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Web 2.0 in the Process of e-participation:

The Case of Organizing for America and the Obama Administration

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Abstract

The presidential campaign of Barack Obama during the 2008 elections sparked new discussion about the public engagement issue in the political processes. The campaign used Web 2.0 tools intensively to reach the general public and seek support and collect feedback from voters. In this paper, we analyze the major website of this project, "Organizing for America" (OFA) from the perspective of e-participation, which is a concept that include all the processes of public involvement via information and communication technologies.

Key Words: Web 2.0, e-participation, social media tools, Barack Obama

Introduction

The impact of technology and the relations determined by it on social structure is a very well known fact. They are also responsible of many changes in the social relations. According to Toffler (1981: 27), the world has seen three major waves of this impact. First was the impact of agriculture, the second was the industrial revolution and the third wave is the revolution of information and communication technologies (ICTs). The third wave of technological innovations in ICTs brought a new social structure where the pace of change cannot be predicted (Drucker, 1994; Drucker, 2000:111; Toffler, 1989:99, 171-172; Toffler and Toffler 1996:14; Toffler and Toffler, 1997vi-ix).

Today, the Internet is a tool that shapes lives in many respects. For some, the Internet is an open source of information, and for others it is a means by which they manage their bank accounts, shop and use public services. All these Internet capabilities transform the way we think about traditional government to e- government, or digital government. Recently, uses of the Internet are becoming relatively more interactive and user-oriented. In this paper, we will examine this type of Internet use, known as Web 2.0, and its outcomes in terms of the social relations. Also in this paper, the site www.barackobama.com will be analyzed as a case of e-participation via Web 2.0 in a descriptive manner.

The Rise of Internet and Web 2.0 Tools

The Internet has a special position among other important inventions in terms of the rapidity of penetration. According to Mann et. al (2000), it took 74 years for the telephone to penetrate and diffuse to a population of 50 million. Similarly, it took radio 38 years, the computer 16 years and television 13 years. The Internet penetrated 50 million people in just 4 years (Mann et.al, 2000:13). This shows that the impact of the Internet will be beyond the projections of many scientists. On the other hand, we can surely say that the Internet, with its capability to go beyond geographical limits in terms of the distribution of information, started an era of digital freedom. Especially in the developed nations of the world, people use the Internet 24/7 for various purposes.

Table 1. Internet Users[1]

Rank	Country	Internet users	Date of Information
1.	China	253,000,000	2008
2.	Japan	247,000,000	2006
3.	United States	223,000,000	2008
4.	European Union	88,110,000	2007
5.	India	80,000,000	2007
6.	Brazil	50,000,000	2007
7.	Germany	42,500,000	2007
8.	United Kingdom	40,200,000	2007
9.	Korea, South	35,590,000	2007
10.	Italy	32,000,000	2007
11.	France	31,295,000	2007
12.	Russia	30,000,000	2007
13.	Canada	28,000,000	2007
14.	Iran	23,000,000	2007
15.	Mexico	22,812,000	2007

The National Performance Review conducted in the US in 1993 defines information technologies as a key tool for restructuring public administration (Brown, 1998:335). On the other hand, many studies show that the use of information technologies in public administration brought speed, quality and efficiency to the public services. The introduction of Web 2.0 tools not only contributed to this capacity, but also transformed the understanding of digital communication to a great extent. According to Manuel Castells, technological progress in the field of information processing, networking and

[1] https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/rankorder/2153rank.html?countryCode=us#us

communication is the most revolutionary driver of social and economic change in the last two decades (1996, 1997, 1998, 2001).

Today, a vast majority of the discussion about the social impacts of ICTs is focused on Web 2.0, which is a term coined by O'Reilly Media in 2004. The term Web 2.0 has many definitions, and includes the use of tools such as social networking sites, video-sharing sites, blogs and wikis[2]. However, what makes Web 2.0 new and important is its capacity to change the relationship between the Internet and its users. According to Jackson and Lilleker (2009), Web 2.0 is about interacting with web-based content, adding comments, or uploading files. Each visitor is able to have shared ownership over a site. This implies a change in power structures and a shift in organizational thinking towards models based on equal partnership rather than elite dominance (Jackson and Lilleker, 2009: 232).

