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*mypolitical*space – Making Politics Visible through Web 2.0

Abstract

Web 2.0 is one of the later innovations in Internet-related developments. The term expresses less a new piece of technology but more new ways of using the Net; weblogs and social networks like myspace are among the most prominent examples of Web 2.0. Its catchphrase may be: you control your own data.

Web 2.0 gimmicks bear new possibilities for young people, which are the heaviest users of the Internet, not only to get political information, but also to show and share their views and opinions. It also gives politicians a way of presenting themselves without any interference. In both ways it can contribute to a process of making politics visible.

Besides assessing some data about political Internet usage the article tries to show some opportunities as well as problems related to making politics visible in Web 2.0.

Contents

Keywords

Web 2.0, Internet and democracy, politics online

1. Introduction

The topic of Internet and democracy is like an evergreen. Although the Web is only about ten years of age (counting from the time when it started to spread quickly) it was always confronted with questions about its possible impact on democracy and politics in particular. Overall however, the time of great hopes and deep fears concerning democracy's future in the online world seems to be over, and has been replaced by a rather pragmatic approach (Shane 2004; Leggewie, Bieber 2001, 37). Nowadays not the Internet as a whole is the topic of discussions but the turns it takes in its ongoing diffusion.

The development of the Net can be hardly compared to any other communication technology in terms of speed (Emmer 2005, 34; Rogers 2003, 346), although one has to keep in mind it is not a political medium (Donges, Jarren 1999, 86; Leggewie 1998, 19). Some of its attributes – like its interactive character and the resemblance to a forum for political debates – led to numerous debates about options for any deployment in the political system (Donges, Jarren 2002, 130). Remarkably enough, the Internet is more than an agent of communication. It contains vast amounts of information (Filzmaier 2004, 142) which are in great parts available for free. Having informed citizens is important in a democracy, even if it is "(..) a high school civics verity, and a cliché" (Froomkin 2004, 3). Of course it is also obvious that more information does not necessarily lead to more participation and more

political consciousness (Siedschlag, Rogg, Welzel 2002, 16). However, the Web can function as a tool for distributing information to a broad audience in a cheap way, without being of course the final solution to this task (Arterton 2001, 18). Not least to mention is the possibility of political participation.

Communication, information and participation: Which of these three ways of using the Internet is dominant is hard to say. Instead of looking at them broken apart it is this mixture of political relevant functions which define its unique character.

Web 2.0 is one of the later innovations related to Internet-technology but might be one of the most commonly used phrases in discussions and articles about new developments. Although the term is widely used its meaning is not that clear and the associations range from a broad perspective to narrowed, application-related understandings. Web 2.0 therefore is a very disputed expression (Alby 2007, 17). Prominent examples are weblogs, wikis, video sites like youtube, podcasts, social networks and so on.

Trying to define it one comes across Tim O'Reilly and his outline of Web 2.0 as a new generation of Internet applications – its main feature being the possibility for users to generate and publish their own content very easily. The term therefore does not only stand for a new piece of technology but also for a new way to use the Internet as a whole. Its catchphrase may be: you control your own data (http://www.oreillynet.com/pub/a/oreilly/tim/news/2005/09/30/what-is-web-20.html, 28.7.2008).

But what is the striking innovation about those technologies that they deserve a whole new version number? Since the early days of the World Wide Web one could build websites, upload data and pictures and create discussion boards. Besides the massive simplification of the process the new feature is that the production and publishing of content shifted into the limelight. The distribution from some central sites gets more and more replaced by a decentralised network of user-generated sites providing, among other things, user-generated content. The people take over the part of generating articles, sound and video clips, pictures etc., in other words they participate as sender and receiver online; that can be a significant change in terms of mass communication.

