

The “audience” as participative, idea generating, decision making citizens: will they transform government?

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Keywords: audience, citizens, open government, participation, web 2.0.

From a purely technical perspective, no one, including Tim Berners-Lee, has ever been able to pinpoint exactly what makes Web 2.0 unique. What may be most accurate to say, is that the enormous popularity of social networking and other social media technologies hinges on a radical reconceptualisation of the audience, now routinely incorporated into ICT applications. Once treated as passive consumers of content created by others, designers of these applications now appreciate and exploit, the fact that new media users (formerly known as the “audience”) actively create content online to serve their own goals, frequently as they interact with others. Users of Web 2.0 applications display and tinker with their identities, express themselves on all kinds of topics, invent new products and ideas, and, as Don Tapscott, Tim O’Reilly and legions of other business gurus hasten to remind us, are willing, so far at least, to lend their problem solving, creative efforts and intellectual products to businesses seeking to innovate, or just looking for free marketing. Hoping to harness this largely uncompensated labour, organisations of all types (both commercial and non-profit) have been quick to find ways to attract these “producers” to their projects.

Governments have not been the swiftest in this regard, however, they may present the most ambitious and optimistic agenda for involving internet users. Nations around the world now hope to use new media to engage their citizens in some variation of participatory governance. Where once the prospects for “town hall style democracy,” were doomed by the limitations and inefficiencies of one-way media transactions, the networked interactivity of social media now makes it technically feasible to invite citizen participation on a routine basis. What is not yet clear is how citizens will react over the long term to these invitations and what kinds of social issues and software applications will best attract and immerse them into new citizenship practices.

From Web 2.0 to Government 2.0

Certainly the most compelling political news about Web 2.0 has been the way that social networking has revolutionised the art of political campaigning. But the most enduring political implications of Web 2.0 may lie in what democratic governments seek to achieve in their efforts to engage users in the mundane daily processes of governance. Administrative agencies, particularly in the bureaucratic and industrial age (despite the substantial organisational evolutions over the last three decades), are finally changing as governments reinvent themselves for the information age. One essential part of this transformation to Government 2.0 is the recognition that the social media enable governments to invite citizens, as democratic watchdogs and collaborators as well as creative do-it-yourself forces, into the administration of government.

Having engineered an election campaign that used social media to solicit the work related and financial contributions of volunteers and to engage voters with wide ranging opportunities for contact with the candidate, Barack Obama quickly translated this experience into a plan for reengineering administration for the US federal bureaucracy. In one of his first executive actions, President Obama issued the Presidential Memorandum on Transparency and Open Government establishing transparency, participation and collaboration as the hallmarks of open government. The Open Government initiative instructs federal agencies to broaden access to government data and other information, creating opportunities for citizen participation, and to institutionalise a culture of open government with a focus on substantial collaborations with researchers, the private sector and civil society.

Other countries are moving similarly to adopt features of the Government 2.0 paradigm. Great Britain, Columbia and Canada have committed to a program of open data, as a way to achieve both improved accountability and transparency through the creation of new data products. Australia issued a “Declaration of Open Government” in 2010, with emphasis on: informing, which requires the establishment of a “pro-disclosure culture” in Australian government; engaging, which seeks to promote collaboration as a way of improving government processes; and participating, which seeks to make government more consultative with citizens. As a part of the Government 2.0 planning, Australia is exploring the value of open public sector information in stimulating innovation and expanding knowledge.

Consider also the “Open Government Partnership (OGP),” which is a program that: supports a pledge made by President Obama to the United Nations to foster the development of open governments around the world, in order to combat corruption and increase accountability. Launched fully in 2011, the OGP is led by an international, multi-stakeholder steering committee comprised of countries (Brazil, Indonesia, Mexico, Norway, Philippines, South Africa, the United Kingdom and the US) and civil society organisations; such as the International Budget Project and the Transparency and Accountability Initiative. Over the last year, 47 additional countries have joined the OGP. In order to do so, countries

are required to satisfy a certain number of eligibility conditions, which include establishing the public's legal right to access government information and the creation of mechanisms for citizen participation and consultation.

