

E-Deliberation Revisited under the Scope of Web 2.0 Evolution

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Résumé

Cet article constitue une recherche documentaire des recherches primaires déjà effectuées/menées sur e-deliberation. Les données empiriques et les résultats sont réexaminés en vue de donner une nouvelle dimension au discours politique et public à travers les médias sociaux, c'est à dire les applications qui ont émergé du Web 2.0. La combinaison des outils d'e-deliberation et du Web 2.0 offre un nouveau champ d'intérêt, appelé e-deliberation 2.0. La recherche primaire a apporté un certain nombre de rivalités au monde scientifique. La technologie nécessaire est maintenant disponible mais l'utilisation de ces nouvelles applications et son évolution future dépend de l'idéologie et de la culture des utilisateurs et des développeurs. Sa vaste étude constitue le noyau de cet article. Pour cette raison, en dehors du cadre théorique, afin d'explorer si l'utilisation du Web 2.0 répond aux attentes relatives à e-deliberation, le présent article utilisera des données empiriques à partir d'un certain nombre d'études menées/effectuées aux Etats-Unis, l'Australie, la France, et la Grèce.

Mots-clés : discours politique, médias sociaux, e- démocratie, Web 2.0, participation politique.

Summary

This paper constitutes a desk research of primary researches already conducted on e-deliberation. Empirical data are re-examined aiming to give a new dimension to political and public discourse through social media, i.e. the applications that have emerged from Web 2.0. The combination of e-deliberation and Web 2.0 tools provides a new field of interest called e-deliberation 2.0. Primary research has brought rivalries to the scientific world. The technology needed is now available but the use of the new applications and its future course depends on the ideology and culture of users and developers. Its extensive study constitutes the core of this paper. Apart from the theoretical framework, in order to explore whether Web 2.0 use meets the expectations relative to e-deliberation, the present paper will use empirical data from studies conducted in the USA, Australia, France and Greece.

Keywords: political discourse, social media, e-democracy, Web 2.0, political participation

Introduction

Deliberation is an integral part of the democratic regime since classical Athenian democracy. As centuries passed by and societies evolved, democratic regime went through different phases, was put aside, became a matter of controversy and underwent substantial changes. This trend could not leave deliberation and the important role that it has always played in political discourse.

For long periods deliberation was marginal or totally absent while the citizens' role in rulemaking was gradually neglected until it came to its end. In recent years communication between citizens and politicians has been diminished to simple transmission of information and announcements on decisions already taken. This resulted in citizens losing their interest, as they believed that they could no longer affect the decision-making process. In a time that the nature of democracy raises controversies and sometimes seems to be at stake, the need for the redefinition of e-deliberation is imperative now more than ever.

The advent and propagation of Information and Communication Technologies (ICT's) and especially Web 2.0 was the starting point for a more thorough study on the new perspectives on e-democracy as well as on e-deliberation. Interactivity offered within the new environment and the extent of the phenomenon have taken on huge dimensions – compared to Web 1.0 - and could not be ignored on this basis. A new era has begun, and, as it happened with the telephone, the radio, the television and the Internet, there are too many expectations.

Interaction allowed by social media (Facebook, MySpace, Hi5), the possibility of sharing content (YouTube), rating systems, creating new personal environments by users (blogs) and Really Simple Syndication (RSS) are only few of the potentials that new applications offer. The hope for the revitalization of deliberation is based on the extended use of these applications. Communication is no longer one-way and citizens-users are able to share information with others, utter their opinion and deliberate on any matter they consider important. Plain information consumption transforms to co-production of content.

Along with the expectations come lots of questions and speculations on whether these expectations are realistic or not. Are there enough citizens willing to participate? Is it possible for all of them to have the level of political efficacy needed in order to comprehend and delve into the decision-making process? How is this measured and who is considered most appropriate to decide? There is also the matter of trust, essential but extremely difficult to be achieved. Furthermore, which are the consequences of the fact that corporate dominance offline may be reflected in the online environment? Certainly there are many more expectations or speculations as Web 2.0 still evolves. Nevertheless, its extensive study constitutes the core of this paper.

Potentials

Gallup, in 1936, argued that poll together with its contribution to political equality could also ameliorate deliberation. Newspapers and radio would broadcast the information around the policy-making process and then the public would discuss the issues and send back its opinion by answering the poll questions (Fishkin, 2009,

p. 25). Today, 75 years later, one could assume that this ideal may become true given that much more sophisticated means are available.

The ideal of a deliberative public sphere is dominant among discussions that take place on e-democracy. The term «e-democracy» refers to a new kind of democracy itself the functioning of which is based on these new technologies (Macmillan and Hughes, 2008 cited in Petrik, 2010, p. 20) and not to the utilization of new technologies for established political practices (Parvez and Ahmed, 2006 cited in Petrik, 2010, p. 20). In addition, the term «deliberation» will be used in order to signify discussion processes, arguing in favor of or against decision alternatives, negotiation, and methods that seek input from community members and take into account their preferences and opinions (Stern and Feinberg, 1996 cited in Rinner, Kebler and Andrusis, 2008, p. 5).

