Community Engagement through Social Media

R. Jayakanthan

Web 2.0 Innovation Labs, Tata Consultancy Services
jayakanthan@acm.org

Abstract

Community engagement, i.e., attracting eyeballs of citizens to focus on their civic government and its functioning is a vital aspect in nurturing healthy democracy at the local level, in both developed and developing countries. This paper looks into specific instances such as graffiti reporting through social media (in a developed country), collaborative focus on local community infrastructure issues in the form of digitizing the traditional "Letters to the Editor" mechanism used by citizens (in a developing country) as well as how the crowdsourced digitization of electoral records - wealth declaration documents of candidates for instance, lead to improved awareness of significant data among voters. Apart from these specific instances, the paper also looks into how patterns from these applications can be applied to other areas of social innovation, especially those involving utilizing social media to shape and administer both public policy as well as the awareness of the same by the citizens.

Introduction

Engaging communities through social media is a very vital means of developing a strong and vibrant local government. In this paper, we look into three specific such instances and the learning that can be gathered from three very different situations and the patterns that arose out of the applications which can be applied to other software focussed on Social Innovation.

What is Social Innovation? Wikipedia provides a helpful definition:

> Social innovation refers to new strategies, concepts, ideas and organizations that meet social needs of all kinds - from working conditions and education to community development and health - and that extend and strengthen civil society.

New methods of connecting the populace with the government at all levels is a need of the hour. As technologists we have the opportunity to appropriate what has worked in the Web 2.0 space and apply those aspects to the Social Innovation space. What is Web 2.0? Wikipedia again to the rescue:

> The term Web 2.0 is associated with web applications that facilitate participatory information sharing, interoperability, user-centered design, and collaboration on the World Wide Web. A Web 2.0 site allows users to interact and collaborate with each other in a social media dialogue as creators (prosumers) of user-generated content in a virtual community, in contrast to websites where users (consumers) are limited to the passive viewing of content that was created for them.

Irrespective of one's opinion of Web 2.0 as a passing fad, or as a gimmicky term signifying low-density marketing speak, by this definition, we can see that a number of valuable percepts and principles form the core of Web 2.0, which are useful to us when we think about engaging communities and individuals at various levels of the local government and in the electoral process. This outlook has great significance and provides a number of useful benefits in improving the efficiency and the effectiveness of our attempts at engaging the people in the functioning of the systems that they seek out to interact with their government and their fellow citizens.

In the following we will look at three such systems built to engage users to participate in three completely different activities which require different forms of engagement and participatory mechanisms, but which utilize the fundamental percepts of Web 2.0 which provides a significant boost to the quality of the gathered responses and improving the participation as whole. Two of these are built for communities in the developing world and one of them is built for a community in the developed world.

Vandalism Reporting System

Graffiti is a legitimate form of art today (Banksy is a great example) but unwanted graffiti which has not pretensions of art and is unbridled vandalism is a significant nuisance in urban communities the world over. While these are relatively less serious in the panoply of ills which plague communities, they are vital in terms of the effect they have on the well being of the community by and large. The significance is explained through the "Broken Windows Theory." (Kelling and Coles 1996)

We were approached to design a system to enable report the instances of vandalism in the form of such unwanted graffiti in public spaces. We were requested to utilize a visual interface which enables the user to pin the location on a map, at which such an instance of vandalism was sighted. We made use of the Google Maps API on top of a Ruby on Rails application and a MySQL database to build a reporting tool. The user places a marker on a map and provides details such as a photograph of the instance (optional but adds weightage to the incident) along with their personal contact details (optional). The index page of the application provided the details of all the reported instances in the form of a display on a map. This non editable display is a common viewing point for both the users and the admins who included members of the local government, in charge of reviewing the incidents and dispatching cleanup crews to take care of instances. This was based on their severity and weightage provided by the system. While this system is indeed simplistic, it provides a valuable insight into how people interact with their local government officials and how we can improve the effectiveness of such interactions. This is done by tracking various aspects such as the period of time before the report is acted upon and the analysis of the severity of the report. False reports are also a possibility but by making the entire report process reviewable by users and by implementing a simple voting and reputation system we can bubble up the significant reports.

The quality of the engagement can be greatly improved by not insisting that the users sign up before submitting the report instead, we can offer the option to sign up post their first report in the confirmation screen. This is a standard interaction pattern provided in ecommerce sites which focus on the customer not being forced to go through a protracted registration process before being able to make the first "buy" but this is seen as a radical departure from expected behaviour from a local government system.

