Rethinking Governance via Social Networking: The Case of Direct vs. Indirect Stakeholder Injection

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ABSTRACT
Recent advances in communications technology have enabled new approaches to governance in which stakeholders across sectors and jurisdictions are engaged in consensus building and implementation processes. This paper explores some mechanisms through which online social networking may impact on governance towards greater openness & transparency.

In particular we examine the case of one initiative, the WeGov Project, which has as its mandate the bringing together of e-governance and e-society. We begin this paper by providing a contextual background to the initiative, its objectives and remit. We then proceed to critically examine the processes underlying the design of the WeGov tool-kit, as well as the end-user engagement methodologies, which feed back into the design of this platform.

We ask how direct & in-direct injection from policy makers on social networking sites (SNS) can facilitate participative governance in its most transparent and inclusive sense.

Categories and Subject Descriptors
I.6.5 [**Computing Methodologies**]: Model Development – *Modeling methodologies.*

General Terms
Measurement, Design, Experimentation, End User Participation

Keywords
eParticipation, online discussion, Social Networks, injection, feedback, Facebook, Twitter, YouTube

1. INTRODUCTION
Social networking technology provides major new opportunities for policy makers (eGovernment) to engage with the community (eSociety). A key feature of the WeGov project approach is to allow policy makers to move away from the limitations inherent in the current practice of using bespoke and dedicated platforms (e.g. specific opinion soliciting websites hosted by government) and instead make full use of the high levels of participation and rich discussions that already take place in existing social networking communities.

In this paper we narrate the story so far, of the evolution of the WeGov tool-set. We then provide an in-depth view into the direct as well as indirect injections of stakeholder (policy maker) inputs on SNS. From this will emerge a discussion on the efficacy as well as challenges of policy-makers engaging with citizens in dialogues via SNS.

2. THE WEGOV PARADIGM
The WeGov project is a pan-European collaborative research project that has as its goal the development of tools and techniques for closing the loop between policy makers and citizens. It sets out to develop a toolset, which will allows full advantage to be taken of a wide range of existing and well established social networking sites. Its main goal is to engage citizens in two-way dialogues as part of governance and policy-making processes. In terms of the story so far, WeGov kicked off in January of 2010, with its first task being to define end user (policy maker) needs, as well as to determine the baseline knowledge and use of SNS by policy makers. Two key use case scenarios were identified in Germany as well as at the European Parliamentary level. The two scenarios were thematically different (one scenario focused on policy making from a more theoretical perspective, while another focused on policy making within the context of consumer protection issues in Europe as a real world scenario). However in all cases similar 'core' functionalities in terms of engagement with SNS, were identified by the stakeholders. It is this latter aspect that we will focus on within the remit of this paper.

The WeGov toolbox, as it has evolved, is a piece of software running through a web browser. The dashboard offers stakeholders kinds of analysis, like hot topic opinion analysis and user behavior analysis, to support a two-way dialogue with citizens on Social Networking Sites. The basic functionality of the WeGov tool-kit was then extracted and implemented within a real world story – which we called the "feedback life cycle". In this paper we examine critically one aspect of this feedback life cycle, by looking at the case of direct and indirect stakeholder injection. Let us take a moment here to understand *"What the WeGov Toolkit enables in terms of functionality?"*

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1. Creating debates: This is where the policy maker starts the group or thread on the SNS. Some examples of specific interest to the end user partners are as follows.

a. Online Surveys: These can be correlated with hot topic analysis and searches of their own archives. An example workflow involving this could be to create & monitor surveys and feed back their results to citizens. (Create debate, seed debate, monitor existing debate, feedback).

b. Create Facebook Group – this is the creation of a group on Facebook specifically for the purpose of the debate.

c. Create YouTube video thread – this is posting a video on YouTube and letting people comment.

2. Monitoring debates: This is where the WeGov toolbox collects posts etc. pertaining to debates of interest to the policy maker. Importantly, the debates to be monitored can be ones seeded by the policy maker or those that already exist. This will involve getting posts from specified debate locations (e.g. a specified Facebook group or a YouTube thread).

a. Monitor Pre-existing Debates: This is the policy maker monitoring debates that are already occurring on SNS. The policy maker needs to input some identifier of a debate that already exists. This can be the group ID on Facebook or video ID on YouTube for example.

b. Monitor Own Debate. This is the policy maker monitoring debates they have created.

