Challenges for National Civic Engagement in the United States

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Abstract. Civic Engagement on the Internet is rapidly evolving. Successful examples of citizen engagement are prominent in recent global media coverage and are the subject of the author's recent paper examining the use of Facebook for national political issues in the United States. With this workshop paper we present a brief overview of some current initiatives of civic engagement at the national level in the United States. We use these examples to form a basis to discuss the challenges facing civic engagement efforts. At the conclusion of the paper we present a series of questions to help inform and examine new and existing civic engagement issues. Although the discussion is specific to the United States, the questions may also apply to other countries and governments throughout the world.

Introduction

The Internet's role in allowing citizens to engage with each other and with their elected officials is changing every day. There are examples of citizens engaging in direct action on large national issues (Egypt, Libya) and examples of virtual community extending local, civic government (Blacksburg Electronic Village). We have recently shown how advocacy groups make extensive use of Facebook to organize and encourage civil discourse through social media (Mascaro & Goggins, 2011). From these examples, it is clear that the nature of Internet based participation in government is under regular revision and reinvention.

Across different levels of government, there is a common set of challenges that arise from the mutual interest in engaging citizens with each other and with their governments.   Both existing technologies and technologies freshly conceptualized for new forms of political engagement will play a part in the future of civic engagement. Through our participation in this workshop, we expect to gain insights from other researchers interested in these topics and begin to address some outstanding research questions about the current state of civic engagement and the path forward.

Current implementations of technology that allow citizens to engage with elected officials have been met with varying success. Social networking sites, such as Facebook, allow individuals to seek out and interact with others with similar interests. Other social networking tools such as Twitter, allow individuals to seek information and participate in emergent discourse surrounding events in the community. The unprecedented access that these tools provide citizens has lead successful implementations to be overloaded with activity. The abundance of activity may result in citizens feeling as though their issues are lost in the noise, which may lead to technological political fatigue. This technological fatigue is one of the greatest challenges that must be overcome in national civic engagement efforts to help ensure continued adoption and utilization of these tools.

In the next section, we present a sample of the projects associated with the United States Federal Government and its elected officials that are aimed at informing the public and facilitating civic engagement. This is an incomplete sample of projects, presented to establish a subsequent discussion of the challenges facing projects where governments and elected officials engage citizens using technology. The challenges that we recognize as persistent among these cases include: awareness of the tools for engagement by the public, the role of critical mass in tool-based discourse and the limiting effects of off-topic, conversational noise on substantive discourse. The final section presents the research questions we expect to develop during the workshop, and examine in subsequent studies.

Literature Review

One of the greatest benefits of Internet in the political process is that it reduces the costs of obtaining information and participation (Bimber, 2001). Citizens that utilize the Internet are more likely to be civically engaged than those that do not. Additionally, the costs for elected officials or candidates to communicate with the public have been significantly reduced with the introduction of the Internet to the political process (Krueger, 2006; Vargas, 2008). In the 2008 United States Presidential election, 40% of Internet users with profiles on social networking sites and 50% of those under the age of 30 used Facebook for obtaining political information (Klofstad, 2007; Smith & Rainie, 2008; Zhang et al., 2009). Many

instances of engagement through these tools were a result of individuals already having accounts on these websites and being made aware of the existence of such information though the website.

Barack Obama's 2008 election victory and Howard Dean's pioneering use of the blog in 2004 contributed to the high visibility of national level civic engagement efforts in the United States (Trippi, 2004). The use of technology in the national political process to engage citizens has grown significantly in recent years. Recent Presidential and Congressional Elections, such as the 2008 Presidential and the 2010 Midterm elections, have illustrated the reliance on technology to engage the public and provide information about the political process (Smith & Rainie, 2008; Smith, 2011).

The efficacy of technology utilization in an attempt to engage with the public and facilitate discourse has yet to be fully examined. There are many instances of times that individuals attempt to engage with their elected officials or others on these sites and the discourse becomes lost in the abundance of other participants and comments on the forum. For example, from November 2010 – February 2011, President Barack Obama's administration made an average of 2.5 Facebook wall posts that received on average over 2,200 comments each. A significant number of these comments were shallow and offered little to contribute to the thread of discourse. Those comments that were constructive were often lost in the middle of a large stream of otherwise non-constructive comments. This scale of discourse is overwhelming and limiting in regard to facilitating effective discourse in the current set of tools utilized in these efforts.

In addition to Presidential campaigns, Congressional members are increasingly using social networking sites such as Facebook and Twitter to engage with the public. Websites such as tweetcongress.org have publically encouraged members of Congress to utilize Twitter to further civic engagement in the legislative process (Netherland & McCroskey, 2010). The increasing usage of Twitter by Congress and the perceived campaign and electoral benefits has lead to a dramatic adoption of technology for purposes of civic engagement (Schaper, 2010). These perceived benefits have yet to fully examined, but studies of the 2008 Presidential and Congressional election cycle illustrate some correlation between electoral success and social networking website activity, specifically on Facebook (Williams & Gulati 2008; Williams & Gulati 2009). Further studies related to the 2010 Midterm Election cycle are likely to further the understanding of the effects of such technology on the electoral process in the United States.

