The Prospects of Web 2.0 for Public Participation

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Abstract

Web 2.0 technologies are presented as enablers to support public participation in the government decision-making processes in order to promote good governance. Web 2.0 encourages a more human interactive approach on the Web that enable group interactions in public participation processes, i.e. inform, consult, involve, collaborative, and empowerment. A case study of blogs usages in Thailand's first referendum is presented with recommendations for future implementation of Web 2.0 in public participation processes.

Key Words: Public participation, Web 2.0, Blogs, Thailand

1. Introduction

In recent years, the proposition that greater levels of public participation would improve good governance has attracted considerable support by the government of Thailand [1]. Public participation can be defined as the process by which public concerns, needs, and values are incorporated into governmental and corporate decision-making. It is a two-way communication and interaction with an overall goal leading to better decisions that are supported by the public [2]. The International Association for Public Participation (IAP2) defines public participation by looking at its core values as follows [3]:

- The public should have a say in decisions about actions that could affect their lives.
- Public participation includes the promise that the public's contribution will influence the decision.
- Public participation promotes sustainable decisions by recognizing and communicating the needs and interests of all participants, including decision makers.
- Public participation seeks out and facilitates the involvement of those potentially affected by or interested in a decision.
- Public participation seeks input from participants in designing how they participate.

- Public participation provides participants with the information they need to participate in a meaningful way.
- Public participation communicates to participants how their input affects the decision.

With the advent of Web 2.0 technologies, the government is given a new opportunity and ability to radically change how to interact with their citizens, dramatically improving public participatory levels and consequently improving good governance. Web 2.0 refers to a perceived second-generation of web-based communities and hosted services which aim to facilitate the collaboration and sharing among users [4]. Web 2.0 has been called the 'Social Web', because, in contrast to Web 1.0, its content can be easily generated and published by users without having to know anything about computer programming [5]. In essence, Web 2.0 aims to:

- facilitate a new online social interaction through the use of wikis, blogs, RSS, on-line social gaming, podcasts, etc.,
- promote collaborative activities amongst people,
- encourage a more human interactive approach on the Web and better support group interactions, and foster a greater sense of communities,
- facilitate the formulation of 'folksonomies' – fluid and flexible categorizations uniquely created by each interest group to provide quicker, more relevant access to practice-specific knowledge,
- support greater levels of participation and promote democracy through the 'Social Web', where users act simultaneously as readers and writers,
- emphasize the pre-eminence of content creation over content consumptions,
- be structured around open programming interfaces that allow widespread participation,
- encourage deeper and more active learning engagement and build communities of learning.

To deliberate on the practicality of Web 2.0 as enablers for public participation, this paper explores the potentials of Web 2.0 technologies in relation to

public participation processes in Section 2. In Section 3, the use of blogs in Thailand on the first national referendum in 2007 is examined and presented as a case study. Discussion and conclusions are presented in Section 4 and 5, respectively.

2. Web 2.0 as enablers for public participation

As public participation needs to seek input from participants and design how citizens participate with the government decision-making processes, Web 2.0 fully supports these requirements. There are several emerging technologies and applications under the Web 2.0 platform. A brief overview of Web 2.0 applications is as follows [5]:

- *Wikis* A wiki is a collaborative website which can be directly edited by anyone with access to it. Ward Cunningham, developer of the first wiki described it as "the simplest online database that could possibly work". A wiki can also be viewed as collaborative software that allows users not only to add content but also allows that content to be edited by anybody [6].
- *Blogs* A blog is a website where entries are written in chronological order and commonly displayed in reverse chronological order. 'Blog' can also be used as a verb, meaning to maintain or add content to a blog. Blogs are simple content management tools enabling non-experts to build easily updatable web diaries or online journals [7].
- *Podcasting* Podcasts are time and location independent digital files. Free software enables computer users to subscribe to regular podcast feeds (audio/video RSS feeds), download them automatically, and transfer them to a portable device such as an Apple iPod or an MP3/MP4 player for later playback.
- *Social bookmarking* Social bookmarking is the practice of 'classifying resources by the use of informally assigned, user-defined keywords or tags'. Social bookmarking services enable users to collect and annotate (tag) their favorite web links in an online, open environment, in which others are usually free to read and use.
- *Web 2.0 special search features* Blog-search tool emphasizes tagging as part of search and discovery, recommending users who add tags to their blog posts. Web 2.0 supports queries for information and reflections on current news. Samples of blog-search tool are Technorati (http://www.technorati.com/) and Feedster (http://www.feedster.com/).