Models of mass communication are based, to put it simple, on the distinction between sender and receiver (see for instance Maletzke 1963). Both have different starting positions and act according to a specific set of rules. Mass communication in the offline world is characterised by a one-to-many relationship (see Emmer 2005, 26f): One sender (for example a news broadcast) produces a message for many receivers (the audience watching).

The Internet changes this scheme at least theoretically. Instead of a communication from one sender to many receivers, many senders and many receivers can communicate with each other; additionally, each receiver can become a sender (for instance by starting his own weblog). Even though this flexibility of communicative roles may be limited (some users may be more likely to be a sender and some more likely to remain receivers; Burkart/Hömberg 2007, 265), this would be a fundamental change in mass communication.

Table 1: Web 1.0 and Web 2.0 compared

Web 1.0		Web 2.0
DoubleClick	-->	Google AdSense
Ofoto	-->	Flickr
Akamai	-->	BitTorrent
mp3.com	-->	Napster
Britannica Online	-->	Wikipedia
personal websites	-->	Blogging
evite	-->	upcoming.org and EVDB
domain name speculation	-->	search engine optimization
page views	-->	cost per click
screen scraping	-->	web services
publishing	-->	Participation
content management systems	-->	Wikis
directories (taxonomy)	-->	tagging ("folksonomy")
stickiness	-->	Syndication

Source: http://www.oreillynet.com/pub/a/oreilly/tim/news/2005/09/30/what-is-web-20.html, 20.2.2008.

Web 2.0 is not limited to any issue (Diemand 2007, 62). Everything can be (and maybe is already) a topic of any weblog or any wiki. The same goes for politics, and of course that is not a one way street: Political content is not only the topic of such sites, but political players act as Web 2.0 users to make themselves seen.

Before going into more detail it is necessary to take a closer look at the title "making politics visible". As simple as the phrase may sound as difficult is dealing with it. Its literal meaning – to transform politics into something visible – does not lead anywhere when asking about the influence of Web 2.0, the concept is too abstract. Politics have always been visible in one way or another: Every politician talking about an issue makes politics visible, every publication of a new law is in fact a piece of visible politics; so is every website concerned with this topic. According to the definition of current (mainly western) societies as media democracies (see for instance Schatz, Rössler, Nieland 2002) the mass media are key players in this act of visualising politics. Consequently one can distinguish open politics (which may also be called symbolic politics at a certain point; see Plasser 1985) from hidden politics taking place behind closed doors with no access for the public.

It makes sense to split "making politics visible" up. That leaves three distinctive questions:
- making: Who makes politics visible?
- politics: What content is made visible?
- visible: How is the content visible, how can it be accessed?

These three questions make up a more well defined basis for looking at Web 2.0 and its impact on making politics visible. After a short notice on the Internet and some numbers concerning its political usage the article tries to identify opportunities and obstacles on Web 2.0. It focuses on weblogs and partly podcasts/wikis as prominent features of Web 2.0 although there are many more worth writing about.

2. Using the Internet

Doubtless the Internet has grown to be a mass medium according to the number of users and the spread of the technology. Worldwide there are more than 1.4 billion people online (http://www.internetworldstats.com, 28.7.2008), the most of them living in Europe, North America and Australia. In Austria for example 67 percent or 4.7 million people were using the Web in 2008, 59 percent were online at least several times a week (Austrian Internet Monitor, http://mediaresearch.orf.at, 28.7.2008). The same goes for Germany with about 62 percent

onliners; the United States top these numbers with about 70 percent of their population being Internet users (the numbers cannot be compared to each other exactly as the surveys are different; they can, however, indicate the main trend; see ARD/ZDF Online-Studie 2007; Nielsen//Netratings, 17.8.2007). The increase in broadband-services (see E-Communications Household Survey 2006, 47) is very likely to have an impact on Internet usage. Having an almost unlimited access to the Internet without having to pay by the minute makes the Web more of a common mass medium: "(..) permanent broadband connections make the Internet much more like an everyday utility, like electricity" (Chadwick 2006, 8).

