

# The rise of the digital citizen-stakeholder: re-balancing multistakeholder governance

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*Thematic area 5:*

*“Many argue that multistakeholder structures are the only way to ensure that the internet – both technically and socially -- continues to evolve successfully. Do you agree with this assertion and how do you think the future will look like in the context of multistakeholder internet governance?”*

## **Abstract**

The principle feature in the evolution of the internet has been its ever growing reach to include old and young, rich and poor. The internet’s ever encroaching presence has transported it from our desktop to our pocket and into our glasses. This is illustrated in the Internet Society Questionnaire on Multistakeholder Governance, which found the main factors affecting change in the Internet governance landscape were more users online from more countries and the influence of the internet over daily life. The omnipresence of the internet is self-perpetuating; its usefulness grows with

every new user and every new piece of data uploaded. The advent of social media and the creation of a virtual presence for each of us, even when we are not physically present or ‘logged on’, means we are fast approaching the point where we are all connected, to everyone else, all the time. We have moved far beyond the point where governments can claim to represent our views which evolve constantly rather than being measured in electoral cycles.

The shift, which has seen citizens as creators of content rather than consumers of it, has undermined the centralist view of democracy and created an environment of wiki democracy or crowd sourced democracy. This is at the heart of what is generally known as Web 2.0, and widely considered to be a positive, democratising force. However, we argue, there are worrying elements here too. Government does not always deliver on the promise of the networked society as it involves citizens and others in the process of government. Also a number of key internet companies have emerged as powerful intermediaries harnessing the efforts of the many, and re-using and re-selling the products and data of content providers in the Web 2.0 environment. A discourse about openness and transparency has been offered as a democratising rationale but much of this masks an uneven relationship where the value of online activity flows not to the creators of content but to those who own the channels of communication and the metadata that they produce.

In this context the state is just one stakeholder in the mix of influencers and opinion formers impacting on our behaviours, and indeed our ideas of what is public. The question of what it means to create or own something, and how all these new relationships to be ordered and governed are subject to fundamental change. While government can often appear slow, unwieldy and even irrelevant in much of this context, there remains a need for some sort of political control to deal with the challenges that technology creates but cannot by itself control. In order for the internet to continue to evolve successfully both technically and socially it is critical that the multistakeholder nature of internet governance be understood and acknowledged, and perhaps to an extent, re-balanced. Stakeholders can no longer be classified in the broad headings of government, private sector and civil society, and their roles seen as some sort of benign and open co-production. Each user of the internet has a stake in its efficacy and each by their presence and participation is contributing to the experience, positive or negative of other users as well as to the commercial success or otherwise of various online service providers. However stakeholders have neither an equal role nor an equal share. The unequal relationship between the providers of content and those who simply package up and transmit that content - while harvesting the valuable data thus produced - needs to be addressed. Arguably this suggests a role for government that involves it moving beyond simply celebrating and facilitating the ongoing technological revolution.

This paper reviews the shifting landscape of stakeholders and their contribution to the efficacy of the internet. It will look to critically evaluate the primacy of the individual as the key stakeholder and their supposed developing empowerment within the ever growing sea of data. It also looks at the role of individuals in wider governance roles. Governments in a number of jurisdictions have sought to engage, consult or empower citizens through technology but in general these attempts have had little appeal. Citizens have been too busy engaging, consulting and empowering each other to pay much attention to what their governments are up to. George Orwell's view of the future has not come to pass; in fact the internet has insured the opposite scenario has come to pass. There is no big brother but we are all looking over each other's shoulder all the time, while at the same time a number of big corporations are capturing and selling all this collective endeavour back to us.

## **The changing nature of the internet**

The growth and omnipresence of the internet has been driven in large measure by the mobile phone and by social media. Access to the internet, once limited to expensive computers, has opened up as citizens all over the world are switching to less expensive mobile phones. The mobile phone can be used by almost anyone, even the semi-literate, it is less expensive than a computer, and it is simpler to use. It does not require a permanent electricity supply and

costs can be controlled by the use of prepaid cards. According to the International Telecommunication Union (2013) there are 6.8 billion mobile cellular subscriptions in the world out of a total population of 7.1 billion and 40% of the world's population are online. According to Alexa (2014) two of the top ten websites in the world, in terms of traffic, are Chinese and in the top twenty there are nine non-English language sites. These include sites serving users in China, India and Russia. The so-called 'Internet of Things', the phenomenon by which a whole range of intelligent devices, from household appliances to items of street furniture, delivers increased intelligence from devices to clouds, and will only increase this ubiquity and interconnectedness.

