

Participation 2.0: Using Internet and Social Media Technologies to Promote Distributed Democracy and Create Digital Neighborhoods

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Introduction

This essay explores the notion of Participation 2.0, which refers to the use of Internet and social media technologies to engage citizens in the work of government. Participation 2.0 has become an important feature in the landscape of American citizen engagement, and particularly in efforts at the local level.³⁶ In addition to producing other benefits, it is seen as a vehicle with which to promote open and transparent government, increase citizen trust and political efficacy, and improve the responsiveness of government to citizen needs and concerns. This essay begins with a brief history and discussion of Participation 2.0. Next, it provides several examples of innovative projects in local government where Participation 2.0 is being used to promote distributed democracy and create digital neighborhoods. The essay then turns to a brief discussion about the challenges of Participation 2.0 and considerations for local officials wishing to engage in such activities.

Participation 2.0

In the early 1990s, widespread Internet access gave rise to both Web 1.0, a term coined to refer to proprietary, static, non-interactive websites, and Government 1.0, the idea that public agencies needed to develop websites to provide information to citizens. By the late 1990s and early 2000s, Web 2.0 tools evolved (O'Reilly 2007). Whereas Web 1.0 tools limited users to the passive viewing of provided information, user-centered Web 2.0 tools facilitate collaboration through interactive information production and sharing (Bretschneider and Mergel forthcoming 2010; Cormode and Krishnamurthy 2008; Howe 2006). Examples of Web 2.0 include web-based communities, hosted services, social-networking sites, picture and video sharing sites, wikis, blogs, and mashups, among others. These tools enabled the development of Government 2.0, defined as “the use of social media applications to increase participation, transparency and interagency collaboration in the public sector” (Bretschneider and Mergel forthcoming 2010; Mergel forthcoming 2010).

In turn, Government 2.0 gave rise to Participation 2.0, a term we use to denote the use of Internet and social media technologies to engage citizens in the work of government and governance. At the heart of Participation 2.0 are the new communication channels that allow for bidirectional interaction among government and citizens. Examples include posting comments to blogs and Facebook fan pages, using Twitter messages to provide breaking news and information, and allowing the use of public data sets for mashups with other application such as

³⁶ It is important to note that in some cases, Participation 2.0 may be the best way to directly engage citizens in the work of government. In other cases, it may be a supplement to in-person participation, and in yet other cases, it may not be necessary at all. The choice between on-line and in-person participation, or the mix of the two, needs to be made after consideration of numerous design issues, such as the nature of the problem, time and resources, and goals, among others.

Google maps. Government organizations are also developing websites that allow citizens to identify and alert managers to problems or deficits in their community (e.g., CitySourced.com). Likewise, citizens are developing applications that make use of data released by government (e.g., The London Data Store, <http://data.london.gov.uk/>) and/or encourage broader engagement in the community (e.g., LocalCracy.org, in beta test in Amherst, MA).

Together, these government- and citizen-initiated applications have substantively changed the way public managers and citizens interact, and facilitated the emergence and development of distributed democracy and digital neighborhoods. The notion of distributed democracy is rooted in the recognition that governments need greater citizen involvement to effectively address the numerous public challenges they face. As a consequence, some governments are using Participation 2.0 technologies to engage citizens in the identification, organization, prioritization, and solving of pressing issues. This distribution of responsibility is helping to create digital neighborhoods, where through the use of Participation 2.0, citizens are becoming active in the work of government and enhancing the civic life of their communities. In some cases, citizens are even organizing to take over non-critical tasks and responsibilities that were traditionally in the hands of government. A recent example on the island of Kauai, Hawaii is illustrative: business owners and residents joined forces to repair a bridge to a state park for which the State Department of Land and Natural Resources did not have the finances (Simon 2009). Examples of Participation 2.0 abound; the following section provides but a few.