The users are not spread equally among all social and demographic groups. Especially age is one factor to distinguish users from non-users, and it has proven to be quite stable over the years. To make a long story short, the younger a person is, the more likely is he to be online and to use Web 2.0 technologies. For instance 55 percent of the teens in the United States use social networks (PEW 2007, 1). Education is another important factor, especially when it comes down to political usage (see also Davis 2005, 102ff).

The theoretical background to those findings is the concept of Digital Divide (Norris 2001; the concept however is not undisputed; see for instance Compaine 2001). It stands for the creation or the deepening of social and political inequalities on different levels. First of all it identifies a Global Divide, indicated by the different diffusion of technology and the Internet usage between western industrialised countries and developing countries. Second there may also be a Social Divide; focussing on one society, Internet access as well as the knowledge to use it are not spread equally among all citizens. Third, the concept addresses a Democratic Divide which links the possibility to go online with democratic opportunities and powers.

Especially the Democratic Divide only comes into play if the Internet is really used for political purposes. While the numbers mentioned above include all the possible ways to use the Web, narrowing them down to political usage only makes quite clear that the Web is still not an equal information source like other mass media.

3. The Internet and political information

"The closest analogy to politics on the Web could be C-Span on American TV, available to two-thirds of U.S. households, delivering worthy public affairs seminars, live and unedited campaign speeches and informed commentary primarily to a small band of hard-core inside-the-beltway political aficionados" (Norris 2001, 98f). This statement may seem a little outdated, but considering expert opinions about the Internet's role as a political medium it still got a point. Although some argue that it has become a real competition to other news media (Grunwald et al. 2006, 171), empirical data shows otherwise (Marr 2005, 231; Bertelsmann Stiftung 2004, 127). Television and newspapers remain the main source of political information (Plasser, Ulram 2004, 73; Bertelsmann Stiftung 2004, 125).

Despite the hopes that the Internet itself will encourage political activism and turn people into political citizens almost over night, the technology did not bring such groundbreaking change. There are no indicators that people connected to the Web suddenly develop a need for political information. It only expands the spectrum of possibilities. People interested in politics offline tend to use the Internet for political information too (Marr 2005, 103).

To give some examples, in Austria 75 percent of the population call television their main source for political information, only four percent nominated the Internet in 2003 (Plasser, Ulram 2004, 73). In the federal election campaign in 2006 71 percent said that television was the medium they would use to inform themselves, 55 percent said the same about newspapers. One in ten named the Internet (Filzmaier, Hajek 2007, 82f).

These findings are even graver considering credibility. 2003 about half of the population in Austria called TV a credible source for political content, the Internet received this status from two percent. And while the credibility of the audiovisual media declines during election campaigns (about 30 percent regarded them as credible in the 2006 election campaign), the Internet figures remain very low (Plasser, Ulram 2004, 92; Filzmaier, Hajek 2007, 83).

In Germany only 14 of the population between 14 and 64 years of age say that they go online on a regular basis to inform themselves about current political affairs; five percent say so in Switzerland (ACTA 2006; Marr 2006, 71).

Now it is true that the amount of time spent online influences the significance of the Internet for political information as does age – heavier and younger users regard it to be more credible than others. Still, it is far off from the traditional media in means of political information.

A glimpse at the European and worldwide perspective shows a quite similar picture. TV News is the main source for politics for three quarters of the population of North America and Western Europe (Plasser 2003, 255), followed by newspapers and the radio. The Internet however is just not that important. 2001 about 87 percent of the British voting population said that information obtained through the Internet had no influence on their voting behaviour; almost 50 percent said that television did (Chadwick 2006, 161).

Nevertheless, the status of a pull-medium still separates the Internet from other mass media. Television programs reach out to their audience directly; online one has to deliberately look for information. This requires the individuals to be more active and enables them to choose for themselves. They can bypass regular gate keepers and avoid direct targeting processes as well as regulations on their informational behaviour (Filzmaier 2000, 232).