In addition to civic engagement efforts, many websites have been established to better inform the public of government activity. Websites such as govtrack.us have been created to aggregate publically available government information. These websites give citizens access to legislation being voted on, the voting records of Congressional members and other pertinent information about Congressional districts (Tauberer, 2010). As time has passed, govtrack.us has

undergone further development to allow citizens to interact with others to ask questions regarding the issues and become better informed. Websites such as govtrack.us have lead to the development of numerous similar websites such as maplight.org that help to further inform the citizenry of the connections between money and politics.

The preceding literature frames a subset of relevant, existing efforts to engage US citizens in national level political processes using technology. The three most salient issues that arise out of these efforts to engage with the public and provide information are awareness of the tools, existence of critical mass within the tool for effective discourse and the existence of a space to effectively partake in discourse that does not become too noisy.

Challenges

Democratic government benefits from an engaged citizenry. In a world with over six billion people, citizen engagement through technology is as once recognized as important and difficult to reliably witness. Awareness of the existence of tools is one of the most prevalent challenges facing these efforts, because individuals must be aware of resources to utilize them. The challenge of awareness related to sites that provide a basis for discourse such as govtrack.us and maplight.org, exists because these websites tend to only be known to those with an interest in politics. Additionally, these sites store an abundance of information that may only be useful to those with a clearly defined information need. This leads these types of websites to be underutilized and unnoticed because of the difficulty citizens have in understanding and utilizing the websites as a resource.

To help overcome issues of awareness, it is important that candidates, elected officials and groups that provide data, establish profiles and forums where there is a critical mass of interested individuals. Popular tools such as Facebook, Twitter and other social networking sites already have a critical mass and therefore can help to overcome the challenge of developing a critical mass for discourse and awareness. Therefore, it is important for these officials to understand how to reach out to their citizens and engage them through already existing mechanisms.

In the event that a candidate or group must establish tools that are not already present with a critical mass, care should be taken to ensure that individuals would be made aware of the tool through established means. This can be achieved by linking the newer tools to existing, developed platforms. For example, President Obama used his own suite of tools hosted on my.barackobama.com during his 2008 election. During the campaign President Obama advertised these tools at campaign events, Facebook and other popular social networking websites. Additionally, it is important for these campaigns and administrations to understand where their constituents are and be ready to move to the next technology when it becomes popular.

The final challenge is the amount of noise that occurs on sites where issues are discussed. Previous research has indicated that many individuals take part in national level forums and groups to encounter other like-minded supporters with the intent of engaging with the candidates (Ancu & Cozma, 2009; Sweetser & Weaver-Lariscy, 2008). Other research has also shown that deliberative discourse has occurred within Facebook groups pertaining to national level issues in the US (Mascaro & Goggins, 2011). Although such discourse is possible, it is likely that a lot of productive discourse either gets hidden in the large amount of other traffic or individuals shy away from participating in such groups because they believe they will go unnoticed and their contributions to the discourse would be wasted.

Conclusion - Research Questions

Understanding the manner in which individuals become interested and participate in the political process is very important to facilitating effective civic engagement and providing information about the government. The concluding table below lists a series of research questions that can help to guide future research on civic engagement and the provision of government information at the national level in the United States. This table addresses each of the above three challenges in a manner to further understand the effects they have on the civic engagement process so that they can be remedied in current and future efforts.

Awareness of the Tools:
• How and to what extent do individuals become aware of the different technologies that exist for discourse and political information?   • To what extent do individuals utilize comments or discussion forums associated with media that they currently use such as comment sections on blogs or newspapers?   • Under what circumstances do individuals go to another website that they do not frequent to partake in discourse with other individuals?
Existence of Critical Mass within the Tools:
• To what extent are individuals aware of the presence of others within the discussion board or group in which they participate? How does this awareness contribute to the facilitation of discourse or patterns of participation?   • What tool specific features exist to allow participants to view other members of the community or those that are currently online?

• In what types of forums does the existence of a certain percentage of individuals within a community group, issue group or specific constituency lead to a tipping point of discourse within a technology utilized for discourse? (Mascaro & Goggins, 2011)
Designing to Eliminate Noise within the Tools:
• Are there automated mechanisms for individuals to address each other in large-scale discourse such as use of the @ symbol? Do individuals utilize these mechanisms or do they address their comments to the whole forum or individuals in another manner? • Do individuals choose to not participate in longer forms of discourse because of noise or are they just unwilling to participate in discourse? • To what extent do elected officials participate in discourse among the public? How does the presence of officials within a technology get conveyed to participants and what effects does this have on the participation rates? • How do the requirements for signing up for these forums of discourse vary? Do individuals have to prove residency or identity? Is discourse more productive on forums that have requirements for true name registration?

Table I. Future Directions of Research on National Civic Engagement in the United States

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