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Monograph "IV Internet, Law and Politics Congress. Social Software and Web 2.0: Legal and Political Implications"

ARTICLE

Towards e-Government 2.0: Review of the IV Internet, Law and Politics Congress – Political Track

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Submission date: May 2008
 Acceptation date: June 2008
 Published in: September 2008

Abstract

Review of the Political Track of the *IV Internet, Law and Politics Congress*, held in June 2008, organized by the Department of Law and Political Science, UOC. An overview of the latest work by researchers and professionals in the field of political dialogue between institutions and citizens on the Internet was presented, specifically that involving the new participation-rich environment of Web 2.0.

Keywords

e-government, cyberactivism, politics 2.0, electronic democracy, participation, blogs

Topic

e-Government

Hacia el gobierno electrónico 2.0: repaso del IV Congreso sobre Derecho y Política en Internet – Bloque de Política

Resumen

Repaso del bloque de política del IV Congreso sobre Derecho y Política en Internet celebrado en junio del 2008 y organizado por el Departamento de Derecho y Ciencia Política de la UOC. En esta parte se presentó una descripción general de los últimos trabajos tanto de investigadores como de profesionales del ramo en el campo del diálogo político entre instituciones y ciudadanos a través de Internet, y más en particular del que se produce en virtud al nuevo horizonte del entorno de la Web 2.0 que fomenta mucho la participación.

Palabras clave

gobierno electrónico, ciberactivismo, política 2.0, democracia electrónica, participación, blogs

Tema

Gobierno electrónico

Introduction

On 2 and 3 June 2008, the Department of Law and Political Science of the UOC organised the *IV Internet, Law and Politics Congress* in Barcelona (Spain). With a two-day structure, the Congress was divided into two tracks: one focussing on cyber law and digital media law and the other on politics. The aim of the political track was to explore the evolution of participation, both of institutions and the citizen, along with the evolution of the new arena of information and communication being created on the Internet. The emphasis was on how the Web 2.0 philosophy and technologies could reshape - or actually is reshaping - interaction, involvement and political activism.

This article includes some of the ideas presented in this last block, together with some personal reflections from the author. Thus, it is not intended as a faithful chronicle of events.

Government on the Web

Professor Helen Margetts, from the Oxford Internet Institute, gave the opening speech and began by summarizing some of the main changes in public governance over the last few years, as described in her book "Digital Era Governance" (Dunleavy & Margetts, 2006).

In the UK - but the same conclusions might be extrapolated to other areas - there has been a shift in the model of government, from the "new public management" towards up-and-coming Digital-Era Governance. The former was characterized by disaggregation and decentralization of government power and action, the introduction of competition in the tasks of government and quasi-government agencies, and incentivisation and privatization to achieve better performance and efficiency. These trends have been somewhat reversed in Digital-Era Governance, returning to reintegration, a new focus on clients and their structures, especially that of co-creation and co-production, arising with force, and an intensive digitalisation of content and processes.

There may be a clear process of change of paradigm, but it is nonetheless slow and far from reaching maturity and having a wide impact. This is demonstrated in the *Government on the Internet*^{www1} research project on Directgov^{www2} (the model e-Government initiative in the UK) and the whole constellation of UK government sites, which identifies gaps and grey areas.

With the motto "public services in one place", Directgov provides a single entry point to existing public information and services, with information from all public websites. A link-rich site, though of limited content, the centralization strategy seems to work well. However, the design and the way information is delivered does not use state-of-the-art online interaction, making the site look like an expensive device that could do more to achieve goals, while the budget should actually be multiplied to improve the information provided. Nevertheless, the general perception of the citizen is that something is moving and that it is moving in the right direction.

And what direction is this? The new Digital-Era Governance, in relation with the evolution of ICT-enabled participation, is pervasive in the use of information, loosening control over it and handing it to citizens who are proactive in getting customised information and using it to suit their needs. This proactive attitude, fostered by an appropriate framework set by the government, gives feedback to the system itself by providing both content (co-production) and reflection (co-creation). Of course, this trend is not without risks: the probability of entering into a chaotic relationship in the absence of clear leadership, privacy and security risks, the policies of public services and the enforcement of social contracts are among the main concerns.