The Web is still a very cheap platform to read up on something or to publish, although it may take some resources to keep up a weblog about for instance current affairs. Additionally, many services online are for free (for example the German weekly magazines Der Spiegel and Focus have recently opened their archives; see http://wissen.spiegel.de, http://www.focus.de/magazin/archiv, 20.2.2008). Altogether these aspects make it more likely that the information level of users online is increased (Marr 2005, 108).

Another interesting point is that regular Internet users tend to have a more critical opinion about other mass media: "People who rely on the Internet as their main news source express relatively unfavourable opinions of mainstream news sources and are among the most critical of press performance" (PEW 2007, 2). One factor for this data could be that online citizens are more likely to have a higher education and are therefore more critical towards the news as a whole.

Finally an important distinction has to be made between offliners and onliners. While the latter see the Internet as a possibility to become active and involved in the first place, offliners use the Net as well as other media mainly to control and watch politicians (Marr 2005, 196). Taking this into account Web 2.0 applications seem to come in handy especially for the political interested who are online already.

Certain indicators may show a beginning change. In the short time the Internet has been around it has built up quite an audience and the numbers are increasing. Latest data from the United States for instance indicate that 24 percent learn about the recent presidential campaign online (42 percent in the age group of 18-29), compared to 13 percent in 2004 (PEW 2008, 2).

The downside of this data is that the websites visited belong to offline media and are no new or alternative sources (PEW 2008, 7; Marr 2006, 278). A "fairly predictable diet of mainstream media sites" (Chadwick 2006, 315) therefore determines the online information sphere.

The limitations of the Internet concerning its role as information medium do not stop with Web 2.0. In the mentioned PEW survey myspace and youtube were the most mentioned Web 2.0 sites concerning campaign news (but only reached three and two percent). This may be related to their nature as they are not information platforms in the first place. But turning to weblogs the desire for political information is not so high either. Among young people in the USA (twelve to 17) about 38 percent read weblogs; but 62 percent of them only read blogs by authors they know in person (Neuberger 2007, 113), which implies that not the content but its creator is the attraction.

4. Web 2.0 – new opportunities to make politics visible?

There are two basic approaches one can take when looking at Web 2.0 deployment in this context. On the one hand it offers opportunities for politicians and parties to reach out to their public in a top-down-manner. On the other hand platforms like weblogs encourage a bottom-up process as well as the development of a horizontal network pointing in the direction of a public sphere beyond the other mass media.

Staying with the first point the new applications are at first sight nothing more than another channel of communication for political professionals – and it almost seems they are a must-have. Many recent campaigns have been accompanied by such means only to see the blogs or websites laid to rest after the polling day (Alby 2007, 44f).

But as some examples show politicians are taking the Internet and Web 2.0 more and more serious. Former Minister of Interior and now French President Nicolas Sarkozy was one of the first major French politicians to give an exclusive podcast-interview to a blogger (who later joined Sarkozy's campaign-team).

http://www.loiclemeur.com/france/files/sarkozypodcast.m4v (20.2.2008)

Distribution of messages and information and not interactivity is obviously the main goal. Interestingly, popular Web 2.0 technologies do tend to favour this one-directional communication style. Thinking about weblogs there is of course some part of interactivity involved and even desirable. But a weblog of a politician may also have many readers without extensive discussions, merely for the content it presents. From this point of view the question if this still is a blog in the Web 2.0 sense becomes redundant. Visibility of politics in this sense clearly means distribution of political information.

Podcasts are another example: They are designed one-directionally to broadcast content. There is no button allowing a listener to respond to what he just heard. These applications tend to favour non-interactive communication despite the interactive nature of the Internet. Nevertheless, those are obvious ways to visualize one's point of view; podcasts in particular are a new way of distributing information as it changes the way from reading to listening (Löser, Peters 2007, 146).