Some of the most popular Web 2.0 tools in terms of social networking and user contents are Facebook, Linkedin, YouTube and Twitter. In addition, we know that many websites today, especially the political ones, have embedded blog pages to give their visitors a chance to contribute.

The Concept of e-Participation

E-participation has many definitions. According to Macintosh, e-participation is the use of ICTs to broaden and deepen political participation by enabling citizens to connect with one another and with their elected representatives. The emphasis of this definition is the involvement of all stakeholders in democratic participatory decision-making, instead of just the top-down initiatives of the governments (2006). Romsdahl (2005) defines e-participation as one of the many methods of public deliberation. Public deliberation is not a new concept in itself, but e-participation holds potential to

[2] http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Web_2.0 (accessed September, 15 2009)

revitalize it (2005: 44).

In the UN E-Government Survey 2008, e-participation is suggested to be an integral part of a successful e-government practice. According to the report, e-government must provide an effective platform for e-participation in order to be successful (2008: 8). More importantly, the government should create a feedback mechanism, which shows citizens that their views are taken seriously. This requires a strong infrastructure that allows the citizens to access decision makers (UN E-Government Survey 2008: 17).

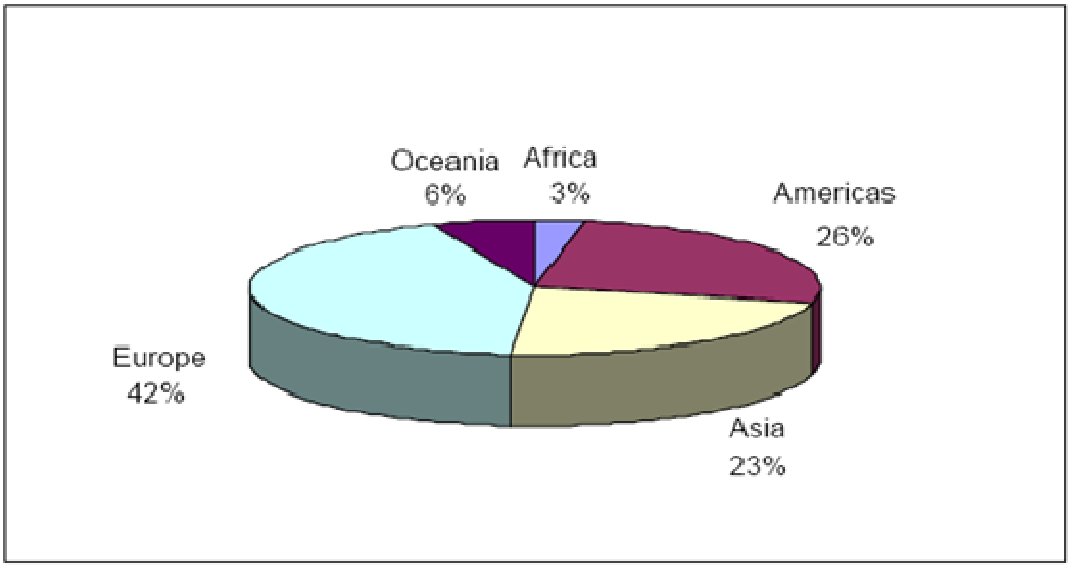
The UN E-Government Survey 2008 also includes the eParticipation Index of member states, which "assesses the quality and usefulness of information and services provided by a country for the purpose of engaging its citizens in public policy"[3] through ICTs.

This assessment is based on:

1. "Their institutional capacity, leadership role, and willingness to engage their citizens by supporting and marketing participatory decision-making for public policy" and
2. "The structures that are in place, which facilitate citizens' access to public policy dialogue" (2008:18).

