

CitizenScape Discussion Paper – Working with Web 2.0 to Engage Citizens with Democracy

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Abstract: The CitizenScape project is an examination of the practical considerations which must be addressed use Web 2.0 tools and techniques for creating measurable democratic outcomes. This paper will describe the project design tensions and considerations as well as the project's initial findings. The project takes a sociological rather than technical approach to the project and discusses the required balance between online and offline as well as between enskilling and ultimately social engineering of Citizens. Web 2.0 is a loose and perhaps overused term for a massive global phenomenon involving technology (for instance wikis or blogs) and techniques (such as social networking) as well as specific web spaces (such as Facebook). Web 2.0 is creating unprecedented levels of participation between individuals, at the same time as there is an enormous, and growing, democratic deficit with fewer people voting, or engaging with democracy, each year. These two effects are happening globally and involve communities at various levels of aggregation and location with radically different social and participative agendas. The CitizenScape project is examining whether the tools and techniques of Web 2.0 can be used to actively create virtual civic spaces where citizen can and will participate in democracy. The project aims to move citizens from a passive uninformed state to one where they have taken some active part in democracy. This paper will describe the approach, methodology and initial findings of this project.

1. Introduction

The CitizenScape project is an examination of the practical considerations that must be addressed use Web 2.0 tools and techniques for creating measurable democratic outcomes. This paper will describe the project design tensions and considerations as well as the project's initial findings.

Web 2.0 is a loose and perhaps overused term for a massive global phenomenon involving technology (for instance wikis or blogs) and techniques (such as social networking) as well as specific web spaces (such as Facebook). Web 2.0 is creating unprecedented levels of participation between individuals, at the same time as there is an enormous, and growing, democratic deficit with fewer people voting, or engaging with democracy, each year. These two effects are happening globally and involve communities at various levels of aggregation and location with radically different social and participative agendas - from small local projects such as www.upmystreet.com to national communities such as www.netmums.co.uk to an international phenomenon like www.youtube.com.

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approach, methodology and initial findings of this project.

The project will work with communities in alongside 4 different Local Authorities in UK, Italy, Ireland and Slovakia. The sites present a good range of experiences which include both rural and urban authorities as well as having a wide mix of social measures such as ethnic mix and income/employment levels. The four sites also provide a wide mix of experience in the area of eDemocracy with Bristol City Council (The UK partner) having a strong track record in the area and the Slovak partner having relatively little experience.

The project team will work with a local issue in order to recruit, train and then support local activists. Web 2.0 tools will be provided within a website for each site called "CitizenScapes" and they will use a variety of web 2.0 tools as well as more formal online democratic tools such as petitions, webcasts of formal meetings and more structured consultations. The project aims to define a measurable and repeatable methodology that will lead citizens through a path of engagement towards measurable democratic action. The stages we will look at include:

1. Marketing and Recruitment
2. Informing and en-skilling
3. Creation of shared codes of conduct and frames of reference for engagement
4. Discussion: Participation in informal Web 2.0 spaces
5. Deliberation: Participation in more formal democratic engagement (e.g. petitioning)

There is a important difference between the discussion and deliberation stages of the process and one of the challenges of the project is to move citizens from the informal discussion stage into formal deliberation which results in democratic decision making.

At each stage of the methodology there is a balancing between what looks, at first sight, to be practical operational requirements, such as marketing, and the democratic requirements of participation and engagement. One of the objectives of the Citizenscape project is to create an outcome that is measurable and understandable to practitioners, who have pressing considerations such as cost effectiveness as well as a need to deliver validated democratic outcomes.

This paper will provide an overview of the areas considered in designing the technology and methodological approach to the project as well as exploring some of the necessary tensions within the project.

2. Objectives

The stated objective is to create spaces, i.e. websites, which will not only provide opportunities for interaction and engagement but also equip and encourage the citizens to use these opportunities. However the creation of spaces is not enough to ensure the kind of change in social dynamics that the project intends to bring about so the objective is to use the Citizenscape methodology to create spaces which are 'active' in this sense and at each step show the citizen a route to engagement with the democratic process.

The methodology will be a practitioner led, accommodating both the theoretical and the practical as well as balancing the need to measure and evaluate with the need to bring marketing and recruitment into the core process.

