

SOCIAL NETWORKING TOOLS SUPPORTING CONSTRUCTIVE INVOLVEMENT THROUGHOUT THE POLICY-CYCLE

Ella Taylor-Smith and Ralf Lindner¹

Abstract

This paper describes the context and background of the conference workshop “Social networking tools supporting constructive involvement throughout the policy-cycle”. EParticipation initiatives are increasingly applying social networking tools and sites at the interactive core of their participation processes. This paper looks at these objectives in more detail. It begins to identify characteristics of individual projects and types of social networking tools that will need to be explored by practitioners in order to successfully apply social networking tools in their projects. A five stage policy-cycle is used to categorise these projects’ relationships with democratic policy processes and intended or possible political impacts.

1. Background and Workshop Context

Researchers and practitioners are just beginning to gather empirical evidence and collate substantiated knowledge about how to effectively take advantage of the manifold functionalities of Social Networking (SN) tools in the area of eParticipation. Some initiatives are starting to use SN tools as an integral element of the major activities that characterise eParticipation: the discussion and perhaps even formulation of public policies with the aim to influence these. This workshop brings together initial experiences from European practitioners, intending to make an important early contribution by compiling and aggregating practical knowledge in this dynamic field.

A perceived weakness of eParticipation initiatives is lack of clarity about political goals during planning and disappointing levels of impact on policy during or following implementation. These can cause cynicism among all stakeholders (citizen and government) and deter participation and cooperation. Workshop participants are asked to categorise their eParticipation initiatives according to their intended input into the democratic decision-making process of public representative institutions. For this purpose, a five stage policy-cycle will be used (section 2.1 below). It is hoped that this will create a more comprehensive picture of the use and usefulness of SN tools in these projects, by making impact on policy-making an integral part of their analysis.

The best practice guide for government departments planning online engagements (an outcome of the five year Digital Dialogues project) [4] advises government departments to consider the most appropriate phase of the policy-cycle at the beginning of planning their online engagement. However, this is easier with regard to eParticipation opportunities provided by governments and

¹ ITC, Edinburgh Napier University, 10 Colinton Road, Edinburgh, EH10 5DT, UK and Fraunhofer Institute for Systems and Innovation Research (ISI), Breslauer Straße 48, 76139 Karlsruhe, Germany.

parliaments (top-down) than in those initiatives run by non-governmental organisations and other civil society actors (bottom-up).

1.1 The HUWY Project: Background and Approach

The workshop is organised by consortium partners in the EU-sponsored eParticipation project, HUWY – Hub Websites for Youth Participation². HUWY aims to involve young people in assessing and developing policies which affect the Internet.

HUWY pilots discussions in four countries: Estonia, Germany, Republic of Ireland and UK, beginning in April 2010 until the end of the year. The project applies a *distributed discussion* method in which youth groups (or groups of young people) explore the topics in *their own online spaces*: youth group forums, social networking spaces, blog pages etc. This model also allows for the participant groups to hold their discussions on Internet policies face-to-face in the offline-contexts of their choice. Regardless in which contexts the distributed discussions take place, HUWY provides supporting information and structured space for the publication of results and ideas on *Hub* websites. Moreover, the HUWY partners support the participating youth groups through workshops (offline).

Five issues clusters in the broad policy area of Internet governance have been identified, through working with young people in each pilot country, as particularly relevant and interesting for the target age group in several focus group sessions:

- Cyberbullying
- Child abuse (only in Estonia, Ireland and UK)
- ID theft, privacy and phishing
- File-sharing
- Censorship and freedom of expression (only in Germany)

This selection of Internet-related policy issues will provide a starting point for the individual group discussions. However, topics of interest that are not covered by this list but related to the overall policy area may be chosen as well (open thread).