Blogs and political parties

If governments are changing their way of operating online, so are the other big institutions in the political arena, the political parties.

[www1] www.governmentontheweb.org.

[www2] www.direct.gov.uk

Lourdes Muñoz,^{www3} member of the Spanish Parliament, Carles Campuzano,^{www4} of the Catalan Parliament, and Roc Fages,^{www5} a political communications analyst, all three bloggers, debated the role, visibility and identity of politicians on the Internet, and whether the Web 2.0 was a trendy hype that politicians simply could not afford to not take into account, or if it was a real tool for achieving higher goals.

Hype or not, data provide solid evidence of growing interest and practice in blogging, especially, but not exclusively, in political spheres. Politicians use all kinds of applications, mainly to inform and to stay informed and to make sure their personal opinions and agenda become known (within the party and beyond the party's filters) and to reshape them according to input given by readers. All in all, keeping in touch with the citizenry and entering into a rich, virtual circle of information and knowledge sharing lead to transparency and accountability.

The main problem is that while individual politicians are increasingly incorporating the Web 2.0 discourse to engage in debate, institutions such as political parties remain in an old-fashioned organisational set-up that does not seem to understand or benefit from online channels for information exchange or for communication purposes. Indeed, the point at issue is not the Web 2.0 tools but the underlying concepts of listening, interacting and networking.

But, while institutions are stuck in their old ways, citizens are not, and they are already engaging in online civic actions that traditionally only arose in the institutional sphere. Hence, some political action is shifting from parties - and their relationship with their active party members - to the "street", where individual politicians engage in conversation with their voters outside the tight speech control of their parties' establishments.

As usual in this sort of discussion, the archaic legal framework and the digital divide between and within

countries and institutions are the main barriers individuals usually face when aiming to fully exercise their political freedom and citizens' rights on the Internet.

Electoral strategies on the Internet

So, even if there are only a few, how do these institution-citizen dialogues take place over the Internet?

After the experience in the Spanish elections on 9 March 2008, administrators of the 2008 General Elections^{www6} observatory and the political analysts José Rodríguez and Xavier Peytibi found that, despite the many changes after the previous elections, campaigning still focussed on mainstream communication media, offline, using propaganda that was largely devised for online platforms.

Nevertheless, interaction between parties, candidates and voters has increased thanks to Web 2.0 tools such as blogs and nanoblogs (e.g. Twitter), which in turn have increased the reach of political messages. This broader reach has also been a consequence of the outsourcing - or, indeed, *crowdsourcing* - of participation, as not only politically active party members but also occasional supporters have joined the political campaigns and have created their own campaigns outside the formal strategies of their parties. Another consequence is that campaigning reaches a wider audience while costs are much lower, with some online campaigns showing positive net results even shortly after they start up.

This *crowdsourcing* could have not been possible without multimedia content being universally available for everyone to use and reuse. The technique of embedding is the main practice, whether on personal sites, as a sort of I-campaigning or personal campaigning, or in social networking sites, which have enabled like-minded people to converge on the same ideologies and candidates.

[www3] lourdesmunozsantamaria.blogspot.com

[www4] carlescampuzano.blogspot.com

[www5] goldmundus.com

[www6] www.generales2008.info

Coherent with other findings, the blogospheres that have been created officially or more informally around political parties have escaped the parties' control, and become a nebulous cloud of people echoing similar messages and political preferences. Even more, when facing a crisis of leadership or of political programme, as has happened in Spain with the main opposition party, the blogosphere has proved to be a compendium of atomized trends of examining the minute details, along different trends and understandings of the lines of thought that kept them tied together.

Political blogospheres might be powerful as drivers for political debate, but they are still safety valves for individuals struggling for their voices to be heard over the louder, united, official party voice, even more so when the status of the virtual volunteer is yet to become a recognized figure in the organisational structure of the party.

Some of these experience-based statements are confirmed by results from the Electronic Government, Administration and Democracy research group at the UOC, which is represented here by Professor Albert Padró-Solanet.