This is an ambitious goal and one which assumes a certain willingness people to take part in this process. This projects aims to tap into an assumed existing interest/activity and to harness it for a socially purposeful outcome. The objective of the project, and of this paper is to examine this optimism to discover whether it is justified on a wider scale. Beyond creating the space, the project's ambition is to see whether it is possible to create a pathway through these stages of participation to help citizens become more engaged in the democratic process. Specifically we are looking to harness the energy created, and techniques used, by Web 2.0 in a more directed and socially purposeful way than has been

widely used before in order to enable formal democratic bodies such as Local Councils to take best advantage of these new technologies.

2.1 Creating an Environment for Engagement

The first milestone of the methodology is to create an active social network at each of the Citizenscape pilot sites. This will involve careful analysis of the stakeholders and a focused content and moderation plan for online and offline content which will work to encourage and enable citizens to enter into active discussions. While the creation of this environment will, if successful increase engagement in one or more issues, it will not increase participation until it is used to engage in some kind of formal decision-making process – in formal democracy. Once an active social network is in place then the project will need to create the right environment for the citizen to take a further step to take part in formal democracy. This tension between formal and informal democracy is a central challenge that can only be resolved by creating a path of action from one to the other. Finding and defining innovative ways to create such paths is a central part of the Citizenscape project.

The project team believe that in order to accelerate the creation of an active social network the project team will need to select some stakeholders on the basis of their likelihood to engage in this way. This is a practical approach to the process of online social networking which does in some way contradict a democratic objective which is to make sure that the process is open, accessible and transparent to all.

Marketing strategies are used to create this widening spiral of engagement. At the first iteration the project team focuses on the 'usual suspects' – the members of the community who they expect to be interested and engaged. From there they reach to people who may be attracted by either the topic or the channel and then engage them. At this point we have already succeeded in creating an environment which is beyond the usual consultation one and the aim of the methodology at this point is to encourage participants to evangelise the Citizenscape to others.

3. Methodology

The project will be 24 months in duration and this will be split approximately 25:75 development time to pilot time. Because the evolving nature of the subject, the technological landscape and the content of each CitizenScape the principal research methodology will involve 'action research', a specific methodology derived from ethnography which both guides and constrains researchers who are also active in agents in the social process that they are working with.

There are some necessary tensions within the project design that needed to be identified and then accommodated within the project design:

3.1 Creating a Dynamic Tension Between Online and Offline Activities

Web 2.0 is a social phenomena as much as a technological one and as such the the project needs to blend online and offline tools to create a dynamic tension which provides all participants with the best opportunity to engage with the process. One of the assertions of the project team is that practitioners apply technology as a 'magic bullet' solution to problems and that a successful methodology will need to demystify the benefits of technology and give better balance between online and offline activities. This process should then more accurately reflect the real lives of citizens who move in between channels and media. In the quickly developing fields of technology and eDemocracy it is essential to have a strong evaluation process that can make some ongoing assumptions about what has and has not worked. However the balance between online and offline work brings with it issues of evaluation as it becomes necessary to use online and offline

evaluation techniques across both online and offline activities. Two questions then become pressing:

- Do you need to ascribe different weightings to online and offline activities and if so how do you do this and ;
- How do you draw a conclusion regarding causation as to how an online activity has drawn a citizen to an offline activity and vice versa.

The project team is keen not to overburden participants with evaluation during the project duration and instead has decided on three distinct evaluation phases for face to face offline evaluation of participants and combine this with in-depth data collection from the technology platform which will infer citizen behaviours.

3.2 Accountability vs. Anonymity

The project team believes that expectation setting is critical for the success of each of the Citizenspaces however the risk is that we lose one of the big web 2.0 benefits by ensuring this accountability. The ability to create a different online identity to your physical one has been cited widely as a major contributor to the success of various online communities (Rheingold¹, Turkle²). Even with the emergence of services such as Facebook or Twitter which are predicted on connecting to your existing social network (however tenuously) there seems to be a separation between from your physical life as can be evidenced by the number of cases of people being disciplined by employers for statements on Facebook (“118 118” August 2007, Argos August 2007). However if we accept that people do create separate digital persona's online then the Citizenscape team want to tap into the phenomenon that exists of people actively creating persona online for different personal purposes and to support the creation of the “citizen” persona. We want to motivate citizens with positive role models and by demonstrating tangible results from democratic engagement.