The HUWY partners are also working with decision-makers involved in Internet policies (e.g. government departments and elected representatives) in order to establish effective linkages between the results of the youth group discussions and the actors involved in the policy-making process. Young people consulted in the planning stages of the project were keen to discuss the topics, but worried that policy-makers would not listen and their input would have no influence. A central objective of the HUWY project is to avoid this scenario and achieve a certain impact on the debates and policies surrounding the future governance of the Internet. The Hubs provide public space for feedback from policy-makers involved and tools to track outcomes.

As the project's main target group are young people, SN tools are a focus of online promotion. The project also uses SN tools to actually carry out the participation process, as the HUWY participants can host discussions on SN pages of their choice.

² <http://www.huwy.eu/>; EP-08-01-011

1.2 Follow-up from Workshop at EDem09: Focus and Results

The workshop “Social networking tools supporting constructive involvement throughout the policy-cycle” has the objective to exchange practical experiences and discuss conceptual approaches concerning the application of SN tools in the area of eParticipation activities. The workshop deals specifically with solutions on how to apply SN tools to support citizens’ effective involvement in the policy-making process.

This workshop is a follow-up to the 2009 workshop “Using social networking tools to promote eParticipation initiatives” which was held at the Electronic Democracy Conference EDem09 2009 in Vienna and organised by consortium partners in the eParticipation pilot project HUWY as well [11]. The aim of this first workshop was to share knowledge about how eParticipation and eGovernment initiatives are using SN tools to encourage people to get involved in these projects. An example of the application of SN tools for online promotion is maintaining a Facebook page to market a project and encourage people to visit the project website. Another is the use of a blog, Twitter or RSS to keep people up to date on progress and recent activities of the project to be promoted. The purpose of the 2009 workshop was to find out who has been using what to get what kind of messages to whom. How successful was this? And how was success measured? In short, the workshop explored good practice cases of SN tool application for the purpose of encouraging eParticipation. The rationale for this specific focus was related to the challenges the organisers were facing to promote their own eParticipation project. As the HUWY project is a small pilot, the consortium did not want to waste resources (specifically staff time) by adopting a *scatter gun* approach to promoting the project through SN sites. One strand of the investigation within HUWY involved working with young people in the pilot countries, through workshops and focus groups (section 1.1 above), to discover their Internet preferences in terms of information provision and communication. The other strand was to learn from the experiences made by other initiatives using SN tools for similar purposes.

During the workshop, four eParticipation projects presented their approaches in using SN tools to mobilise participants.³ At the end of the workshop, some overarching conclusions were drawn. Based on the various experiences made by the participants, it was recognised that a successful usage of SN tools to encourage people to get involved in eParticipation activities should

- implement easy-to-use and user-friendly technology,
- enable content sharing across different SN site profiles,
- be entertaining for the target groups,
- use a broad range of widgets (blogs, RSS feeds etc.) in order to maximise outreach,
- use a broad media-mix and apply a cross-media approach,
- strive to address individual or personal relevance for the potential participants.

Another outcome of the workshop was that participating researchers and practitioners felt the need for additional opportunities to exchange practical experiences and empirical evidence on how to

³ Comuno (<http://comuno.org>), Breda Morgen (<http://breda-morgen.nl>), The Virtual Town Hall (<http://www.public-i.info/product.php?id=44&c=CitizenScape>) and Shepherding Change (<http://innovate.direct.gov.uk/node/84>). For detailed project descriptions see [10, 11].

effectively take advantage of the functionalities SN tools may provide for e-participation. This demand was an important impulse for the organisers to hold a follow-up workshop.

The need for more orientation and guidance concerning the application of SN tools in the area of eParticipation, as it was expressed by workshop participants, supports the general observation that in the meantime there is an abundance of academic literature dealing with Web 2.0 and social networking sites in general and patterns of media usage in this expanding field in particular, but there is clearly a lack of systematically conducted and empirically based analyses on SN tools supporting eParticipation and processes of policy-making. However, a few practical guides for UK government staff and youth workers have been developed recently. These include:

- “Engaging Through Social Media” by the Central Office of Information (COI) [1],
- “Template Twitter Strategy for Government Departments” by the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills (BIS) [12],
- “Aiming High for Young People: Engaging through social media” by the Department for Children, Schools and Families (DCSF) [2] and
- “Social networking and youth participation - action learning set 2010” by the Local Government Information Unit (LGIU) [9].