Case Examples

As noted in the introduction to this white paper, government can engage citizens in public decision making at a variety of levels and with a large assortment of processes. The first column in Table 1 describes the levels along spectrum of public involvement in decision-making; as one moves the top to the bottom of the spectrum, the level of citizen involvement in, and influence over, public decision making increases. The second column identifies examples of Participation 2.0. These examples, discussed next, are roughly categorized within the public involvement spectrum. However, it is important to note that the spectrum categories serve as a heuristic, the boundaries between the levels are porous (denoted by dotted lines), and that in some cases, the reality of Internet and social media technologies does not directly translate into the spectrum categories. Thus, even though the examples here are discussed in terms of the level of involvement, they do not always fit neatly into the spectrum categories. Finally, as is clear from the table and discussion, the majority of Participation 2.0 work is happening at lower levels of involvement; however, we expect, in time, the further evolution of such work to higher levels of involvement and distributed responsibility.

A. Inform

In terms of information sharing, the strengths of the Internet and social media tools are their ability to allow for immediate, multi-directional exchanges between citizens and government. When used in conjunction with mobile phones, social media tools also have the ability to instantly reach citizens wherever they are. There are a number of examples where local governments are using Internet and social media technologies to inform citizens. For example, the overwhelming majority of local governments use Web 1.0 tools on websites to inform citizens about various events such as public meetings, decisions, and community activities, among a wealth of other types of information. Many of these websites also use Web 2.0 tools to encourage interactive information production and sharing, through mechanisms such as events

postings, blogs, and discussion boards. In addition to websites, many local governments, or individual agencies within local governments, use Facebook or other social networking sites to provide citizens with information. Similarly, many local governments use Twitter, a micro-blogging service, which can be accessed via the Internet or mobile phone, to provide information to citizens. In some cases, Twitter is used simply for updates and to direct citizens back to websites for more information, or by citizens to report problems and ask questions (e.g., the City and County of San Francisco's 311 service, <http://sftwitter.sfgov.org/twitter/>). In other cases, Twitter is used to supply breaking news or other critical information (e.g., evacuation routes or shelter locations in emergency and natural disaster situations) as quickly as possible to all constituencies. Another example is the use of Twitter to provide Amber Alerts for missing children (http://twitter.com/AMBER_Alert).

B. Consult

Social media technologies are also increasing the ability of local governments to consult with citizens, that is, to receive and respond to comments, concerns, requests, and complaints. A good example is SeeClickFix.com (<http://www.SeeClickFix.com>), based on the original FixMyStreet.com in the UK, <http://fixmystreet.com>). These innovative web applications allow both citizens and public managers to collaborate asynchronously on non-emergency issues in their community. The idea harnesses the willingness of citizens to report issues, such as potholes, trash problems, or other nuisances on a central platform by uploading pictures (taken with cell phones) along with a short explanation. The participating government agencies, public works departments, and/or community groups can then log in and give citizens feedback and progress reports, such as "work process started" or "issue resolved." A similar project called Love Lewisham (<http://www.lovelewisham.org>) is being used in Lewisham, a district in south-east London. The project, allows residents to photograph and report environmental issues such as graffiti, trash, and abandoned vehicles, by text message or MMS to the local authority, along with a GPS location of the problem. The local authority responds to the complaint, and informs residents via the website about the actions taken to address the issue. Finally, Boston Massachusetts is using an iPhone application for citizen-to-city transactions called Citizens Connect (<http://www.cityofboston.gov/mis/apps/iphone.asp>; status updates are provided at http://mayors24.boston.gov/selfservice/CoB_Case_Statis.htm). The application is a gateway for citizens to report issues to the City's Constituent Relationship Management System (CRM).

C. Include/Incorporate

Some local governments use Participation 2.0 technologies to engage the public in information processing and given them some influence over decision making. Wikis, software platforms that allow non-technical, interactive online content creation, have emerged as an important and commonly used tool in such cases. Wikis are designed such that users need not have Web programming skills; using a simple text editor window, users are able to easily collaborate and produce joint outcomes (Goodnoe 2005). An example is the Wikiplanning project in San Jose, California (<http://www.wikiplanning.org/>). This project uses a wiki to solicit information from citizens, city planners, vendors, and others in a "virtual charrette." The goal is to "create a new and better avenue for citizens to provide input on the city's future" (Vander Veen 2009) by defusing confrontational attitudes common in planning and development and by constructing joint ownership of solutions.