The ability to vote up and vote down the vandalism incidents is also a departure from expected behaviour in that the value of such an interaction of the system is not obvious at first sight. The mere act of voting up increases the "vested" nature of the users' involvement with a particular incident and its resolution. While the significance of this interaction is non obvious at first it becomes apparent when we conduct interviews with the users and also track their feedback on the forum built in the system. Promoting a sense of ownership and improving the sense of "investment" in the interactions with the local government is of value and any interaction patterns which improve the quality of such aspects are of interest to us.

Modeling "Letters to the Editor" as a Web 2.0 application

Writing to a newspaper is considered to be an important way in which citizens participate in a democracy (Kim, Wyatt and Katz 1999.) Especially in developing countries in which the means to approach the government regarding civic problems is mired in red tape and peppered with bureaucratic roadblocks, writing to a local newspaper about civic problems is seen as an important first step to bring attention to and eventually resolve issues pertaining to civic problems such as flaws in sanitation, transportation, infrastructure and public safety. In such a scenario we decided to look into ways in which the process of writing to a newspaper and getting published in the "Letters to the Editor" column can be improved by the development of a web based software system which augments the process by providing a superior interface to accessing the data in the system.

While the influence of the printed news media is generally considered to be on the wane in the developed world, they continue to wield significant influence in the developing world and continue to gain relevance both in terms of readership and their effect on the government. The "Letters to the Editor" columns in the newspapers of India are not only used by readers to debate the matters of public significance and the editorial stances but also to report instances in which the local government has been derelict in some aspect of public need. The influence that these letters hold over the flow of public policy is significant in that they are seen as a means to quickly gain attention to matters of import with even courts of law taking note of them while gauging public sentiment.

We have undertaken the process of augmenting the "Letters to the Editor" process with the aid of a Web 2.0 application. At its foundation the application utilizes the RSS feeds provided by newspapers to their Letters to the Editor column to provide a list of "issues" up for discussing and highlighting. The "Letters to the Editor" is self imposed limitation in order to restrict ourself to utlizie the prefiltered and selective nature of the items which reduces the effort that we would otherwise have to devote to them. A pool of voters then classify them into

actionable items (if they can be acted upon by a part of the government), geo taggable items (if they are pertinent to a particular locality) and general opinion pieces (on which no significant action can be taken upon). Some of these classifications may overlap and the system allows the users to classify the items accordingly. The issue queue which is thus generated is then voted upon. The issue queue is also visually presented in the form of a map in the case of the geo taggable items in order to reflect which parts of the region in question feature the most issues. The voted upon items present a broad overview of the issues of the interest to the users. The presence of the online system simplifies the process of tracking items which have not been acted upon and also filter items which have popular appeal. A discussion thread in built with each item adds to the expressions of involvement by the user and adds to the conversation. A reputation system built in the system helps building a sense of community and a keen sense ownership and participation amongst the users.

Election Watch

Election Watch is an ongoing project to digitize the documents made available by the Election Commission of India. The primary focus is to digitize the affidavits made by the electoral candidates as part of their applications to the Election Commission. The affidavits comprise of self declared information from the candidates with regard to their educational qualifications and their income and wealth. This information is not currently made available to the public at large, and whatever little information is made available online is in the form of difficult to parse silos of documents which are very difficult to navigate and comprehend.

The project is being carried out with collaborative efforts of 200 NGOs and over 100 students, that has been trying to disseminate information by deciphering hand-written affidavits and providing information — owned assets, list of pending cases, loans and educational qualifications — about candidates using graphs and pie charts online. With the upcoming state elections in the south Indian state of Tamil Nadu, the project has been worked upon around the clock with the aim of making available a significant amount of information online.

The aim of making such information available online is to engage citizens with their democracy and increase awareness of the various attributes of the candidates in the fray. In developing countries this is a significant issue as administrative corruption and misrepresentation is a significant issue. By making available the information provided by the candidates themselves in an easily accessible form, the ability of the voter to make an informed decision is augmented. With the integration of Social Networking buttons like Facebook's "Like" and Twitter's "Tweet this", the viral dissemination of such information is made possible.

Conclusion

We have so far had a broad overview of three systems built to augment participatory democracy at various levels in both developed and developing countries. While much of the learning derived from such systems remains to be looked into a bit more deeply, the development of said systems has provided us with much needed perspectives and more importantly a jumping off point for exploring the utilization of more such systems in local government to bring in greater participation and transparency.

References

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