3. Get SNS users to join debates. This is the process of advertising a seeded debate, targeted marketing to potentially interested users, so they can come and join the debate. A key point arising from the legal and ethical analysis undertaken by the project, is that is relevant to this use case is the need to give citizens the opportunity to opt into a debate, and in the process give explicit consent for their data to be used for the purposes of enabling the policy maker to understand the citizens' opinions on the topic of the debate. Another key point is the targeted marketing – the intention here is to advertise only to citizens who have an interest in the debate and therefore a strong chance of participating.

a. Configure Target Audience – this is the policy maker specifying the characteristics of the target audience to the system so that the most appropriate people may be invited to join the debate. This could utilise demographic or other characteristic information (e.g. subject areas of interest) of potential participants, and communicating it to SNS so that only relevant participants are invited to join the debate.

b. Advertise debate. Post links to the debate's location to relevant places, e.g. Facebook groups, post tweets or retweet relevant tweets, etc. Citizens can then join the debate if they wish.

4. Injection of information into debates: We need to support injection of information by the policy maker into the debate at the creation stage of the debate ("seeding" the debate) as well as during the debate. This applies not only for debates that the policy maker has created, but also to those started by other people that the policy maker is following. The information could be the start of a debate, e.g. a YouTube video, or answers to points made by participants. Different types of injection identified so far are as follows.

a. Inject Posts, links etc. – this is the policy maker contributing posts or links (or other media such as videos) to a debate.

b. Seed debate – this is very similar to Inject Posts above, except that seeding the debate occurs early in the debate's life.

c. Provide feedback to users on SNS. Consultation needs to be transparent and giving proper feedback to citizens on SNS is very important and needs to be factored in. Feedback results of analysis / debate responses from the policy maker into the debate so as to give them the confidence that their opinions are being listened to.

One stakeholder's basic need is to test a particular statement within the society and gather the feedback and opinions of the citizens on the given statement.

3. 'REAL WORLD VIEW' IMPLEMENTATION ON SOCIAL NETWORKING SITES

To evaluate the basic idea of WeGov, a first prototype was developed. It uses a fixed Facebook group and analyzes always the same a set of comments. The test run, visualized in Figure 1, starts and ends with the policy maker, who wants to post into the Facebook group "We love e participation". The topic he wants to post is "The future is e-participation", expecting to obtain users' comments on this statement.

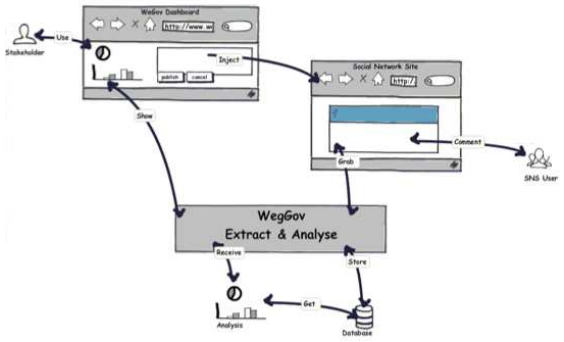

Figure 1. WeGov prototype.

4. PROTOTYPE TESTING – STAGE 1: THE GERMAN PARLIAMENT

The first prototype was presented to 29 stakeholders of the German Parliament, who are working for a member of the Bundestag. All different parties of the current German Government, SPD [1], CDU [2] (CSU [3]), FDP [4], Bündnis 90 - Die Grünen [5] , Die Linke [6], were represented. After the presentation of the first prototype there was a discussion on its potential development.

The outcome of this session was that stakeholders are very interested in gathering users' opinions on a particular topic; also on Social Networking Sites as well as through other channels.

The major problem is that not every German politician has got a Facebook profile, as yet.

The impact on stakeholders' injections using Facebook is not often that big, hence a generated summary and user behavior analysis, as is proposed within the WeGov toolbox, was seen as added value.

But German stakeholders distribute a lot of their statements throughout traditional media: For instance with giving interviews to (online) newspapers or within public debates of the German Bundestag. These statements are then cited on news channels or again on (online) newspapers. Ideally these sources are also cited by users within Social Networking Sites and will be discussed. This is exactly the idea of indirect injections.

5. DIRECT VS. INDIRECT INJECTION

Running the basic use case the stakeholder is supported with the analysis on the seeded injection of a statement: The stakeholder injects within a first step a statement on a Social Networking Site and starts within a second step the analysis on the discussion thread; this means that the software gathers the complete feedback and generates a summary based on diverse comments and the topics which describes the comments as well as a behavior analysis to get the comment with the biggest impact on the discussion. This way in which the stakeholder starts the workflow is a direct injection, and it describes exactly the functionality that the WeGov prototype covers.

In contrast to the direct injection the aim of the WeGov indirect injection is to include all statements of a policy maker, whether they are raised directly as a Facebook user or been cited by third parties – e.g. a newspaper. The challenge is to find these discussion threads with a search and run the WeGov analyzing tool, such as within the direct injection, on all gathered threads. In contrast to the first use case where the stakeholder injects the statement on Social Networking Sites, a third user injects the statement, like a citation; this could be an interview to an online newspaper or a video on YouTube.

