

Usability of Social Media in Public Services and Politics

R.Erdem ERKUL
Editor & Founder
www.digital-government.net

When the development processes of societies are examined, some main elements that made great impact are recognized. In an agricultural society the tools to plants the earth; in industrial societies the inventions like steam machine and electricity humanity has been some the turning points.

As known ‘information’, exists in both agricultural and industrial societies. However the phenomenon that qualifies the era that we are in as the Information Era, is the increase in transportation and circulation of information via ‘Computers’ and ‘Internet’ technologies in a speed that was never seen in the history.

Internet

Internet and Internet technologies are significantly developing these days. A lot of countries are following these developments very closely aiming not to stay behind of these technologies. Also, by these technological developments new social structures occur. [2]

The United States (US) first met with the Internet technology in the beginning of 1970’s. In 1970, a project named ARPA NET was started by the US with the aim of preventing any possible nuclear attacks targeting its territories. This project started to be used first by the universities, and then by some of the state organizations. Later on, the same technology was transferred to Europe, and became widespread under the name of Internet. In the 1980’s Internet was further developed to turn into the web technology.

The first step to bring Internet to Turkey was taken in 1991, with the approval of the TÜBİTAK-DPT (The Scientific and Technological Research Council of Turkey – State Planning Organization) project, which was prepared jointly by TÜBİTAK and METU (Middle East Technical University).

As a result of the joint studies of TÜBİTAK and METU, the first physical Internet connection in Turkey was established on 23 October 1992 between METU and the NIKHEF Research Center in Holland, by using X.25. Immediately after making METU-NSF line of 64 Kbyte ready to use on the date of 05 April 1993, Internet technology was made available for general use in Turkey.²

Internet has become a tool in re-shaping many concepts. By using Internet, the ordinary citizens can now follow many official procedures from their homes or offices by making use of “electronic government”³ opportunities, or they don’t need to go to banks to carry out many banking transactions, and they can even make their daily shopping. For many people,

- This article published by Institute of Strategic Thinking (SDE)

Internet serves as an open library. When looking at that novelty from the perspective of the new understanding of management, we can see that the concepts of transparency, accountability, democracy and participation have been re-shaped by the Internet. We can also see the positive contributions of Internet in all those concepts, when it is used properly.

Considering that the ratio of people using the Internet all over the world and in our country is increasing more and more every day, we can ask the question if it is possible to use the Internet within the framework of a citizen-focused understanding of management. Internet has now become a platform, within the context of which every individual can find something catching his/her personal interest. As the Internet is becoming more and more widespread, the world is getting smaller and smaller. Many concepts and applications we could never imagine 15-20 years before, are now easily accessible for us, thanks to the opportunities provided by the Internet.

The Second Generation of Internet: Social Media

Today, we live in a world where people discuss Web 2.0 terms. The term Web 2.0 was first used in 2004 by O'Reilly Media [4] and it is described as the second-generation Internet services - social networking web sites, communication tools, wikis that is the system created by collaboration and sharing of internet users.

In the earlier stages, Web 2.0 used to be presented through wikis and social network website products. Later, it started to come with some other Internet technologies. Nevertheless, we can say that Web 2.0 stemmed from the idea of ensuring the participation of visitors to the web site and the platform, and sharing their thoughts and opinions to cooperate in order to improve web services.

There are many different applications in Web 2.0 technologies. We can say that Facebook, YouTube, MySpace, LinkedIn, Twitter, Google applications, Wikipedia and blog sites are the most used ones. These terms were not in our lives until 2004 but now our lives are surrounded by them. In social media applications, content is determined entirely by individuals and individuals can establish interactions with each other through these applications. Therefore, an application should have the following properties in order to comply with the definition: To have independent users from publisher, have a user-based content, to provide communication between users, no restriction on space and time.

E-Participation

E-participation is one of the terms which have been opened to discussion by this new communication tool. We can name it e-participation since we consider that it is Internet-based. According to the United Nations' report published in 2010 on E-government, [5] providing an effective platform is one of the most important elements for application of information Technologies on e-government. E-participation has a potential for providing more transparency in government through permitting citizens to use new impact tools. These tools remove the obstacles for participation of citizens in legislation processes. [6]

Today, we see that US government started to benefit from these applications. White House continues to broadcast with a web site on YouTube under its own name. Also citizens are now able to be involved in the decision making processes with Open Government project. During

- This article published by Institute of Strategic Thinking (SDE)

the discussion of Health Reform in US last year, US president Barack Obama tried to learn the public opinion about proposed bills and also other daily issues.[\[7\]](#) Furthermore White House has started an application in which when 25000 people registers online to the petition that is uploaded to system and signs it, that petition is taken into account. [\[8\]](#) These applications are considered as e-participation applications. European Customs Information Portal [\[9\]](#) has aimed on gathering its citizens who work on communication technologies in public and private sectors in 35 European countries, and successfully reached this goal. Currently, there are 135.000 registered members sharing opinions with each other and benefit from their experiences over 3500 cases from 35 countries. We can say that participation is now as near to us as a tablet.