[3] http://www.coe.int/t/e/integrated_projects/democracy/02_Activities/002_e-democracy/CAHDE_Indicative_Guide_5_E_14May09_PDF.pdf

Table 2. E-Participation index: Top 35 Countries[4]



On the other hand, some scholars approach the concept of e-participation from a critical point of view. For Wallsten (2008), blogs, which are among the Web 2.0 tools used for e-participation, are not just tools for people to express their political beliefs or connect with other sharing the same ideas. Instead, they are "designed to influence the political world by shaping the attitudes and behaviors of blog readers" Also according to Macintosh (2006), one the major challenges of e-participation is social complexity, which implies the necessity to reflect the various needs and demands of different groups in the society. The second challenge is integration and responsiveness which requires that the mechanism exists to manage the process, analyze inputs, respond to them and feed them into the policy process (Machintosh, 2006). Romsdahl (2005) discusses the major challenges of the e-participation process and states that despite the Internet's benefits, such as the potential for "unbiased dialogue provided by online anonymity, true deliberation will be more difficult to develop." According to Romsdahl, "The internet poses great challenges for the essential components of deliberation, such as ensuring access for all interested individuals, fair and equal

[4] UN e-Government Survey 2008 from e-government to Connected Governance, United Nations, United Nations publication, New York, 2008

involvement for all participants, development of interpersonal trust, and the ability to negotiate and compromise" (Romsdahl, 2005:44). Similarly, Jane Fountain argues the importance of easy access to the democratic process through Internet use and notes the fact that the use of Internet for political participation is "biased in favor of the educationally and economically advantaged" (2001: 23). As can be concluded from these arguments, there is more to e-participation than just installing online social media tools. Therefore, attention should be paid to the outcomes of e-participation in any analysis.

The Case of www.barackobama.com: Before and After the Election

The United States scored the highest on the UN e-Government Survey's e-participation index (2008). According to the report, the YouTube-sponsored Democratic Presidential Debate in the United States highlighted the blurring of the lines between politics and citizens. The use of YouTube for Presidential Debates gave citizens "a platform to question candidates on issues that mattered to them. This direct interaction using ICT tools was unprecedented and ushered in an era of direct dialogue between politicians and citizens" (UN E-Government Survey 2008: 17). Political campaign Web sites that contain candidate profiles and blogs have become major aspects of election campaigns. (Bimber &Davis, 2003; Davis, 1999; Grönlund, 2001; Kluver, 2007), and, as we know, the use of ICTs and especially Web 2.0 tools was not limited to this one example in the case of the Obama Campaign and Obama Administration.

Table 3. E-Participation Index 2008: Top 35 Countries[5]

	Country	2008 Index	2008 Ranking	2005 Ranking	Change 2008-2005
1	United States	1	1	3	2
2	Republic of Korea	0,9773	2	4	2
3	Denmark	0,9318	3	7	4
4	France	0,9318	3	24	21
5	Australia	0,8864	5	9	4
6	New Zealand	0,7955	6	6	0
7	Mexico	0,75	7	7	0
8	Estonia	0,7273	8	11	3
9	Sweden	0,6591	9	14	5
10	Singapore	0,6364	10	2	-8
11	Canada	0,6136	11	4	-7
12	Japan	0,6136	11	21	10
13	Luxembourg	0,6136	11	61	50
14	Ukraine	0,5682	14	28	14
15	Jordan	0,5455	15	90	75
16	Netherlands	0,5227	16	10	-6
17	Norway	0,5227	16	26	10
18	Viet Nam	0,5227	16	63	47
19	Bhutan	0,5	19	90	71
20	Austria	0,4773	20	24	4

The www.barackobama.com website was launched as the presidential campaign website. This website was actually the host of the project 'Organize for America'

[5] UN e-Government Survey 2008 from e-government to Connected Governance, United Nations, United Nations publication, New York, 2008