- *RSS feeds* RSS (Really Simple Syndication) is a set of XML-based web content distribution and republication/syndication protocols used by news sites and blogs to announce recent additions of content/updates to a website or user-defined query. RSS can be seen as the syndication plumbing that allows free flow of content between applications and websites. Users subscribe to the feeds using an RSS aggregator.
- *Social networking services* Social networking services are essentially online group-forming applications that connect people through shared information interests. They allow users to locate links with people through mutual friends or acquaintances, build profiles, and update address books.
- *Online social gaming* In contemporary computer gaming, the term 'multiplayer' usually implies that players simultaneously play by connecting multiple computers via network. A Massively Multiplayer Online Role-Playing Game (MMORPG) is an online computer role-playing game in which a large number of players interact with one another in a virtual world where users can 'inhibit' and interact via avatars (Internet users' representations of themselves).

In order to appreciate the usefulness of Web 2.0 for public participation, this paper applies the 'participation spectrum' described by the IAP2 [8]. The spectrum represents a continuum of 'increasing levels of public impact or influence' and provides a systematic way of determining the appropriate level of public participation for a decision. It consists of five forms or 'degree' of participation as follows:

- The 'inform' level, government officials (and the professional practitioners they retain) endeavor to 'inform' citizens in order 'to provide the public with balanced and objective information to assist them in understanding the problems, alternatives, opportunities, and/or solutions'.
- The 'consult' level asks government to 'obtain public feedback on analysis, alternatives, and/or decisions'.
- The 'involve' level, the goal is to 'work directly with the public throughout the process to ensure that public concerns and aspirations are consistently understood and considered'.
- The 'collaborative' level asks government 'to partner with the public in each aspect of the decision, including the development of alternatives and the identification of the preferred solution'.
- The final and 'highest' degree of influence the public can achieve is 'empowerment'.

'Empowerment' places final decision-making authority in the hands of the public.

To illustrate the implications of Web 2.0 technologies towards public participation, Table 1 shows the Web 2.0 technologies in relation with the public participation processes and its techniques. However, the sample of Web 2.0 technologies for each public participation process shown in Table 1 is by no means an exhaustive or mutually exclusive list; rather, the table serves as samples of Web 2.0 implications on public participation processes.

Table 1 Web 2.0 implication on each forms of public participation.

Spectrum*	Example techniques to consider*	Web 2.0 implications
Inform	• Fact sheets • Web sites • Open house	• A collaborative wikis and blog software can be used as the avenue to keep citizens informed of facts of the cases. With wikis and blogs, citizens can share knowledge and express concerns or opinions about problems, alternatives, opportunities and /or solutions. • RSS supports a free flow of multiple content sources that the government wants citizens to know.
Consult	• Public comment • Focus groups • Surveys • Public meeting	• Citizen's involvements and consultations with decision-makers through the use of wikis and blog technologies are a vital tool for the government to communicate, listen, and acknowledge citizen's concerns and aspirations. • Locating citizen's blogs with the same interest can be applied as focus groups to gain input from discussion on a participatory process that is important to citizens. • The government can utilize a blog-search tool or RSS to accumulate feedback or input from citizens for preliminary assessment polling that influences the decision.
Involve	• Workshops • Deliberate polling	
Collaboration	• Citizen Advisory Committees • Consensus- building • Participatory decision-making	• Social bookmarking can be used as a tool to discover consensus and judgment of a community of citizens. The collective intelligence of citizens, e.g. consensus-building, can be stored and organized as memory across different scattered links. • Social networking or on-line social gaming can create virtual communities that build on member relationships. It enables decision- makers and citizens to share information and receive advice and innovation in formulating solutions in the decisions.
Empower	• Citizen juries • Ballots • Delegated decisions	

Source: International Association for Public Participation [8]

3. Case Study

On August 18, 2007, Thailand had the first ever referendum votes in its political history amidst the social equivocation as to whether to accept or reject the draft. According to Office of the Election Commission of Thailand [9], 'Referendum' is a process in which people use their votes to 'approve' or 'disapprove' an important subject affecting the national interest or fundamental rights and freedom of people before its implementation as law. Referendum is one of the mechanisms of "direct democracy" in which people can express their thinking and preference on an important state matter affecting their rights and freedom. In addition, the referendum promotes checks and balances by obligating the ruling political elites not to engage in any activities without the public consent.