Considering the question why ICT have been so notorious in recent political campaigns and whether this might be due to some sort of cyber-optimism, the research (Batlle *et al.*, 2007) shows some contradictory findings: even if there is clear strategic use of the web for political issues beyond the "hype" factor, political parties (especially the ones addressing mass electorates) just reproduce their offline structures online.

So, political parties do not seem to actually benefit (or understand) the potential of online campaigning: additional media, low cost, wide reach, possibility of segmentation, quick response, links with individuals and groups that think alike and endorse the parties' discourses, ample support, improved control of the diffusion of information (as opposed to information in the mass media), potentially interactive, etc.

It is likely that the lack of adoption of the new channel is a result of the new requirements of the Internet. First, the cost of keeping information up-to-date. Second, as messages are issued straight from the core of the party and not through other media, debate is not

encouraged since there is no ambiguity. Third, the fearful reality that, in the long run, control over the message is absolutely lost. Fourth, the perceived or real rivalry between offline and online participation, which is more acute in smaller parties as they require more participation and more external funding that comes, increasingly, from the online channel.

Towards citizenship 2.0?

To sum up, Eduard Aibar (Vice President, Research, UOC), Ana Sofía Cardenal (Professor of Political Science, UOC), David Osimo (e-Government researcher and activities coordinator, European Commission Institute for Prospective Technological Studies), Helen Margetts (Director of Research, Professor of Society and the Internet, Oxford Internet Institute) and Joan Subirats (Professor of Political Science, Autonomous University of Barcelona) participated in a round table discussion to draw conclusions from the whole track.

The first major conclusion is that scepticism about the Internet and the Web 2.0 stems from unawareness of the online world. So, from the governments and institutions' point of view, there is an urgent need to raise policy makers and decision takers' e-awareness of the potential benefits of the new medium.

Complementary - or maybe in direct opposition - to this idea, only a strong commitment to the online channel offers the possibility of practically testing the *real* usefulness and importance of ICT for e-Government or e-Politics. Or, at least, to run through a list and check where the opportunities and the weaknesses really are, rather than having to rely on biased perceptions and more or less informed guesses.

The second major conclusion deals with the theoretical framework of participation and the point of view of the citizenry. Online participation puts at stake the fundamentals of representative democracy. "Apart from the expected or potential benefits, the costs that representative democracy appeared to succeed in bridging - the cost of information, the cost of forming one's opinion, the cost of debating and deliberation, etc. - are being sustained once again by the citizens in the new design of things." Hence, there is a need to measure the actual

demand for political information and, even more, the cost of doing so in terms of both money and time.

Last, but not least, for the new political dialogue between institutions and individuals, new frameworks are needed. The most obvious is the legal sphere, where urgent changes are needed in issues

such as security, privacy, intellectual property rights, transparency and accountability. But also in the organisational sphere, where old mindsets and relationship scenarios need to move aside for newer ones, based on horizontal non-hierarchical structures built around short run multi-stakeholder civic actions.

Suggested further reading

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Recommended citation

PEÑA-LÓPEZ, Ismael (2008). "Towards e-Government 2.0: Review of the 4th Internet, Law and Politics congress - Political Track". In: "IV Internet, Law and Politics Congress. Social Software and Web 2.0: Legal and Political Implications" [online monograph]. *IDP. Revista de Internet, Derecho y Política*. No. 7. UOC. [Date of consultation: dd/mm/aa].

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Lecturer of Public Policies for Development at the School of Law and Political Science of the UOC Economics degree. Master's in Ecoaudit and Environmental Planning. Specialist post-degree course in Knowledge Management. M. Phil. in Political Science. Ismael Peña-López has two main fields of interest. On one hand, stemming from a personal philosophy of life, aspects related to Information and Communication Technologies for Development (ICT4D): e-readiness, the digital divide, ICT in cooperation for development, non-profit technology, online volunteering and e-inclusion. On the other hand, stemming from professional engagement in the field, aspects related to e-learning and empowerment: digital capacity building and literacy, e-portfolios, open access, open science and access to knowledge. The conjunction is perfect. Founder and director for five years of the UOC cooperation for development programme, mainly on e-learning for development. He is editor of ICTlogy.