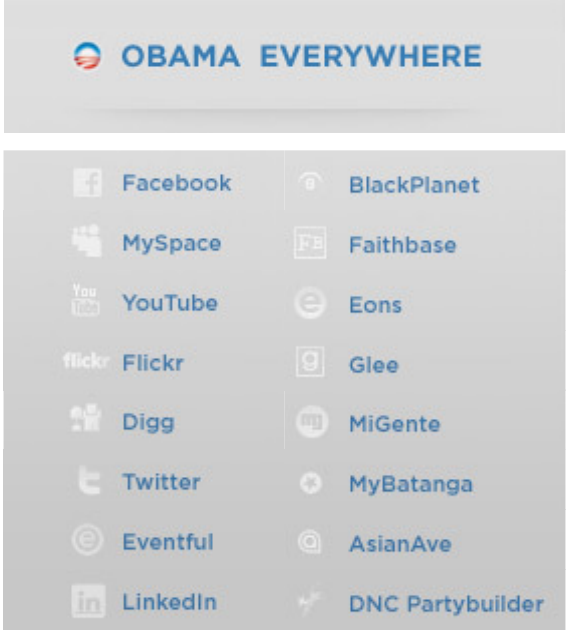
which reveals the main objective of the website. After the election of Barack Obama as the 44th president of United States, the website has become a platform for promoting the projects of Obama Administration and sharing political information. During the campaign, the website played an important role in engaging individuals and groups by using Web 2.0 tools. As Jane Fountain mentioned, the use of these tools was an important case in itself:

> As you know the presidential campaign of Barack Obama was notable for its use of information and communication technologies and, specifically, its use of social media or Web 2.0, tools. These tools have encouraged deliberation, knowledge sharing, public participation and innovation. The current Obama administration is experimenting with the use of social media inside the government as well as across the boundary between the formal institutions of government and its citizens. (Erkul, 2009)

Contents and Web 2.0 Tools

When we look at the contents of www.barakobama.com, we see that it has a variety of links and tools for visitors to use. These links are grouped under three major headings, issues, volunteers and blog, which each lead to different pages with rich contents. Looking at these, we can argue that on the website, interaction with users are emphasized to a great extent. Only the issues page is dedicated to a one- way communication by sharing information with the visitors. Even from this page, however, visitors can access Web 2.0 tools. On every page of the website, the links to major tools are provided: Facebook, MySpace, YouTube, Flickr, Digg, Twitter, Eventful, Linkedin, Blackplanet, Faithbase, Eons, Glee, MiGente, MyBatanga, AsianAve and DNC Partybuilder. The tools include applications ranging from social networking to video sharing thereby enabling people to choose the type of communication/tool they like. Also, it should be noted that the links to these websites are collected under the title of 'Obama Everywhere', which implies the online accessibility to the president.

Table 4. Obama Everywhere[6]



www.barackobama.com

Blogs

On Barackobama.com, the main tool for interaction between users is the blog page. Visitors can join this blog page and post their comments by creating a user account, which is a very common, user-friendly application. As of September 16, 2009, there were 681 pages of blogs. Some of the most popular blog discussion titles with over 2,000 comments are shown in Table 5.

[6] www.barackobama.com

Table 5. Most Popular Blog Discussions

TITLE	DATE of ENTRY	#of COMMENTS
Photos: Obama in Duncanville, Texas	February 27, 2008	2118
Slideshow: Barack and Michelle	March 5, 2008	2293
Barack at Johnny J's	March 7, 2008	2843
OK GO Want You to Register and Vote	March 12, 2008	2076
Senator Obama's comments in response to the Clinton and McCain campaign's attacks	April 11, 2008	2339
'The elitists are those who ignore the realities of people who are struggling' by State	April 14, 2008	2147
Election Results Open Thread II	May 7, 2008	2490
Video: Join Michelle Obama and Make GOTV Calls Tonight	May 20, 2008	2334
Massachusetts Super delegate for Obama; Delegate Countdown - 30.5 To Go	June 3, 2008	2125
Response from Barack on FISA and Discussion with Policy Staff	July 3, 2008	2630
Joe Biden!	August 23, 2008	2232

Groups and Circles

One of the most important examples of social networking through www.barackobama.com is the formation of groups and circles in many categories. This application can be regarded as a unique form of social networking provided by the website itself.

These groups also can be browsed based on five criteria: interests, local, people, issues and national. As of September 17, 2009, there are 28,280 groups on the site. Under these categories is a range of additional sub-categories ranging from book clubs to foreign policy. This diversity in categories shows that people were able to find platforms to discuss and share information about many topics regarding the national issues, as well as about the President himself. In addition, the Organizing Resource Center, which includes guidelines for the users to organize local events, allows the users to get together for face-to-face interaction. Search tools further allow people to reach out to others in their own neighborhood.