Technology once requiring advanced and specialised knowledge to understand and operate is becoming better and simpler to use. Advances in our understanding of human computer interaction and usability engineering, combined with the natural progression of technology from novel to normal is opening up the internet to users of all ages and skill levels. In the 1970s one used to have to be a programmer to use a computer, today communication tools are becoming second nature to the most novice of user, young or old. Furthermore, the net tools available online, and their easily available character, allow an accumulation of effort through social networks that exponentially increases the effectiveness of individual engagement. Whether this is termed 'social production' (Shirky 2008), 'peer production', (Benkler and Nissenbaum 2006), 'crowd-sourcing' (Howe 2008), or 'wikinomics' (Tapscott and Williams 2008),

the effect is to accentuate hugely the reach and impact of the outworkings from this networked technology. It also seems to promise a democratic dividend as people cooperate with one another in what is often presented as a free and open environment.

The growth of social networks has been rapid and shows no signs of slowing. In January 2014 it was announced that Facebook had more than 1.23 billion monthly active users, of which 945 million were mobile users, and 757 million were daily users (Protalinski 2014). Unlike computer games which were initially targeted at young men, social networking has had an equal effect on young women. Social networking is of course gender neutral but because it appeals to young women in a way that gaming seldom did, there is massive growth in the use of ICT in that segment. One important weakness in the report on the Internet Society Questionnaire on Multistakeholder Governance is the fact that about 80% of the respondents to the questionnaire were male (Internet Society 2013, p.4). This does warrant further exploration as one of the big changes in recent years is that the percentage of female users has grown considerably. Whilst it is still true that more men than women use the internet this gap is narrowing: globally, 37% of all women are online, compared with 41% of all men. The gap is larger in the developing world which is home to about 826 million female internet users and 980 million male internet users but in the developed world the gap is almost closed (International Telecommunication Union 2013). It appears that in terms of gender, the respondents to the Internet

Society Questionnaire are not representative of internet users.

So in 2014 the internet is more international, more balanced in terms of age, gender and language than it has ever been (Power 2013). The availability of the mobile phone to those of low socio-economic status has had the greatest impact in structurally widening the possibilities of communication among the historically more disadvantaged segments of the population. The advances in usability and design have improved access to both older and younger users and the social dimension to the types of activities engaged in on social networks has changed the gender balance of young technology users.

Whilst these economic, age and gender divides are narrowing new ones may be opening up in the area of disability. However a number of companies are making efforts to make their products and services accessible. Part of the difficulty is seeing disability from a medical or clinical perspective rather than a social one. In the former case disability is seen as a defect in the user, for example the inability to walk, whereas in the latter case it is seen as a defect in the infrastructure, the lack of a ramp. The advent of the internet and the digitisation of data hold out great potential for disabled users in that the digitisation of data allows its reproduction in many forms. Unlike the written word on a page, digital content can have its font size increased, translated into another language, turned into audio or transferred to a Braille tablet. However the principal ways of accessing data are still keyboards and touch screens

which present challenges to many disabled users.

As the much debated digital divide diminishes, the acceptability of using technology for democratic engagement becomes more practical and more acceptable. The more people online, the larger the size, scale, and efficiency of the 'communication market' (Couldry 2007, p.390). The implications of these changes for governance are that now it is possible to say (or rather we are approaching that point); access is becoming sufficiently universal that technological solutions can replace rather than augment off-line processes.

The view expressed in the report on the Internet Society Questionnaire on Multistakeholder Governance (Internet Society 2013, p.1) that a new form of governance 'provides opportunities for new forms of cooperation' amongst a 'diverse set of stakeholders' has some resonance with this diminishing of the digital divide. Equally the finding that the principle factor affecting change in the internet governance landscape is 'more users online from more countries' (Internet Society 2013, p.5) supports the above assertions.