Looking at the concrete possibilities it is obvious that there are many ways to present political content. The Internet does not only contain text and written information but also sound and video clips as well as pictures of all kind; Web 2.0 makes it even easier to combine and publish them.

For instance, searching for "politics" on youtube.com returns about 354 000 hits (28.7.2008). They range from famous speeches to current events to fun clips and so on. The interesting point about that mixture is that the Internet does not only support all these formats but the content can also be obtained through the Web allowing another way of interactivity. Taking advantage of free software available over the Net one can take on this content, mix it up, turn it around, make one's own statement about it and upload it again for others to read, watch or listen to. In this way political activism and criticism of current events has gained a new level.

http://youtube.com/watch?v=nupdcGwIG-g (28.7.2008)

An interesting and also ambivalent example in this context came from the USA in 2007. For the first time a round of debates of the candidates of each party consisted solely of questions from the audience asked through video clips posted on youtube (http://www.youtube.com/ytdebates, 28.7.2008). They were played to the candidates who then had the chance to respond to those questions, and their answers were posted again on youtube. The event was hosted by a journalist from CNN and broadcast by the network.

These youtube-debates show mainly three things which might be characteristic for the deployment of Web 2.0 in political context. First, it works. The candidates of both the Democrats and the Republicans participated in the event. The style of the questions was at least partly unorthodox and different than the style of journalists might have been. The

answers of the participants received quite a lot of hits (going up as high as 300 000 and above).

Second, although there were no regulations or restrictions concerning the questions in the first place, the aired ones where picked by journalists. Despite the possibility of equal publishing opportunities for everyone online, a selection is necessary. Time and attention are also limited in the Internet. The important question is on which basis this selection is made and who makes it. While the first point may be disputed from case to case, the second one implies numerous problems. The fact that a major network took part in this event points out that dominant players offline are dominant players online (furthermore it is likely that the youtube-debates were only possible because of the involvement of CNN). But even if the selection is not made by journalists, a moderator will be needed; and it is probable he won't be picked by democratic decision, his position might rely on other resources.

Third, making politics visible over Web 2.0 depends on attention. One way to gain it is of course the cooperation with other mass media. Another may be innovativeness. I would make the case that many people watched the youtube-debates because they were a new and innovative way of dealing with a traditional political event. The attention produced by it may therefore not focus solely on the political content but also on the new technological way of transporting them.

Once more, this is not a bad thing in the first place. If one wants to strengthen the visibility of politics he will be pleased with almost any possibility to do so. In other words, why people watched is not the primary concern as long as they watch. However, this is a little too simple. Arguing from the point of civic education, a real improvement would mean that the audience is not only attracted to politics online because of fancy programs and gimmicks but also because they feel they can benefit from this channel and its content; and this is a much more demanding perspective because it involves at some point the possibility of participation.

To complete the description of the debates, there was critique too. Some argue they were just some new way for the candidates to repeat their routine, and that they even were an abuse of Web 2.0 and its idea of participation (for a little résumé see Pany, Mühlbauer 2007).

Turning to a more bottom-up-level of Web 2.0 applications, as mentioned above things like blogs have extremely simplified the publishing on the Web (Alby 2007, 26; similar statements can be made for wikis or sites like youtube).

This leads to the almost logical consequence that the number of blogs and similar sites has risen over the past few years and is still rising. Technorati links to an estimated 112 million blogs worldwide (http://technorati.com/about/, 28.7.2008). They are not limited to politics but cover every topic one can think of. A good example is the online plattform videojug which literally offers to explain life on video (http://www.videojug.com, 20.2.2008). Among other things one can watch for instance a video clip about how to register to vote in the United States.

http://www.videojug.com/interview/registering-to-vote-2 (28.7.2008)

Important are also the links and connections between the single Web 2.0 sites. Bloggers do not act completely on their own. They pick up stories from the news or from other blogs linking to them in their own space and in doing so they create a network of interlinkage that provides a very intense overview about current affairs in different fields. Those viral effects (see also Alby 2007, 31) can lead to the heavy spread of certain news solely through the Web. This has the potential to amass that much attention for certain topics that it effects them in the real world. Issues ignored by the mass media in the first place are suddenly hard to avoid for them.