D. Collaborate

Participation 2.0 technologies also allow for government to partner with the public throughout the decision making process, from identification of problem, to the development of alternatives and the identification of preferred solutions. An emerging example, which uses both in-person and on-line participation, is that of the Virtual Ward Panels in London. As part of its policing effort, London created safer neighborhood ward panels, in which a group of neighborhood residents holds public meetings to collect information on area crime and safety and report that information to their area police department. To supplement its effort, the Westminster City Council has launched a pilot project called Virtual Ward Panels, which will use Participation 2.0 technologies such as blogs and discussion forums, along with online surveys and voting tools, to engage a broader, more diverse set of residents in the work of its safer neighborhood ward panel. The goals are to engage citizens and give them a say in developing and selecting the policing priorities and strategies for the area in which they live.

E. Empower

Participation 2.0 technologies can also be used to empower citizens, that is, to place decision making authority in their hands; however, we have yet to identify cases in local government where citizens are engaged beyond the collaborative level, though it is likely that some exist. At the state level, however, citizen empowerment is occurring, at least to some degree, in the Virginia Idea Forum (see <http://www.ideas.virginia.gov/>). After logging in to the site, citizens submit their ideas about improvements for state government. Together, citizens discuss the ideas and collaborate to develop and enhance them. These ideas are then rated by users, and the ideas with the highest ratings receive an official response from a representative of the state. The premise of this state-level example could be applied easily to local government endeavors.

Putting it All Together: Examples with Multiple Levels of Involvement

The cases we discussed above present examples of Participation 2.0 processes used at a single level of involvement. The two cases we discuss here, one initiated by government, the other by citizens, use Participation 2.0 technology in a single application across the levels of public participation spectrum. Redbridge is a diverse community of almost 260,000 residents in the North East of Greater London. The Borough Council created *Redbridge i*, an interactive website with numerous tools for engagement (<http://www.redbridge.gov.uk/>). The website provides easy mechanisms (in a “one-stop-shop”) for the council to report news and information to residents, as well as for residents to provide feedback and raise issues with the council. Residents can also make requests for action and receive responses direct from their councilor. Similarly, Haringay Online (<http://www.HaringayOnline.com/>) is a citizen-led, hyperlocal social network for the neighborhood of Haringay in the Borough of Haringey in north London. With the extensive use of social media technology, Haringay Online seeks to blend web-based and real-world neighborhood interactions to strengthen the community by building a sense of place and social capital, empowering residents to take action to shape their neighborhood, and increasing the capacity to influence local decisions and circumstances through democratic processes. While both websites have multiple levels of involvement, the empowerment aspects of each come in the form of interactive tools where residents can self-organize for community

improvement efforts and other community building activities. Examples include situations where residents have organized to tackle community problems such as crime through neighborhood watches and the beautification of park and public space through clean-ups, among others.

In summary, each of the above cases is an exemplar of how local governments are innovating to use Participation 2.0 technologies. Together, the cases demonstrate substantive changes in the ways that local governments and citizens are interacting. The cases show how Participation 2.0 is being used to promote distributed democracy, that is to engage citizens and share responsibilities for the identification, organization, prioritization, and solving of pressing community issues. Moreover, the cases demonstrate the emergence of digital neighborhoods, where citizens come together and interact on-line to enhance the civic life of their communities and take over non-critical tasks and responsibilities that were traditionally in the hands of government. Despite these innovations, and as noted in the introduction, Participation 2.0 is not a panacea for public engagement. The final section of this essay discusses some of the challenges of using Participation 2.0, as well as some of considerations for public managers wishing to engage in such endeavors.

Considerations for and Challenges of Using Participation 2.0

Local public managers need to address several important issues before embarking on a Participation 2.0 endeavor. First and foremost, they must decide why they want to use Participation 2.0 technologies, that is, they must be able to clearly articulate their goals for using such tools. Then, they must determine at what level they wish to involve citizens -- do they simply want to inform citizens, or do they want to consult, include, collaborate with, or empower citizens? This requires an analysis of mandates and political realities, as well as an examination of financial, human, technological and other resources and constraints. Moreover, public managers must provide a clear explanation to citizens about how their input will be used in government decision making. This requires public managers to think about and address ways to visualize, inform, distribute and create feedback mechanisms so that citizens feel that their input has been received and is being processed.

