of electoral outcomes, access to health care, transportation routes, and responses to disasters. Second, it explores an example of how Web 2.0 fostered a series of changes in the community of Brión, Galicia. Third, it offers a philosophical critique of Web 2.0’s implications for e-governance by invoking the works of Jürgen Habermas and the notion of the ideal speech situation. In democratizing access to information, neogeography is changing the nature of e-governance. These lines of thought indicate that urban planners must take citizen participation in e-governance far more seriously than they have hitherto. In short, the Web 2.0 reflects and contributes to the democratization of urban e-governance.

WEB 2.0, NEOGEOGRAPHY, AND URBAN PLANNING

Web 2.0 is a diverse set of software applications that have revolutionized usage of the Web. Key components of this technology are Asynchronous Javascript and XML (AJAX) and Application Programming Interfaces (API), which facilitate the creation of websites that allow instantaneous user interactions. The functionality offered by Web 2.0 has precipitated significant changes from traditional approaches to internet usage, making the web markedly more user-centric. In this sense, it has fostered an unprecedented democratization of knowledge. Goodchild (2007, p. 27), focusing on “citizen sensors,” maintains that whereas “the early Web was primarily one-directional, allowing a large number of users to view the contents of a comparatively small number of sites, the new Web 2.0 is a bi-directional collaboration in which users are able to interact with and provide information to central sites, and to see that information collated and made available to others.”

One dimension of e-governance is the production and consumption of spatial information. The term neogeography, which has been used in several ways with varying meanings (Vander Wal, 2005), points to the process by which people use on-line geospatial tools to describe and document aspects of their lives and environment in terms that are meaningful to them (Hudson-Smith et al., 2009). Web 2.0 is vital to the production and consumption of this volunteered geographic information, which is closely linked to neogeography and participatory GIS (Dunn, 2007). This approach lies at the heart of services such as GoogleMaps or OpenStreetMaps, in which users can upload location-based, geocoded information from a GPS and engage in a bi-directional process of cartographic design and production. The interactive websites characteristic of Web 2.0 allow users to upload information about locations into online content and apply their data in diverse ways, including, for example, simple displays of locations (e.g., favored routes for a proposed bike trail) or lists of attributes of a place near a user equipped with a GPS. This approach lies at the heart of mapping websites such as Google Maps, Yahoo!Maps, OpenStreetMap, and Bing Live Maps. Google Maps is used by more than 71 million people annually and Google Earth by 22.7 million (Haklay, Singleton, & Parker, 2008).