Before voting in the referendum, citizens were encouraged to carefully consider the substance of

the draft constitution by themselves. The government had sent copies of the 194 pages proposed constitution to all 18 million homes in Thailand. Public participation prior to the referendum was very important. There were debates that were broadcast live throughout the country, during which citizens heard the pros and cons of the constitution draft. "Open for everyone and to every opinion" is a vital key concept of referendum. Blogs can be used by Thai citizens to discuss and express opinions about the 'for' and 'against' arguments on the new constitution. The survey of blog posts in Thailand with keywords/tags 'Constitution draft' and 'Referendum' in Thai's language as of August 22, 2007 is presented in Table 2.

Table 2 Survey of blog posts on the referendums vote of a new constitution.

Blog Site	Keywords/Tags	
	Constitution draft	Referendum
GotoKnow.org	61	6
Learners.in.th	24	18
home.live.com	57	43
wordpress.com	23	3
bloggang.com	4,250	2,220
Technorati.com	1,812	2,716

Despite the fact that some citizens have actively expressed their opinion through blogs but compared with the population of 62 million people, the use of blogs is still at a rudimentary stage. Ironically, no blog was initiated by the Thai government for the purpose of public participation in the referendum. Without blogs, the Thai government has missed an opportunity to attract and communicate directly with the public and to reach an influential group of highly politically engaged individuals.

The Thai government should have utilized blogs to create trust and commitment among the major stakeholders in the debate over the pro and con of the new constitution. A strategic plan in using Web 2.0 should be formulated to win over the public opinion. The government could have created a free and easy-to-access blogs site for Thai people as a means to convey information to and receive feedback from the public. Furthermore, participatory learning processes through blogs encourage the engagement between government officials and Thai people to work together in collaboration processes. Blogs can help the Thai government foster an understanding of new concepts contained in the new constitution in a

language that suits the uneducated or the needy who require special attention.

4. Discussion

From the case study, the use of Web 2.0 applications to support public participation has not been adopted well in Thailand. As Web 2.0 is about people, there are several barriers against the successful implementation in public participation. To promote Web 2.0 in public participation, this paper recommends that the government:

- Create government and citizen awareness of Web 2.0 technologies to enable public participation and to promote good governance.
- Provide government information and references to develop 'trust' between the government and citizens through Web 2.0 applications.
- Set up a strategic plan to promote public interest and confidence on Web 2.0 technologies, specifically in the participation of decision-making processes.
- Promote an online social culture or a social networking community that enables many-to-many social interactivity to take place via the Internet.
- Encourage public authorities to change the way they interact, share information, and cooperate with citizens to ensure more openness and transparency.
- Be aware of offensive activities, such as 'hate campaigns' against vulnerable groups and online exploitation of minors.

5. Conclusions

Web 2.0 presented in this paper looks very promising and is a potential fit for the purpose of public participation processes. However, the case study of Thailand's first referendum reveals that the Thai government has failed to utilize blogs to consult and involve its citizens in the public participation processes. This finding indicates that to achieve good governance through Web 2.0 and public participation requires thorough thinking, understanding, and proactive managing from the government.

Future research should focus on Web 2.0 strategic planning, modeling, designing, testing, and evaluating in order to establish an 'acceptable' practice model which leverages these emerging technologies to boost good governance in the society. Cross culture e-government study with other countries that had successfully implemented blogs is valuable for Thailand to learn lessons and critical factors for blogs and good governance. In

addition, developing a tool to analyze citizen's information posted in their blogs is imperative to prove the supportive of good governance outcomes. Web 2.0 special search features together with existing artificial intelligence and ontology technologies, e.g. legal ontology, can be developed to extract and categorize citizen blog's content that can be of important to a decision maker. Sample of a framework to automatically map user-defined categories in blogs can be viewed from a research studied by Hsu et al. [10].

6. Acknowledgements

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