The Social Media Tools Outside the Website

As mentioned earlier, barackobama.com provides access to social media tools such as YouTube, Facebook and Twitter. When we look at the related pages of these websites, we see that the contents created by the users is more diverse than the website content. For example, on Facebook we see more critical comments than we see on the actual barackobama.com website. In the same fashion, the comments entered to the videos on YouTube have more diversity. These examples imply that people engaging in public debate about the Obama Administration or candidacy do not necessarily choose barackobama.com to express their opinions. We can also argue that extending the platform for public engagement to include the most popular social media tools is important for increasing the number of people involved and ensuring diversity.

Table 6. Barack Obama Pages on Web 2.0 Tools(As of October 6, 2009)

Site	YouTube Channel- Barack Obama	Facebook Barack Obama Page	My Space Barack Obama Page	Twitter Page
Join Date	September 05, 2006	unknown	April 25, 2007	12:04 PM April 29, 2007, First Tweet
Supporters, Subscribers, Friends or Fans	178,529 Subscribers	6.814.080 Supporters	1,845,097 Friends	2,320,649 Followers
Content	1871 Videos	168 Pages of Posts, 3524 Discussion, 548 Pictures	133,950 Wall Posts	373 Tweets
Views	22,230,248 Channel Views	unknown	unknown	unknown
Last Sign In	October 6, 2009	September 29, 2009	October 6, 2009	September 29, 2009

Findings

The examination of the blog entries and comments on the web pages of social media tools show that they were equally popular before and after the election.

After the election, we see that the blog and the other tools were used for similar purposes as before the election. During the presidential campaign, the website content was focused on the concept of change, whereas the most popular blog discussions were about the development of the campaign and the activities. After the election, the website focused on the promotion of the idea of change by emphasizing the key projects of Obama Administration such as Health Care Reform. This reveals the most significant finding of this descriptive study: the website served to seek support, rather than engage people in the decision/policy making process. Before and after the election, the content created both by the website editors and by the users is related to

the promotion of the Obama Administration. Looking at the popular blog discussion titles, we do not see much critical discussion or public debate, suggesting many people login to barackobama.com to show support. It should be noted that this is not to suggest that the website was designed only for support of Obama. The users created the content in a supportive manner. On the other hand, the discussions among the supporters of Barack Obama constitute an important part of the blog contents. Therefore we can suggest that the Web 2.0 tools creates a significant discussion platform for the followers of the website.

The users of barackobama.com not only create contents, but they also provide a control mechanism using the blog. In some cases we see that the users warn the website administrators to remove a comment which contains an insult or objectionable content. The blog page provides easy access to such reporting. This application allows people to 'administrate' the website themselves.

The volunteering and organization applications provide user-friendly tools to localize activities organized by the users of barackobama.com. This shows that the importance of face-to-face interaction was not ignored, and the tools for making this type of interaction easier were created on the website. By using these tools, people can be kept informed of the local activities, too, thus increasing the participation in local activities.

In comparison, the popularity of Barack Obama pages on Web 2.0 sites such as Facebook, YouTube and MySpace shows that the use of existing tools, which are already popular, is a major factor in the success of e-participation. When we look at the way that these Web 2.0 applications were integrated into www.barackobama.com, we argue that the major role of the website was to create a common platform for all the applications to be accessible.

Discussion

In the light of these descriptive results and the current uses of Web 2.0 tools by the Obama Administration, we argue that Web 2.0 tools and sites are going to be more and more common in the political activities and in the relations between politics and the citizens. Therefore, current political discussions must include discussions of the evolution of Web 2.0 toward Government 2.0. As Ostergaad and Hvass (2009) suggest, the Obama Administration is already breaking down the walls of White House. On the other websites used by Obama Administration such as www.change.gov, we already see many applications to provide communication and public debate with citizens, such as 'Join the Discussion' and 'Open for Questions' portals are created and responded by White House Press Secretary Robert Gibbs.

When we evaluate the findings of this study in terms of e-participation, we see that www.barackobama.com was a very significant initiative in engaging citizens in the political process. In addition, the popularity and amount of user-created content show the positive reaction by the general public and their willingness to get involved. However, as mentioned before, the analysis of the outcomes of this initiative in terms of e-participation requires a deeper research.

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