What Citizens Stand to Gain

Throughout the international discourse of open government and Government 2.0, two complementary themes are evident. The first is a focus on using new technologies to promote e-participation, and is thus a continuation of what, in the annals of new information and communication technologies, can be seen as a historical preoccupation with using new technologies to improve democracy. What begun as Web 1.0 as an effort to engage citizens with their elected representatives, has now morphed into Web 2.0, involving citizens in policy deliberations or actual decision making with public administrators. A case in point is the now famous Peer to Patent project (<http://www.peertopatent.org/>), which invites reviews by members of the software development community, to help assess the claims of pending patent applications in two pilots. These are sponsored by the US Patent and Trademark Office and the United Kingdom's Intellectual Property Office.

The second theme is with a Web 2.0 focus on distributing government information previously unavailable to the citizens, either by intention or through neglect. In some cases, the interest is in enabling citizens to use this information as a political tool for transparency. When information and data about government actions and decisions are accessible, citizens can more effectively participate in decision making. They can also, at least in theory, assess the efficiency and effectiveness of government actions, and hold them accountable for their performance; a condition that is reciprocally expected to improve government performance. Such information is also a key to controlling corruption, since the right kind of information enables watchdog citizens and civil society organisations to track budget disbursements and expenditures.

In other cases, interest rests more squarely on anticipated economic impact. As our ability to mine and manipulate data increases, speculation also increases about the potential for innovation and economic value that might be achieved in liberating "public sector information" from the governments that have collected it, and exploring the ways in which this data might stimulate entrepreneurial activity. Cases in point are the data repositories now functioning in the US (<http://data.gov>) and the UK (<http://data.gov.uk>). However, even developing countries, such as Moldova and Kenya, are experimenting with opening up their data inventories in an effort to both cultivate the citizen's trust and stimulate economic growth. It may take some time to appreciate the overall economic impact of government data on business activity. In the meantime, moreover, efforts such as the US "Smart Disclosure" task force are considering more immediate impacts by asking what information (owned by the government or that could be provided by third parties) citizens need, in order to make informed decisions about a variety of consumer relevant topics. This includes energy consumption, cell phone plan purchases, medical care, etc. The

expectation is that citizens are both ready and willing to use such information if it is available, to make wise lifestyle and marketplace decisions.

Whither Transformative Government?

It is worth remembering that every new communication technology of the past century has been accompanied by nearly immediate prognostications about how that technology might be used to improve democracy. Apparently, hope springs eternal for democracy theorists. Web 2.0 has been no different in this regard. In response, Frank Bannister and Regina Connolly have recently sought to temper this latest round of “exuberance” over Web 2.0. Noting that although the technological capabilities have improved, with the “assumption that there is a large untapped pool of active citizens waiting to get engaged and stay engaged, lacks as supportive evidence”. This is a sobering and accurate observation.

However, two potentially encouraging differences are worth bearing in mind. Firstly, the active citizens addressed by Government 2.0 are not only the “digital immigrants” of our generation, but also, and perhaps more significantly, are the “digital natives” of the Net generation. This is a generation raised on electronic interaction. A generation that plays on the net, is educated on the net, follows politics on the net, and one that may well be inclined to engage with government on issues of interest using the net. Digital natives have never experienced a world without networked interactivity. Will participation in governance become an expectation of their lifestyle?

Secondly, this time, the wave of democratic enthusiasm is coming from inside the government itself. The payoff is an unprecedented array of solicitations and government programs for citizen empowerment; to register ideas and opinions, contribute to policy and decision making, and improve their lives and government itself through new forms of engagement with Government 2.0.

It is of course wise to be skeptical about the extent of the public’s demand for and receptivity to such opportunities, but it is also worth attending to the other side of this coin. Equally pressing questions are: Will governments listen? Will they know what to do with the creative products of an active and involved citizenry? Is government willing and able to translate the products of public engagement into observable outcomes? Answers to questions like this will depend on substantial change, not just from citizens, but from within the ranks of government itself. Clearly there is a reciprocal causality at work here. If the time has come for two-way active engagement in the daily processes of governance, then both conversational partners must be up to the task.

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