Once the decision to launch a Participation 2.0 project has been made, public managers need to consider how to overcome several challenges. Some of the challenges of using Participation 2.0 are similar to the challenges of using traditional forms of public participation, for example addressing issues of low engagement and turnout. There are some interesting examples of how these issues are being addressed using online contests, such as AppsForDemocracy.org or the Centers for Disease Control 2009 Flu Prevention PSA Contest (<http://www.flu.gov/psa/psacontest1.html>). Other challenges emerge specifically from the nature of Participation 2.0 tools. We briefly discuss three.

First, from the perspective of citizens, there are the issues of access and digital literacy. Participation 2.0 technologies cannot be used by those who do not have access to them and may exclude those who are unfamiliar with the technology. Thus, public managers must consider means for addressing these issues. Some communities are working to lower access barriers by providing computers and Internet technology in online kiosks at public libraries and community centers.

Second, from the perspective of government, there is the issue of information overload. Participation 2.0 technologies increase the amount of information received, which requires more

work for processing, analysis, and verification. Thus, public managers must consider how to establish the necessary “back office” systems for information processing and analysis. That is, they must devise protocols and procedures for collecting, processing, synthesizing, and evaluating information, and otherwise translating and transforming citizen comments in ways that are easily digestible and useful for public managers, elected officials, and other audiences.

Finally, there is the challenge of co-optation. While Participation 2.0 opens access to greater number of users, there is the chance that organized users and groups can overwhelm the systems with their opinions and ideas. A recent example is the manipulation of President Obama’s first online town hall meeting, where the number one issue discussed was the question of legalizing marijuana. This is not the most pressing issue for the majority of Americans, however, the marijuana legalization lobby is so strongly organized that it was able to dominate the discussion (NPR 2010). Thus, public managers need to consider issues of recruitment and participation to reduce the likelihood of co-optation. Moreover, public managers need to establish guidelines and protocols for on-line engagement (i.e., the rules by which participants share and respond to opinions), and mechanisms for monitoring and handling violators.

Conclusion

There can be little doubt that the advent of Participation 2.0 is changing the ways citizens and governments interact. At the federal level, President Obama’s Open Government Directive has encouraged federal agencies to be more transparent, collaborative, and participatory, and many states are following suit. However, it is at the local level where citizens and government generally have the most direct interactions. Consequently, it is at this level where Participation 2.0 has the greatest likelihood of promoting and developing distributed democracy and digital neighborhoods, and producing the other potential benefits of citizen participation. This essay provided examples of such work in local government, as well as some considerations for and challenges of using Participation 2.0 technologies. In the future, we expect to see more innovation and the use of such technologies at higher levels of involvement. Only time will tell if we are correct.

Table 1: Public Involvement Spectrum in Decision-Making*

Level and Goal of Involvement	Examples of Participation 2.0
<p>Inform Provide the public with balanced and objective information to assist them in understanding the problem, alternatives, opportunities, and/or solutions</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Interactive websites • Facebook and social networking sites • Twitter
<p>Consult Receive and respond to citizen comments, requests, and complaints, and/or obtain public feedback on analysis, alternatives, and/or decisions</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • SeeClickFix.com • FixMyStreet.com • Love Lewisham • Citizens Connect (Citizen-to-City transactions)
<p>Include/ Incorporate** Work directly with the public throughout the process to ensure that public concerns and aspirations are consistently understood by staff and the public and considered</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Wikiplanning
<p>Collaborate Partner with the public in each aspect of the decision including the development of alternatives and the identification of the preferred solution</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Virtual Ward Panels
<p>Empower Place final decision-making authority in the hands of citizens</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Virginia Idea Forum
<p>Multiple Levels of Involvement</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Rebridge i • Harringay Online

*Adapted from “Public Involvement Spectrum” in Lukensmeyer and Torres (2006, 7, Table 1)

**The term “engage” is used for this column in Lukensmeyer and Torres.³⁷

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