2. eParticipation, Policy & Social Networking Tools

2.1 The HUWY Approach and Impact on Public Policy

In the HUWY project, young people (in focus groups and preparatory workshops) told us from the beginning that it was important to them they could have a real influence through the project and that this should be demonstrable before they took part. As described above (section 1.1), we are working with policy-makers (government departments and elected representatives) throughout both the planning and implementation phases to increase the project’s influence on policies related to Internet governance—i.e. to help ideas coming out of youth group discussions be used in policy-making and implementation.

Working with policy-making partners has led us to try to be much more specific about how this objective could be realised. Given the complexity of policy processes in the area of Internet governance, HUWY faces a number of challenges: the HUWY project deals with topics which are legislated and regulated at many levels of government (e.g. international, supranational, national and devolved/sub-national) and by different institutions (e.g. international organisations, parliaments, ministries, agencies). In addition, many issues at the EU level are governed by the Open Method of Coordination⁴. Further, the pilots are taking place in four EU member states with different political systems and different legislative timetables. Plus, advance planning means that we could not factor in specific windows of opportunity, like Internet governance issues moving up on the public agenda due to unforeseen incidents, government consultations or bills passing through parliament, into our implementation.

⁴ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Open_Method_of_Coordination

However, the policy-makers that we are working with asked us to be more specific about their role. This has led us to investigate the various ways citizen inputs can influence policy-making. One stage in this investigation took place at our first dissemination event⁵ where a Citizen Engagement expert, Ian Johnson, a HUWY consortium partner from the UK's Ministry of Justice, led a workshop exploring engagement processes: *Making a difference — how to translate engagement into change*.

Thus, we are using the policy cycle concept in this workshop to encourage practitioners to be specific about how their eParticipation initiative intends to have political impact.

2.2 The Policy-Cycle and eParticipation

Different eParticipation initiatives can be linked to different stages of the policy process. At least theoretically, eParticipation can be relevant for any phase of democratic decision-making and governing process. An often applied heuristic in order to structure processes of public policy-making is the policy-cycle. This framework presents a simplified and ideal-type model of the policy process; it is nevertheless useful to systemise and structure the highly complex processes of policy-making [5]. A common conceptualisation of the policy-cycle, which will be applied for the purpose of this workshop, differentiates five different phases (*Figure 1*):

1. Problem definition and articulation: Recognising a policy problem or the need for policy change and expressing the necessity of state intervention.
2. Agenda setting: Selection of a recognised problem and putting it on the government's (formal or informal) agenda for serious consideration of public action.
3. Decision-making and policy formulation: Proposals and demands are transformed into government policy documents, actions or programs. This includes the definition of objectives and consideration of alternatives as well as the development of legislation and regulation.
4. Policy implementation: This includes the specification of program details and the execution or enforcement of a given policy by the responsible agencies.
5. Policy evaluation: This involves the evaluation and review of the policy in action, research evidence and views of actors concerned. The insights gained in this phase open the possibility of a feedback loop to the first or second phase, perhaps resulting in a new policy initiative or a revision of an existing policy.

A cursory overview of different eParticipation initiatives of civil society actors shows a propensity to concentrate activities on two or three phases of the policy-cycle. Usually, these eParticipation initiatives focus on the input side of the policy-cycle (phases 1 and 2) and the actual decision-making stage (phase 3). Similarly, the eParticipation opportunities made available to citizens by governments and parliaments tend to be related to certain phases of the policy-cycle more often, while other stages of the cycle are largely ignored. For instance, e-petitions and other electronically submitted complaints and proposals tend to relate to the phase of problem definition and articulation. E-consultations are usually initiated in a later phase of the policy process in order to support ongoing policy formulation after the policy agenda has already been set. Some

⁵ HUWY: *Young people's experience and advice on Internet Policies*, Edinburgh 3rd December 2009
<http://itc.napier.ac.uk/ITC/NewsItem.asp?ID=45>

e-consultations which are addressed at selected expert communities also deal with specific technicalities of the implementation process of a policy or program [8].

