

European Workshop
Perspectives of Web 2.0 for Citizenship Education in Europe

7 - 9 April 2011
Brno, Czech Republic

Report

Workshop III Empowerment through Web 2.0?

by Jaroslav Petrik
Civic Education Centre, Czech Republic

Input:

Ellen Helsper, London School of Economics and Political Science (UK)

Project Presentation:

“INCLUSO”

presented by Jan Dekelver (Belgium)

Moderation:

Tatjana Meijvogel-Volk, The House for Democracy and the Rule of Law (the Netherlands)

To keep the narrative flowing and simple, this report does not reflect the order in which ideas were said, nor does it credit the authorship of individual ideas. Although the specific focus of this workshop was on marginalized youth and disabled people, many of the discussed issues were general in nature.

Current research in digital studies to certain extent mirrors the development of previous research on television. The huge expectations with this new medium arriving in people's homes – making information more accessible and promising a rapid increase in education of general population – has not had the expected outcome as it is the case for today's digital media. Therefore, research has moved from 'access, skills and attitudes' to 'digital engagement spheres' (beyond how do people access digital media to what do they actually achieve using them). Future research should address the question of what do digital media do to us, with the clear example of the recent unrest in the Arab world, which was partly precipitated through increased interconnections in the virtual world, allowing people to first imagine and then realize the long-lived dream of pan-Arabism.

Much of the research still focuses on the question how do **‘the rich get richer,’** reflecting the fact that access to technology in itself does not necessarily empower people, but it can predisposition offline influence on the level and nature of participation online. As a result, offline structures of socio-economic conditions and psychological, social and cultural environments largely define online engagement. After previous findings in media studies, many agreed that the existence of proxy users has to be taken in account. These play a similar role in the social fabric of digital society as opinion leaders do in information society, providing a bridge to the online world for people who live offline. For example, virtually all homeless people in Brussels, although not online users themselves, still have access to information distributed online (such as where and when the next soup kitchen is open), through their various proxies.

Most of the discussion then revolved around **online participation in active citizenship**, which can be roughly described in three levels: (1) access to information, (2) opportunity that one’s voice is heard, and (3) active engagement in decision-making processes, influencing the outcome. An entry point into the debate was the acknowledgement that participatory platforms alone don’t cause greater participation: research shows that while 34% of people are engaged online and 29% are also engaged offline, the number of people engaged offline but not online is close to none. With the remaining 5% who do engage online but not offline, an interesting observation was noted: active citizenship participation represents only a small margin of their online activities, and only comes into play after roughly 80% of other activities have been exhausted.

In a trial to overcome this obstacle, **rewards for participation** were briefly discussed, concluding that previous experiences are not encouraging: in an example where participation in nuclear waste management debate was encouraged by a Slovenian MEP by offering USB sticks as a reward, responses spiked while the reward was being offered, but then quickly died. In another example, a rewards system was tested with high-value incentives (digital cameras) and incentives of little value (chocolate bars). The result was that the attractiveness and importance of the debated issues were far more important for levels of participation, while the value of incentives remained irrelevant. Supposedly much of the marketing in the online community uses the principle of ‘prosuming’, where several influential individuals are provided a product to use for free, so that others see it in action and become interested. Similarly, issues that opinion leaders in the online community choose to engage with are likely to increase in prominence.

It is beyond doubt that the **selection of issues** for online citizenship participation matters greatly. Previous experiences with social networks and other Web 2.0 platforms show that users relate public debates to their personal experiences. **Timing** matters too – tools should be offered at times when the target groups need them and are ready for them. A valuable insight into the choice of issues was presented on the example of introducing digital platforms to social workers, who can be seen as a group particularly resilient to modern technologies (reportedly, their generally cold relationship to modern communication tools is often one of the reasons why they chose to be social workers in the first place). One of the observations made during the course of the INCLUSO project was that social workers are looking for *solutions*, not *tools*, and therefore practical uses and impacts of digital technology in the real world are of most importance to them. As a result, they are more willing to explore tools which relate to issues that they already deal with, and enable them to do their work better (personal development, social participation, integration, social relationships, self-sustaining, independent living, employability, counselling, facilitating communication with families, etc.).

At the same time, they are very aware of potential pitfalls of introducing new technology, seeing that it can be used or abused (internet can be used for more effective job-hunting as well as more effective dealing in drugs; the possibility of concealed identity can facilitate better counselling as well as enable identity theft and other fraud). Therefore, a number of issues have to be taken care of in advance, such as increased time and resource consumption, lack of control, fear of legal issues, and the difficulty of measuring impact and providing decisive cost-benefit analysis. In this regard, practical examples of success stories are extremely helpful, and social workers are more likely to take up certain tools after having heard how they can have tangible benefits for their clients.

On top of the selection of issues, **naming and framing the topics** are of paramount importance as well. Bearing in mind that existing social structures precede and define online behaviour, participatory platforms have to reach people where they are, rather than try to bring them somewhere else. Knowing that people are likely to engage in topics that directly affect or interest them, reaffirms the importance of the choice of issues. On top of that, it is vital to offer tools which are likely to yield practical results (e.g. such methods in participation which are directly linked to decision-making). Moreover, it is important to 'speak the language' of the target group, by using terms that they are familiar and comfortable with. Examples included gypsies and travellers in the UK, who asserted that they are not using technology, although they were texting from mobile phones all the time. For them, texting amounted to "just me and my mates talking" rather than "using technology," a term which clearly bore profoundly different meanings to them. Similarly, many young people strongly refuse to admit they are interested in politics, although many of the issues they engage with, are political in nature.

Finally, **digital exclusion** might not necessarily be an involuntary result of unfavourable conditions, but a purposeful and deliberate choice. For example, numbers show that practically all 16-17 year old girls of Turkish background in Austria, refuse to use Facebook for personal reasons. Thus our belief that just about all young people are online might be exaggerated. For some people, Web 2.0 platforms might add obstacles rather than remove them – unlike in offline participation, additional skills are needed for online participation, namely media literacy and digital literacy, representing two more walls between the individual and active engagement. Therefore, **scalability** is a crucial factor in customizing Web 2.0 tools for use by specific target groups. Speaking particularly of disabled people, the nature of disability makes a huge difference: while for the physically disabled digital technology can support integration as it levels the ground with their healthy peers, for people with learning disabilities digital technology widens the gap and can exacerbate the already existing difficulties they face when interacting with others. In this regard, it has been observed that disabled people generally shun custom-built interaction platforms as they replicate modes of exclusion from real world, but appreciate mainstream platforms which erase their differences and enable them to interact with general population on equal terms.

Summary of key points

- digital tools do increase possibilities of people who already are engaged in active citizenship, but do not necessarily enlarge the pool of active citizens → the potential of Web 2.0 for mobilization to active citizenship is rather limited;
- if digital technology is to be used, it is not wise to start with citizenship participation, as this often comes last in a chain of other online activities that precede citizenship education and should be built on;

- it is unrealistic to expect great results from the use of digital media – trying to engage people online often yields a similar number of responses as standing on the street corner and engaging them offline (*Although as other participants and other workshops have shown, there are examples of successful online projects run by a handful of people, sometimes equal in number to one ‘street corner group’ of major NGOs*);
- when trying to reach various audiences using Web 2.0, it is crucial to go where the target groups are, rather than try to make them come somewhere else, to speak their language (even if it means not talking about politics or technology); and engage with issues that directly affect them, offering tools that directly lead to solutions.