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Empowering Social Media: Citizens-Source e-Government and Peer-to-Peer Networks

Maxat Kassen
University of Illinois at Chicago, maxat2@uic.edu

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Maxat Kassen
Fulbright Scholar, PhD in Political Science,
University of Illinois at Chicago

maxat2@uic.edu

UIC UNIVERSITY OF ILLINOIS AT CHICAGO

Introduction

This study examines the empowering potential of digital media as a platform useful for promotion of open government and creation of citizens-source e-government networks. The author argues that today e-government agenda suffers from its overgeneralization as a citizen-oriented tool to achieve better governance which does not take into account the value of peer-to-peer collaboration processes within civil society itself which could be used for generating citizens-source initiatives and civic engagement. In particular, the study analyzes the peer-to-peer relations between citizens and environment of a collective learning and interactive collaboration it creates, and argues why it is necessary to set an agenda that takes into account the typical limitations governments facing in realization of citizens-source projects, and suggests ways forward.

Hypothesis

Paradox of open data

Since 1990s when e-government concept was offered various possible models of interactive services have been suggested both by practitioners and theorists all over the world. But the key challenge has been the same - how to find the effective way of citizens engagement using the digital government platform?

The ultimate goal of any e-government project is promotion of transparency and participation. But the paradox of the concept is a traditional one way mechanism of its realization. In fact, all efforts to further the idea in its various forms all over the world are driven by standard top-down administrative commands or directives practically without any input from the civil society itself. Many projects, theoretically intended to be successful, failed basically because of a lack of interest from citizens themselves even despite the fact that huge financial resources were invested for their realization.

In this respect, the recent financial and economic slowdown makes many governments to rethink the whole model and seek not only a more cost-effective, but also a more sustainable way to promote e-government. In this respect, citizen-sourcing concept may address the challenge.

In fact, with minimum of investments and harnessing the collective knowledge of the local society the open data projects are resorting to, the local communities will be able to change the traditional political communication channels between governments and citizens.

General Description of the Networks

Two models of e-government networks were analyzed: traditional concept with e-government platform as a central supernode and citizen-sourcing model or peer-to-peer model without a central node.

Visualization of the Traditional E-government Networks
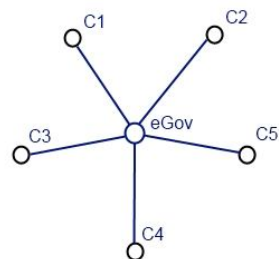
Nodes:
• eGov – e-government platform(s) as a supernode;
• C1…5 – citizens;

Dyadic relations:
• G2C – government-to-citizens component

Features:
• Centralization;
• Authentification of nodes;
• Top-down mechanism of realization;
• Reactive traditional "black box" mechanism.

Realization tools:
• National and local e-government portals;
• Off-line e-government mechanisms (text messages, automated phone calls, etc.).

Visualization of the Citizen-Source E-government Network
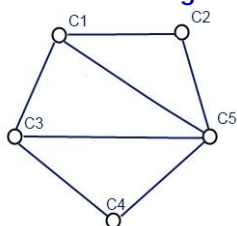
Nodes:
• C1…5 – citizens;

Dyadic and triadic relations:
• C2C – citizens-to-citizens component.

Features:
• Decentralization;
• Anonymity;
• Proactive mechanism of realization and communication.

Realization tools:
• Open data platforms (wikis, interactive media, etc.);
• Independent local open government projects (e.g. apps, mashups, visualization tools, mapping, etc.)

Patterns of the collective learning and interactive collaboration:

• **CitySourced** - independent peer-to-peer networking platform for civic engagement and political participation. Realized in San Francisco, CA;
• **DistrictBuilder -** provides customizable redistricting tools for local communities. Realized in Philadelphia, PA.
• **Open Atrium** – peer-to-peer platform designed for harnessing the citizen-sourcing by networking developers, citizens, etc. Realized in New York City, NY.

Structure of citizen sourcing concept (findings):

The peer-to-peer relations between citizens

Quasi-peer-to-peer networks: there is always a proxy even in the relationship networks between citizens themselves since almost many modern digital media tools use a central server or portal for overall sustainability of the open government projects;

Apps or mashups are feasible tools for development of independent peer-to-peer networks between citizens, local communities and independent developers;

Local open data projects are of particular interest for citizens, especially, those related to visualization and mapping of issues such as transportation and urban planning (mostly, in large cites), crime rate, school district visualization, etc.

Open data platforms provides raw datasets for independent developers useful in realization of local open government projects.

Hypothetical model of peer-to-peer projects:

Nodes:
• eGov (N) – e-government platform(s) at the national level;
• eGov (L1…n) – e-government platform(s) at the local level;
• C1…5 – citizens;
• d1…4 – developers.

Proxy platforms:
• p1…n – peer-to-peer platforms;
• o (N) – open data platforms at the national level;
• o (L) - open data platforms at the local level;

Dyadic interactive relations:
• C2C – government-to-citizens component;
• G2G - government-to-government component;
• G2D – government-to-developers component;
• C2D – citizens-to-developers component
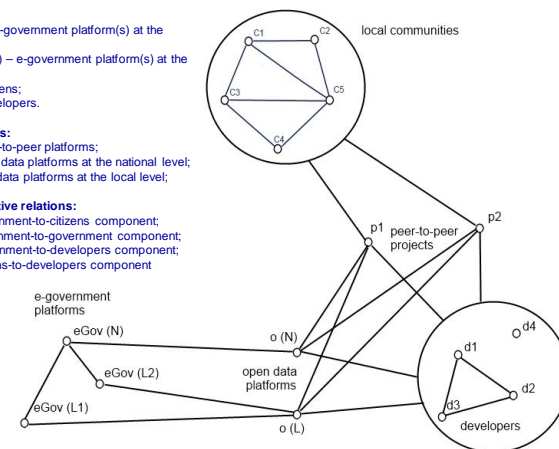
Conclusions:

• Many local independent citizen-source e-government projects are unsustainable due to shortage of financial resources;

• Anonymity of interactive political transactions between peers themselves in some of the projects paradoxically challenges the democratic potential of the open government concept itself;

• Enforceability of decision-making process which is presumably made possible due to use of some peer-to-peer e-government applications is unclear as there is virtually no legislation in the area.