A closer examination of the relationship between the policy-cycle and different forms of eParticipation is useful in order to be able to better assess the political impact which is to be expected from certain eParticipation activities, which actors/addressees are relevant in which phase, and which tools seem appropriate when. An improved understanding of the policy process is instrumental for many eParticipation initiatives as this knowledge helps to design political strategies more appropriately, focus resources adequately and avoid unrealistic expectations about the likely outcome of the involvement.

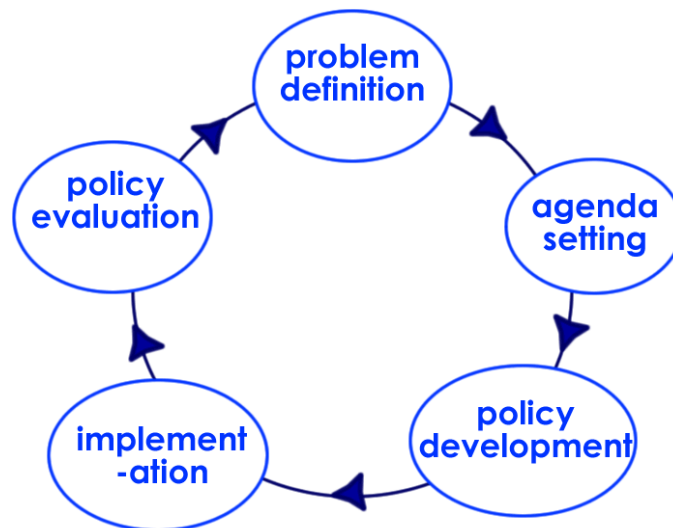


Figure 1: Five stage policy-cycle used in workshop

3. Workshop Format

The workshop is focused on eParticipation projects using SN tools. In order to work out how these tools fit into the policy-making process, we are asking participants to categorise the tools in advance, using a framework we have prepared and distributed as a spreadsheet (XL file). The framework includes four criteria which aim to define the tools' interface with the policy-making process:

1. Policy-making target (i.e. level and type)
2. Policy-cycle stage
3. How do policy-makers respond?
4. How do you measure its impact?

Examples are given in Table 1, which depicts the full framework used for analysis.

The criteria "How do policy-makers respond" aims to identify interaction tools used at this end of the eParticipation process. We are interested to see whether and how SN tools are being used to gather inputs or feedback from government or elected members, as well as inputs from citizens.

SN tools and initiatives that have been entered into the framework in advance of the workshop will be mapped to graphics. Other tools and initiatives will be added during the workshop (or perhaps during the conference in advance of the workshop). This will begin to give us a picture of how eParticipation initiatives aim to have impact on public policies. In addition, it will shed light on how SN tools are used within eParticipation initiatives and what advantages they bring over/add to other eParticipation tools like structured discussion forums. Do they bring identifiable benefits or are they merely being used as the current interaction trend?

Table 1: Framework to investigate tools

Project name/ URL	Tool/ widget type / brand	Citizen target	Policy-making target (type and level)	Policy cycle stage	How do policy- makers respond?	How do you measure its impact?	Problems so far
	e.g. RSS feed, Bebo	e.g. Young people, people who use a specific service	e.g. Parliamentary Committee, Minister (National or EU), Local council	1. Problem definition 2. Agenda setting 3. Policy development 4. Policy implementation 5. Policy evaluation	e.g. using the same SN tool, provide text for response page, no method provided	e.g. usage statistics, feedback from users, change in policy.	

In addition to mapping the tools using the framework, a selection of tools will be presented as more detailed case studies, in order to furnish examples for discussion.