3.3 Enskilling or Social Engineering

This social engineering approach to engagement where social networks are artificially created with a defined democratic objective encapsulates another tension within the project. Democracy, in one sense, is about the expression of the will of the citizen body. Implicit in this is the citizens free choice – though that free choice is made on the basis of information from the democratic parties and candidates. The Citizenscape methodology goes beyond just informing citizens and instead aims to actively encourage them to take action. Given this ambition to change the citizen is it still a free choice? By engineering people to participate are we depriving them of the option of apathy? Apathy, or disengagement, annoys the engaged citizen – however does this make it a less than valid choice? This is a tension which practitioners in local government are very familiar with – the tension between supporting the process and supporting the politics. The project team have in this instance decided that the decision to encourage citizens to participate democratically by better equipping – enskilling – them to do so is a justifiable position. However in order to maintain transparency and trust in the environment the team are directly addressing this as part of the code of conduct defined for the Citizenscape. Democratic bodies such as Local Authorities commonly have to carefully manage the vital difference between consultation and communication and as they act as host organisations for the Citizenspaces this will be exacerbated.

4. Technology Description

The CitizenScape technology is open source based (LAMP) and will form an updated version of the Public-i platform which was studied as part of the eparticipate project

(<http://www.eparticipate.org>). The project will use a web 2.0 approach which relies on the development of individual components which can be 'snapped together' to create specific Citizenspaces. The aim is to create a development environment along the lines of for example DRUPAL but with a greater variety of technological components than the larger scalable infrastructure of the DRUPAL approach. The project team are making a number of web 1.0 and web 2.0 features available to the hosts of the Citizenspaces to enable them to choose a technology selection which best suits their individual requirements. Tools can be loosely mapped to the stage of the methodology where they are introduced as follows:

Stage	Tools / Features
1. Marketing and Recruitment	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Website with content management system ● Document management system ● Email / SMS alerts & newsletter ● Basic registration ● Webcasts
2. Informing and en-skilling	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Blogs
3. Creation of shared codes of conduct and frames of reference for engagement	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Discussion boards ● Wiki
4. Participation in informal Web 2.0 spaces	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● User comments / rankings
5. Participation in more formal democratic engagement	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Petitions ● Formal surveys ● Collaborative document creation

Tools are not to be applied rigidly to each stage and the above is used as a guide to help sites get started.

Another important technology that is being used as part of the Citizenscape methodology is the idea of technology outreach. Each site will make use of tools such as RSS feeds and Facebook widgets in order to build audience and keep stakeholders informed in the places that they are most often online.

5. Developments

Citizenscape is not seeking to be ground breaking in terms of the individual technology components but more in the design principles. These have been defined as:

- Do not assume that Citizenscape is the stakeholders main online domicile. The project team is using the Citizenscape as the centre of the debate but does not assume that this is where stakeholders are spending the majority of their time. The technology needs to reflect this with the outreach widgets described above.
- Borrow not build – the project team is making use of existing systems and where this is not possible will be building using open source components to maximise re-usability
- Use existing communities and platforms rather than dissipating the energy – if a Citizenscape stakeholder group is already using for example a discussion board then the project team will integrate this rather than try to migrate the discussion to the Viewfinder application
- Assume a fixed shelf life – do not build future legacy systems. Rather than create an open ended website the Citizenspaces will be developed with a fixed duration in mind so that their usefulness needs to be regularly debated.

6. Results

As an action research project the design and methodology are very closely linked and initial results are in the form of practitioner conclusions about project design and implementation.