## **The changing nature of the User**

Just as the internet is changing so too are the users. Again social media or more broadly the applications which have come to be known collectively as Web 2.0 have changed the role of users from consumers of content to creators of content. Elements of

interactivity and an end user focus are now central. The internet has moved from a useful reference tool and a place we went to visit, to a communication device that we carry around in our pocket. In fact more than a communication device, it is a camera, a calendar, a diary, and has even replaced the wristwatch as the primary means of telling the time (McFarlane 2010). As social networking is portable, omnipresent and constant our relationship with technology is changing.

Perhaps the most obvious example of users as creators of content is the rise of citizen journalism. Allan and Thorsen (2009, p.7) define citizen journalism as 'the spontaneous actions of ordinary people, caught up in extraordinary events, who felt compelled to adopt the role of a news reporter'. Peat (2010, cited in Greer and McLaughlin 2010, p.1045) describes how with the aid of a smartphone; 'the average Joe is now a walking eye on the world', and for Jay Rosen (2006, para.1) citizen journalists are 'the people formerly known as the audience'. The capacity of technologically empowered citizen journalists to produce information that challenges the 'official' version of events offers a counterbalance to news organisations and institutions who might seek to control the news.

Flexible, cheap, and inclusive media offers opportunities to do all sorts of things we once did not or could not do. Governance, considered in its broadest sense, is enabled by advances in social networking technologies that provide us with the tools to build social capital and encourage group working. This is in turn providing the

opportunity to build civic engagement and introduce the skills of governance at a local level. These technologies are no longer the sole preserve of younger or better resourced people but are rather becoming universally available. MacSithigh (2008) argues that it is this increased availability of user-generated content which is influencing the development of cyberlaw. As people and businesses develop more content, services and applications, the ability of the State to keep up with appropriate legislation, or even guidelines, is limited. This decentralisation of law making and the development of processes which do not seek to impose a framework of law, but which allows one to emerge, is one way in which governance may evolve in what some have termed a Gov 2.0 model (Morison 2010).

However all too often Gov 2.0 remains a missed opportunity. Older models of government tend to re-emerge both in terms of service delivery and democratic engagement. While there is huge potential for an individualised, on-demand service delivery programme via the new technology all too often traditional, silo-based processes dominate. In terms of democratic engagement with policy making, questions remain as to whether what might be termed the 'democratic technology' has developed to keep pace with the power and reach of the information technology. Much of what passes for engagement is at a very low level. It is not enough for government to simply put consultations on line in the hope that citizens will read and respond to them. This does not amount to participation but is rather, in the terms provided by Arnstein's classic 'ladder of participation', simply

‘manipulation’ or, at best, ‘informing’.  
(Arnstein 1969) Real, democratic engagement requires more than this. Although present online practices where real citizens freely engage with each other offers huge potential for government to be responsive and engaged, all too often government expects the citizen to come to it via official portals and traditional processes now put online.

## **The new challenges for the state in re-balancing the stakeholder relationship**

We are arguing that the nature of the internet has changed. The online citizen is on the march. Web 2.0 has provided greater reach, increased interconnectedness, and the potential for doing new things in new ways. However there are challenges. In particular, these revolve around the importance and role that is afforded to the online citizen himself or herself. Although the online citizen is key to the engagement that creates the Web 2.0 world, and central to the production of the data that powers it, the relationship with the other stakeholders is not an even one. It is our belief that Government – in its most general sense – must take the lead in the rebalancing process among stakeholders that needs to take place.

The role of government is not limited to attempting to use the new technology to do better its own traditional tasks of service delivery and policy formation. It should of course develop the democratic technology to match the internet technology and ensure

that it performs its role to a much more effective degree than presently. However there are other challenges too in terms of how government must hold the ring among the other stakeholders, and, in particular, re-balance the relationship between individuals who provide the information that powers the system and the companies that control the network from the bottom up. A major consequence of the new connected world is that the connections between people are not reciprocal or equal. While everyone may be linked up not everyone is able to profit to the same degree from these networks. The report on the Internet Society Questionnaire on Multistakeholder Governance correctly recognises as one of its ‘Challenges Ahead’ the possibility of capture of internet governance processes by some stakeholder groups, such as large corporations, and stresses the need for a better democratic basis and model for multistakeholder process. (Internet Society 2013, p.10-12) However perhaps the Report does not fully take into account how the very nature of present arrangements for networking facilitate a radically unequal distribution of benefits and, indeed, challenge the public nature and basis of the internet.