Our country is one of the top 4 countries with its 40 million active users in terms of the use of Facebook and MSN. Can it be possible to establish a new concept in serving to the people in our country, through web sites of similar nature to be run by our state organizations? Can it be possible that a new bill to be opened to discussion on the Internet by the relevant Ministry? I put the emphasis on these questions in an earlier article 2 years ago. Looking at today, one can see that Turkish Grand National Assembly has begun to use E-petition [\[10\]](#) and taken the views of society on issues related to the constitution of Parliament into consideration [\[11\]](#). In Today's Turkey, by observing lots of comments made in the columns or news published in the newspapers, we can easily say that the use of web 2.0 applications have become more efficient in our country.

Opening these applications, freely, into the discussion of society through blog pages may push us to become a model nation in terms of information technology at the international level. Moreover, we can lead the young population to use their potentials in these areas. Another example is that by using Web 2.0 tools citizens can reach politicians and share their views in such a comfortable way via the Internet. Furthermore, the politicians and deputies representing the nation can use these platforms to ensure participation. Our politicians already have begun using Twitter and Facebook platforms recently, tough.

Public institutions can also use these channels in providing regular weekly or monthly information to media organs. The local administrations can broadcast their council meetings over those platforms and can establish blog channels that would be used by the citizens to communicate messages to the local administrations. Thus, the citizens can find the opportunity to share their opinion on the decisions of local administrations both with each other and with the authorities on the Internet.

It is also possible to use web 2.0 technologies in our educational system. For instance, after the establishment of YouTube-edu[\[12\]](#) system by Youtube, the universities and educational institutions in the US started to give introductory information about themselves and their course schedules through the channels they are running within that system. Through those channels, it is also possible to state your comments about the courses and the educational materials in the video you watched. For example, as a user, you can share your views and questions about a course you watched with other users.

Through these applications, we can ensure the participation of our citizens to the various processes, and we can establish a more transparent and democratic system of management by permitting the citizens to use new impact channels through e-participation. Our administrators can also share the contributions provided by the citizens with the general public through the same channels.

- This article published by Institute of Strategic Thinking (SDE)

Prime Ministry web page can serve citizens as a participation model within the scale of state-wide transparency. Already carried out successfully, Prime Ministry Communication Center Works [13] can become our way in the upcoming periods in a more integrated way with social media. Again, by launching Prime Ministry web pages in different languages, which enable people from all around the world to reach the Prime Minister through internet and social media, these pages can be transformed into a model page of public institution.

By using its young and dynamic population, hopefully Turkey will be one of the leading countries in the areas of e-government and Information and Communication technologies.

Today, the use of Information and Communication technologies in an effective way is gaining importance in all areas of cultural, economic and social life. Communities have completed this process successfully will better locate their economic activities and ensure strategic competitive advantage.

Conclusion

In sum, I have no doubt that by using the web 2.0 applications and the Internet in a proper and useful way; we will be able to reach a more transparent and more democratic understanding of management, which will support participation. With a good planning and effective coordination, we can spread these platforms to the entire country, by starting first from the web pages of Ministries.

The more these concepts like e-participation are discussed in our country, the more it will show the contribution of information and communication technologies to the democratization process of our country. Perhaps as a result of these discussions, new models will be proposed, with the hope of revealing new public applications for the whole world...

Let's finish this article with Rumi's beautiful saying; "What belongs to yesterday has gone with yesterday, now we need to say something new."

[1] Aysu Erkul, R.Erdem Erkul, Web 2.0 in the Process of e-participation: The Case of Organizing for America and the Obama Administration, NCDG Working Paper No. 09-001 Submitted October 6, 2009.

[2] Başbakanlık (2003), "Bilgi Toplumuna Doğru: Türkiye Bilişim Şurası Taslak Raporu", Türkiye Bilişim Şurası, Ankara.s. 6

[3] <http://www.digitaldevlet.org/edevletnedir.html>

[4] <http://oreilly.com/web2/archive/what-is-web-20.html>

[5] http://www.unpan.org/egovkb/global_reports/08report.htm

[6] K.L.& van Dijk, J. (ed. 2000) Digital Democracy: Issues of Theory and Practices, London, Sage

[7] Bkz. <http://change.gov/page/content/discusservice> , www.whitehouse.gov , www.barackobama.com

[8] <https://www.whitehouse.gov/petitions>

[9] www.epractice.eu

[10] <http://edilekce.tbmm.gov.tr/Login.aspx>

[11] <http://yenianayasa.tbmm.gov.tr/gorusgonder.aspx>

- This article published by Institute of Strategic Thinking (SDE)

[12] <http://www.youtube.com/education?b=1>

[13] <http://bimerapplication.basbakanlik.gov.tr/Forms/pgMain.aspx>