Weblogs play also an important role as watchers of the mass media as they critically reflect on the news. One prominent case was the debate about the past of US-President George W. Bush in the National Guard. Former CBS anchorman Dan Rather criticised him based on documents which later turned out to be alleged forgeries. This story was brought up by the weblog little green footballs (http://littlegreenfootballs.com/weblog/?entry=12526, 20.2.2008). The Bildblog (http://www.bildblog.de/, 28.7.2008) is another weblog which became quite famous for taking a closer look at the Bild-Zeitung, the largest tabloid in Germany, and its rather disputed style of reporting (see also Leggewie 2007, 46).

A fundamental positive point about Web 2.0 is money. It is still cheap to publish on the Internet, especially compared to the costs of a TV ad. Organisations and NGOs with little resources may benefit from those conditions and they may find support for their ideas online. This leads back to the easy-to-use-platform Web 2.0 provides. People with no or scarce resources can get their message across the Internet, and that goes especially for politicians too. Not only are they online independent from time and space in mass media products, but they have also not to pass the journalistic gate keepers.

An example for such a move could be seen in Austria recently: In February 2008 an alleged scandal about corruption in the ministry of interior dominated the public discussion. One protagonist, a former high-ranking police officer, was questioned in the corresponding subcommittee of the parliament, which normally meets under the exclusion of the public. One politician from the Green Party used his (already quite popular) weblog and a mobile Internet connection to almost simultaneously blog about the meeting (http://www.peterpilz.at, 5.2.2008 and http://www.platterwatch.at/blog/5-2-2008/PLATTER-BLOG.html, 5.2.2008). He received quite an echo in the traditional media as well as criticism by other parties.

It was also the Greens who reacted to the resolution of a new law by starting the website http://www.platterwatch.at. The so called Sicherheitspolizeigesetz simplified the way the police can monitor Internet and cell phone activity. Protesting against the law and the way it was imposed, platterwatch.at tried to document every move of the responsible Minister of Interior by posting video clips about his daily work.

To sum up the positive aspects of Web 2.0 it is obvious that the possibilities seem almost unlimited. No politicians, citizens, groups or individuals are excluded from using the technology to make their political points visible. Considering the user data the technology seems especially promising if one wants to reach out to young people.

Still it is questionable how this alternative channel of political information can be regarded as integrated into everyday life. It seems one still needs the mass media to bridge the gap between a small online community and the public as a whole. TV and newspapers might pick up certain stories but this happens more due to technological innovativeness than due to content.

5. Critical points about Web 2.0

Having looked at the opportunities of Web 2.0 there are of course numerous critical aspects to be pointed out, some of them quite similar to already-known criticism about Internet and democracy.

The most obvious one is the simple and striking matter of volume. Since Web 2.0 simplifies the way to publish it is quite a sure shot that new applications do not decrease the number of Web content. On the contrary, looking at the mentioned number of weblogs nowadays one may add a new version number to the term information overload as well. Already at the beginning of the 90s Postman pointed that "(..) [w]e have directed all of our energies and intelligence to inventing machinery that does nothing but increase the supply of information. (..) We don't know how to filter it out; we don't know how to reduce it; we don't know to use it" (Postman 1990). In other words, we are drowning in information but thirsty for the right information and some sort of orientation (Grammes 1999, 52).