One of the main features of Web 2.0 has been the appearance of several huge online behemoths - Amazon, iTunes, Netflix, FaceBook, Google etc. – who are well placed to survey and track users, gathering what has been termed ‘collective intelligence’ to sell people goods and services directly or indirectly (see Taylor 2014). The amount of data about location,

purchases, browsing habits, friendship networks and preferences of users of these sites is an immensely valuable resource and it is one that largely belongs not to the content creators within the internet but to those who own the platforms. While the dream of the internet may have been as an open, democratic space free of intermediaries where users could interact directly, the reality has been a consolidation and centralisation of power to a few very large companies. The many millions of users who give a site content and value may enjoy self-expression and interaction but the value they create in terms of rich vats of data benefits others who, with massive economies of scale provided by millions of users, have an advertising and data mining resource of great value (Larnier 2011). The users, who have been vividly termed ‘digital sharecroppers’ (quoted by Taylor 2014: Ch. 2, n. 8) produce the content but sites such Myspace, Instagram or Tumblr reserve through the fine print all rights, royalties and benefits (see for example, <http://www.tumblr.com/policy/en/terms-of-service>). The huge valuations given to such companies, and the efforts that make to buy up nascent rivals, suggest a new economy that is far beyond the level of traditional retail, broadcast or media format, although interestingly these old establishment players are now re-emerging in the new world too (Wu 2010).

It is interesting and perhaps significant that much of the language surrounding this radical re-division of power and wealth continues to be couched in terms of participation, cooperation, freedom and transparency. The new providers (and their

cheer leaders such as Lessig (2009) and Tapscott (2008)) see themselves - in distinction to the old entertainment and media corporations - as being as devoted to ideas of radical openness and sharing. Open source software is often cited as the paradigm example of what they are engaged in. There is even a suggestion that this is a new form of publicness: based not on who actually owns the resource (and its profits) but who creates and benefits from its existence. The users are free to continue to add value in an open, public way but their return is rendered only in terms of the benefits of continued networking, not the hard cash that accrues as the site owners sell on their data. Of course this idea of publicness and openness as promulgated by the big internet players ignores that the collective ethos of the user community is being appropriated. It overlooks that the producers are giving up their effort and data for free and for the benefit of those who simply maintain the platforms. It denies that the users are in fact being used.

## **Conclusions: What is to be done?**

All of this suggests a more expansive role for someone – presumably government, in its widest sense – to ensure that those who, in a very real sense produce the new internet society, stand to benefit from it fairly.

With regard to its own role in engaging citizens in government processes it is reasonably straightforward at least to state what needs to happen. Real and meaningful engagement with citizens in designing the

way in which services are delivered and policy is made is required. The acknowledgment by governments of the need to include the citizen as a stakeholder has often perhaps by necessity taken the form of representative multistakeholderism. Representatives of business, civil society or whoever is deemed appropriate are given a forum for input or consultation. The major change or potential change which social media provides is in the inclusion of all individuals in a meaningful process of consultation or involvement. All too often this has been tokenistic, cursory, and cosmetic where it requires to be genuinely bottom-up and user-generated – as indeed social media can potentially offer so well. Governments need to commit themselves to developing a technology of democracy that can properly hear the voices of those who are governed, and ensure that this is connected to the technology of communication that can deliver on the promise of Gov 2.0.

With regard to how government can protect the citizen from exploitation from those commercial providers who increasingly are betraying the ideals of networked society being an open and democratic space, it is more difficult to prescribe even a general solution. Government in the sense of national parliaments do not have the range and effect to regulate all these matters. A further degree of international and transnational cooperation than already exists is required, and this remains problematic. However the battle lines are clear and regulations on competition, monopoly and

anti-trust are some of the weapons that must be deployed. There will be a whole series of individual skirmishes – around for example, the need to keep certain providers from introducing a fast lane to the information superhighway to privilege their own content over that of rivals – but basic principles such as net neutrality can be relied on to provide a general battleplan. The important thing is that government recognises that there is ahead an important struggle for the soul of the new networked society, and takes to the field.

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