The following example demonstrates the direct injection scenario: The policy-maker gives an interview to an online newspaper including the particular statement "I am against nuclear power plants". In contrast to the direct injection the policy-maker doesn't inject his particular statement on Facebook himself but the online newspaper itself publishes the interview story on its official Facebook wall, where a discussion starts. Next to this injection a Facebook user clicks the "I like" button on the official website and starts another discussion on his wall. Other Facebook users share the link on the article of the online newspaper website and initiate several discussions on the same stakeholder's interview.

6. DIRECT INJECTION – BEST PRACTICE

Christian Lindner is a member of the German Parliament and Secretary-General of the party FDP, which is the second leading party in Germany. He is a well-known politician in Germany and is part of the top 20 German politician, in matters of "likes" on Facebook. At the time of writing this paper, he gathered 6250 [7] "likes". During the early months of 2011 there was a strong discussion on the topic "Frauenquote" in Germany; that topic stands for an increase of the proportion of women in leading position. The German Government wanted to regulate the proportion of women in leading position by a new law, but that wasn't realized, yet. Christian Lindner was capturing the opposite site on that discussion, in a very early phase. On January 31 Christian Linder posted a statement [8] that he rejects a regulation on women in leading position by the German Government.

Figure 2. Injection of German politician Christian Lindner.

Figure 2 shows Christian Lindner's post on his Facebook profile. In a little while he gathered over 100 comments and 340 "likes".

While using the WeGov toolbox, the software would provide a summary on the Facebook discussion with the most discussed topics within the thread and some sample comments. In addition the behavior analysis would find the comment with the biggest impact on the debate; that means that the frequency of the posts after this comment increased greatly and pushed the discussion in a very strong manner.

6.1 Indirect Injection - Best Practice

As we noted above, in the case of the indirect injection, the stakeholder does not engage with the SNS platform directly, rather it is more a case of monitoring how interviews and statements made in more mainstream media, are circulated, commented on and discussed later in SNS. Below are some real world examples of how this process takes place.

6.1.1 Statement as YouTube Video

The CSU is the sister party of the CDU, one of the biggest parties in Germany and part of the Government. On January 11 the CSU uploaded a video on YouTube: "Ein Blick hinter die Fassade der Grünen" [9]. The aim was campaign advertising – but instead of highlighting the strong points of their own party, the message within this video served more to demonstrate how another party failed to offer constructive suggestions on problems. The statement of particular interest in this video, is that the party CSU always keeps promises.

Figure 3. Video statement on YouTube.

Figure 4 shows that the video was also injected on the CSU Facebook page, on January 11. The indirect injection of the CSU statement gathered at the time of writing, 124 comments and 73 likes.

Figure 4. Indirect injection by party CSU.

On January 13, the video was discussed within an online newspaper article (URL: http://goo.gl/KwjsI, Retrieved May 6, 2011) of Spiegel Online. Figure 5 shows that there are no "likes" on Facebook and no tweets, but there is a discussion with 168 comments.

Figure 5. Indirect injection by online newspaper.

What we see above is how the WeGov toolkit takes into account more than just numerical hits in terms of "likes" or citations per se. It also looks qualitatively at how certain comments generate a lot of discussion & commentary, (such as the statement above). This functionality allows our end users – the policy makers, to not only gain a more nuanced understanding of how their comments are processed in SNS media, but also to appreciate how they generate citizen feedback & what the citizens are actually voicing. Policy makers who have been traditionally using their bespoke sites to disseminate on policy issues, have now access to a wider network of stakeholders who can comment, participate and voice their concerns or support with a sense of urgency, that was hitherto missing.

The challenge of the indirect injection is determining the criteria for searching and identifying the sources where a statement is cited. This might be the URL on the statement, the text of the statement itself, some keywords or the name of the stakeholder. Another key factor is the integration into the WeGov dashboard: To enable this a new iteration of mockups is needed to discuss the workflow on indirect injections with stakeholders, to elaborate a methodology fitting the toolbox into the stakeholder's daily work-life.

7. CONCLUSIONS

By discussing in depth a particular component of the WeGov tool-kit we hope to have provided an analytic perspective on the kind of impacts such technologies can have on traditional methods of policy making. While the field of social-networking & governance is relatively new, as reflected in the lack of studies to date, we hope via our work within the WeGov project to contribute meaningfully to the understanding of how policy-makers and citizens engage within this transparent and seemingly unregulated environment.

In this paper we have reported on the work carried out within the first half of the project. We know how to take forward the revised prototypes (in line with user feedback) and to delve deeper on the actual interactions that it enables. In particular we are interested in how adaptive governance systems often self-organize as social networks by drawing on various knowledge systems and experiences for the development of a common understanding and policies.

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