The project has one fundamental assumption and that is that citizens, if informed and equipped, will participate in democracy. In developing the methodology for the first implementation of the Citizenscape websites it was clear that each of the practitioners have seen elements of this assumption at work:

- The team from Bristol City Council are able to evidence active online activity around both their multimedia discussion board Viewfinder leading both to and from their online petitioning system (both projects can be found at <http://www.askbristol.com>).
- Bristol and the City of Genoa are both part of the eParticipate project which uses webcasting technology to increase trust and transparency in the formal democratic process.
- All of the team members have anecdotal evidence as the effectiveness of online methods to engage with new groups of citizens
- Each team were able to easily identify a group of initial stakeholders to begin the engagement process with

This last point is extremely salient – as this is a practitioner led methodology it is important to ensure that the first stages are straightforward and pass a basic 'commonsense' test to ensure that the teams can get started in building their specific citizenscape sites. In coming to this conclusion however the team needed to debate the tension between the democratic imperative of universal access to the debate and the need to actually get some kind of conversation started. The team have concluded that the initial identification of stakeholders based on their likeliness to participate in the initial stages of building the site and 'kick-starting' the participation process is a justified compromise as long as early efforts are made to extend the reach of the discussion are made and as long as the process is made clear and transparent on each website.

The second conclusion of the team is the need for a shared conversation about the code of conduct for each site. This is important not only to create a shared ownership of the site between the host organisation, which in each case in the project is the formal democratic body, and the rest of the stakeholders who are being encouraged to take part, but also to address the earlier discussed design tension of the social engineering goals of the project. The code of conduct conversations will also be an opportunity to use the collaborative and informal participation tools and as a result these conversations should speed up the ability of stakeholders to participate in the actual democratic issues to be debated. The debate about anonymity versus accountability is still ongoing with the project team though the prevailing opinion is that users should be able to use a screen name though will be asked to identify themselves as part of the registration process. This point will be further discussed with stakeholders as part of the code of conduct discussions.

Specifically however hard results will be measured in terms of what additional democratic acts will citizens actually carry out as a result of participating in the project. As part of the project design process the team is looking to create a list of democratic metrics, which can be applied to the evaluation. At present these include:

6.1 Formal Democratic Actions

- Either watching a webcast of a formal meeting or physically attending
- Making a deputation
- Signing a petition (depending on region)
- Contributing to the formal consultation

- Attending a meeting/event – other real world stuff
In parallel with this the team will be monitoring informal participation as well:
- Reading content
- Posting content (text/audio/video/map)
- Blogging
- Recruiting other participants
- Moderating/facilitating content
- Rating content
- Signing a petition (depending on region)
- Contribute to Wiki
- Attending a meeting/event – other real world stuff
- Being trained as a moderators

7. Business Benefits

Local authorities in each of the pilot sites have a responsibility both to consult the public on specific issues and also a general mandate to raise the level of democratic participation within their area. With this backdrop there are two main business benefits to the creation of a repeatable and thereafter potentially self sustaining Citizenscape process:

- Recruitment is one of the largest costs around consultation – actually finding citizens to talk to. The Citizenscape methodology has the potential to provide a cost effective route to the citizen body, which should become quicker and easier each time you use it.
- Online engagement is far cheaper than offline to deliver. While Citizenscape does not believe in a wholly online approach the targeted mix of online and offline activities should provide cost effective consultation.

Overall however the main business benefit of a successful Citizenscape methodology may be in its repeatability. Consultation projects – both online and offline – have a patchy success rate and improving this and boosting confidence in the cheaper online approach may prove to be the greatest benefit.

8. Conclusions

Conclusions in the project are ongoing however the initial conclusion is that the working assumption – the idea that it is possible to use web 2.0 tools and techniques in order to move citizens from a passive state to actually taking part in democracy - is a realistic one. All this shows however is that the project has a good starting point and the real test will be in whether the team succeeds in taking a group of citizens on a journey which leaves them tangibly more engaged in the democratic process at the end of the project. A further success would be to also show a inclination from these citizens to engage on an ongoing basis.

The balance of online and offline activities is a critical part of taking edemocracy away from technologists and making it a more practical, measurable and therefore repeatable tool for practitioners who want to increase levels of democratic participation. This is why this project is being run as a social and not as a technical projects and why the conversations between stakeholders and practitioners will be central to the ongoing evaluation and design of the project. As such the clear identification of the design tensions and concerns is a critical stage in the project and one which will inform the work going forward.

References

- [1] The Virtual Community: Finding Connection in a Computerized World By Howard Rheingold, Published 1994, Secker & Warburg, ISBN:0436202085
- [2] Life on the Screen: Identity in the Age of the Internet By Sherry Turkle Published 1997, ISBN:0684833484