This distinction is rather important as calling every data online "information" can be misleading. Doubtless Web 2.0 has boosted the amount of data flowing through the Internet considerably. To claim that the amount of information online has been boosted accordingly is not possible. Besides the difficulty of measuring it, such a statement depends on the definition of information; and it is hard to draw a line and differentiate information from general data for the Internet as a whole. However, it is likely that Web 2.0 has not only increased the amount of data on the Web, but also the amount of information.

Now a rise of information, in terms of this article visible politics, must not be confused with a rise of democratic attitude (Lee 2006, 181). The mere fact that more information is available

does not mean it is used. On the contrary, information online can hamper itself and the growing number of blogs might lead to cannibalising effects (Büffel 2007, 265).

Since the possibility to publish shifted from professionals to amateurs (not using the term in a negative way; see also http://www.roughtype.com/archives/2005/10/the_amorality_o.php, 20.2.2008) everybody can be the creator of content. This freedom of virtual speech implies that there are no borders or boundaries as well as there are no quality criteria or any control. One can publish online whatever one wants, not depending if it is true or not. To distinguish between facts and rumours demands a certain competence by the users, especially concerning political issues. While on television or in newspapers journalists provide a level of reliability; anything comparable to this is missing online. Their gate keeping role may be challenged by advocates of the freedom of the Internet. It is true that they are a bottleneck which some issues and topics never can pass (due to media logic, news worthiness etc.). Nevertheless: "What the print media, radio and television offer is credibility, or, if we prefer, the truth. Someone has to verify and guarantee that a certain piece of information is correct. In most cases, the user does not have the literacy necessary for doing that alone in the World Wide Web and requires someone to validate the information for him" (Cardoso 2006, 213).

Especially taking into account the viral effects over social networks (see above) it is no doubt possible to spread rumours over the Web in no time making it very hard to counter such a development. In the end Web 2.0 leaves the user with the choice to decide whether something he picked up can be trusted or not. While mass media offer an already selected bunch of information users online have to choose for themselves (Neuberger 2007, 112).

To call for transparency is no solution either. The infamous editing of Wikipedia articles, done by companies, political parties and others (http://www.wired.com/politics/onlinerights/news/2007/08/wiki_tracker, 28.7.2008), does not remain unnoticed and was eventually even picked up by the media. But does this prove that the system has a working failsafe? I would argue it does not. No doubt that everyone can take a look at the version history of a Wikipedia article and find there a detailed list of each and every change made to it. However, it takes much more competence to find out if the content was changed in the wrong way, or who made the change. The Wikiscanner (http://wikiscanner.virgil.gr/, 28.7.2008) offers some insight into anonymous edits, but its capacities are limited. Transparency alone gives any user information he cannot process often; it is costly to deal with it and it takes experts to draw conclusions from this information.

Taking the critique to a more abstract level, the Internet as a political platform in general and especially Web 2.0 innovations are idealised. They may be a chance for new players to get their opinion to the public, they can serve as a starting point for a counter public and in technical terms they offer equal starting opportunities. But online there is no equal community listening to each other. Some blogs are more popular than others, some websites get more visitors than others, and altogether some sites are more and better linked to each other. Online there are dominant players as there are offline. Furthermore mass media have already begun to embrace the new platforms, as for instance myspace was bought by media tycoon Rupert Murdoch (Diemand 2007, 59): "The newspapers, television and radio understood that they had to join the Internet. They did so for different reasons: fear of missing out on the revolution in progress, because the Internet is a work tool for the journalist; because they saw new business opportunities; as a survival strategy by means of transformation of the Internet itself; or as a means of repositioning themselves in relation to the other media" (Cardoso 2006, 213). In this context content is no longer online for its own sake but has to serve a (monetary) purpose.

The fact that blogs strongly link between each other shows again the two sides of the medal. Due to the massive amount of information in the Web every help one can get to identify and find interesting content is on the one hand very welcome; without interlinkages this would be much more difficult. Assessing the land map of blogs (one concerning the current US-presidential elections can be found here: http://presidentialwatch08.com/index.php/map/, 28.7.2008) shows on the other hand that there are of course core regions in the blogosphere, or in other words: not all blogs are included in the network, there are few who make up the centre and therefore are more important and tend to influence the content (Alby 2007, 29ff).