4. Debate

The workshop will allow plenty of time for discussion and disagreement, as we anticipate a lively debate. When one tries to map flexible or even nebulous initiatives to separate stages of an ideal-type cycle, that is itself disputed, there are bound to be disagreements. If the process is handled rigidly, we may be accused of “trying to herd cats”. However, the intersection between citizen participation and government or parliamentary action is often a weakness in eParticipation projects, with different stakeholders following different democratic or dialogic [3, 6, 7] models. Thus, if we implement the workshop carefully and with good humour, we may inspire all participants to look carefully at this area when designing or studying initiatives.

References

- [1] CENTRAL OFFICE OF INFORMATION (COI), “Engaging through social media: A guide for civil servants” COI, London 2009.
http://www.coi.gov.uk/documents/Engaging_through_social_media.pdf
- [2] DEPARTMENT FOR CHILDREN, SCHOOLS AND FAMILIES (DCSF), “Aiming High for Young People: Engaging through social media” *DCSF*, London 2010.
<http://www.dcsf.gov.uk/everychildmatters/resources-and-practice/IG00676/>
- [3] FISCHER, F., “Participatory Governance as Deliberative Empowerment: The Cultural Politics of Discursive Space”, in: *The American Review of Public Administration* 2006; 36; 19. (2006).
<http://arp.sagepub.com/cgi/content/abstract/36/1/19>

[4] HANSARD SOCIETY, “Digital Engagement Guide: A guide to effective digital engagement for government”, HMSO, London 2009.

<http://digitaldialoguesuk.files.wordpress.com/2009/11/digitaldialogues-guide-1-0.pdf>

[5] JANN, W., WEGRICH, K., “Theories of the Policy Cycle”, in: Fischer, F., Miller, G.J., Sidney, M.S. (eds.): *Handbook of Public Policy Analysis*, Boca Raton 2007, p. 43-62.

[6] KIM, J & KIM, E.J., “Theorizing dialogic deliberation: everyday political talk as communicative action and dialogue”, in: *Communication Theory*, 18 (2008), pp.51-70.

[7] LINDNER, R., “Communication and Campaign Strategies of Intermediary Organizations – A Comparative Analysis“, in: Baringhorst, S.; Niesyto, J.; Kneip, V. (eds.), *Political Campaigning on the Web*, Bielefeld: Transcript 2009, pp. 235-257.

[8] LINDNER, R., „E-Konsultationen in Kanada – Vorbild für Deutschland oder Sonderfall?“, in: *TAB Brief*, Nr. 34, Dezember 2008, Berlin: Büro für Technikfolgen-Abschätzung beim Deutschen Bundestag (2008), pp. 14-19.

<http://www.tab.fzk.de/de/brief/brief34.pdf>

[9] LOCAL GOVERNMENT INFORMATION UNIT (LGIU), “Social Media Action Learning Set“, *LgiU*, London 2010.

<https://member.lgiu.org.uk/csn/projects/Documents/Social%20Media%20Action%20Learning%20Set%202010.pdf>

[10] PROSSER, A. & PARYCEK, P. (eds.), *EDEM 2009 – Conference on Electronic Democracy 2009*. Proceedings of EDEM 2009, September 7-8, 2009, Vienna 2009, p. 115-130.

[11] TAYLOR-SMITH, E. & LINDNER, R., “Using Social Networking Tools to Promote E-Participation Initiatives”, in: Prosser, A.; Parycek, P. (eds.): *EDEM 2009 – Conference on Electronic Democracy 2009*. Proceedings of EDEM 2009, September 7-8, 2009, Vienna 2009, p. 115-130.

[12] WILLIAMS, N, “Template Twitter Strategy for Government Departments”, for Department for Business, Innovation and Skills (BIS), London 2009.

<http://blogs.cabinetoffice.gov.uk/digitalengagement/file.axd?file=2009%20F7%2020090724twitter.pdf>