There are gate keepers online as well, and their intentions are at least as intransparent as are the ones of mass media.

One must not forget that "what" is at least as important as "how". In other words, what content is it that is made visible through the Web. Besides doubts about correctness and substance it can also be a platform for anti-democratic movements (see Chroust 2005). So where the technology is a chance to reinforce political and democratic discussion it also opens the gates for their opponents.

Finally it takes more than the pure will to go online and start to post and publish about politics. One needs knowledge and information and must of course be able to put everything together in an appealing style.

And there is of course the need for content. Weblogs need interesting, new, compelling or entertaining content. Without it they miss their function and won't be able to draw the attention of anyone. Politicians blogging about their daily routine might be worth a look for one or two times but posting one's schedule online is hardly an informative content – and even worse, it is no improvement in means of explaining and arguing political decisions.

Making politics visible takes more than the possibility to do so. That does mean, however, that those people with knowledge, informational resources, good contacts etc. in the offline world are more likely to get attention online. In this sense Web 2.0 reproduces the influence and importance of players.

6. Conclusion

Maybe the points listed cannot be accomplished by projects like a wiki and maybe accuracy cannot be the main goal of Web 2.0 applications. Maybe it is more about having the opportunity to make one's point of view visible and put it into a relation to others doing the same. But if that is the case one has to keep in mind what those blogs, wikis, podcasts and other stuff are – personally shaped, opinion-driven and fallible information.

Looking at the questions at the beginning of the article, the specifics of Web 2.0 in making politics visible can be summarised as follows:

– making: Who makes politics visible?

As pointed out on several occasions, Web 2.0 gives everyone with access to the Internet the theoretical possibility of becoming a sender. It can be a platform for information besides the traditional mass media. In reality the numbers show that there are relatively few sources or creators of visible politics who reach a broader audience and therefore control the content online. Mass media corporations are important players on the Internet as well, especially when it comes to political information. So while the new technologies enlarge the pool of individuals making politics visible they do not automatically enlarge the audience reading, listening or watching to those alternative sources.

– politics: What content is made visible?

It seems that there are no limits on the variety of the content in Web 2.0 days: The examples reach from news-sources to satirical pages, from encyclopaedic websites to weblogs by politicians. The content on the Internet can also exceed the content offline, but the other way around – topics discussed offline becoming topics followed online as well – seems more likely. After all virtual and real reality are not two separate spheres but interconnected and influencing each other. The amount of information on the Internet can hardly be measured, its boundaries are a person's ability to find, select and process it. While the possibility to publish one's own thoughts and online should not be underestimated, its impact must be put in the right perspective. Web 2.0 might not necessarily make more or different political content visible but it might provide an opportunity to display it and its interpretations in many individual ways.

– visible: How is the content visible, how can it be accessed?

The technical possibilities have reached a new level with Web 2.0. Multimedia content like video or sound clips and flash animations are getting more and more space on the Internet,

as it gets easier and easier to integrate them into websites. The access is limited only by the technology as well. Given an Internet connection (which should be broadband to take advantage of all the multimedia pieces) almost anything on Web 2.0 can be accessed through modern web browsers and plug-ins also available online. However, Web 2.0 is therefore no remedy for the Digital Divide. It enhances the possibilities of those online already, but there is no sign that it widens the accessibility for those offline.

In the end it all comes down to individual competence or a necessary "infomedia literacy" (Filzmaier, Plaikner, Duffek 2007, 299). Using Web 2.0 as a way to make politics visible, the question is not how it can be done. There are numerous (good and bad) examples out there already. The question is how one can enable users to take advantage of it, showing and teaching them how to assess, interpret and judge things they come across and last but not least how to find the information they want.

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