Apart from the terms «e-democracy» and «deliberation» it is also important to define what the term «political discourse» refers to. In this paper it is used to denote the formal exchange of reasoned views as to which of several alternative courses of action should be taken to solve a societal problem (Johnson and Johnson, 2000, p. 4). Politics cannot be conducted without language (Chilton and Schäffner 1997, p. 206) and the domain of politics defines political discourse (Van Djik, 2001, p. 212). In addition, it is intended to involve all citizens in the making of the decision, persuade others (through valid information and logic), as well as clarify what course of action would be most effective (Johnson and Johnson, 2000).

The Internet as a medium provides areas of political discourse that are direct and self-regulated. Within this context the citizens, who had gradually withdrawn to their private sphere, while the public sphere seemed to collapse, are able once more to emerge as a public power. The communities formed in cyberspace combined with the new architecture of social software can lead to an enhancement in political activity and political participation of citizens (Neumayer and Raffl, 2008). The conditions that need to become embedded in e-democracy in order to fulfill that target are economic power, autonomy, equality and sincerity (Dahlberg, 2001).

Taking into consideration that the attainment of e-deliberation does not depend only on what citizens will do but also on how public institutions will cooperate the classification of De Cindio, Peraboni and Sonnante (2008, pp. 47-48) is of particular interest. In accordance with the levels that Caddy and Vergez introduced (2001 cited in De Cindio, Peraboni and Sonnante, 2008, p. 47) they describe three different levels of citizen participation. The first level, the lowest of all three, is the «information level» and refers to the commitment of public institutions to providing citizens with all necessary information as well as publishing comments on this information provided by citizens. At the «listening level», which is the second one, citizens' opinions should be taken into consideration by public institutions before decision-making. The third level is named «involvement level» and refers to the fact that the decision-making process should be done in cooperation with the citizens.

Citizens have access to all the information needed and are responsible to decide whether they will participate and to what extent they will do so. This process has four stages:

1. Suggestion of proposals and ideas
2. Collaborative evaluation of the suggestions

3. Collective decision-making upon the options

4. Collective evaluation of the outcome (the Australian policy cycle as defined by Bridgman & Davis, 2004 cited in Petrik, 2010, p. 20).

As expected collective action is dominant since it constitutes an indispensable condition for the realization of deliberation. Some indicators that are additionally used in order to measure the degree of one person's deliberative action are the frequency with which they seek out information, the tendency to review other citizens' comments, the comprehension of the positions of others, and the possibility of changing one's own mind after being exposed to the arguments of others (Schlosberg, Zavestoski and Shulman, 2009).

A change of major importance, which the new environment brought, is the deliberation's release from time and space. Fishkin (2009) while conducting four of his deliberative projects, either in the online environment or face-to-face, noted that the projects which take place on the internet cost less, are much more eligible as far as user's time is concerned, are more comfortable since the user stays in his/her home environment and they can be extended. However, the fact that between the sessions participants are subject to their normal habits, news sources and conversation partners may dampen the effects (Fishkin, 2009, p. 31) but it seems that the benefits outnumber this foible. As Chadwick (2009, p. 31) writes, «politics on Facebook goes to where people are, not where we would like them to be». It is worth mentioning the increase of directly political applications such as «Causes» which in early 2008 averaged 114,000 daily active users. Moreover, fashion, music and art co-exist with politics in many profiles (Chadwick, 2009).

In addition, new applications spur users to willingly reveal information about their personal life and their preferences within enclosed technological frameworks. Information such as age, gender, education level, hobbies or which sex is one interested in are now easily accessible (Serfaty, 2010, p. 121). This fact reveals one of the most important disadvantages of Web 1.0 where politicians confronted particular difficulties during their effort to locate and address each target group. Moreover, the pursuit for solutions in issues, like the lack of trust that derives from anonymity, is easier now and has already resulted in self-regulation models such as Wikipedia where a great number of volunteer «Wikipedians» are on alert in order to correct any mistakes spontaneously (Chadwick, 2009, p. 29). It seems that a great number of expectations that could not be fulfilled in the past find now implementation in several Web 2.0 interaction environments while this does not mean that the other side of the coin is not still there.

Limited use and misuse

Politicians, public officials and citizens are often dubious towards the use of ICT's. It is obvious that in recent years lots of attempts have taken place in order to achieve the greatest participation of the local community. These attempts include listening to citizens' opinions, collecting suggestions and proposals, and, in some cases, defining a path to reach a joint decision. Nevertheless, as was observed during the EC eDemocracy Seminar (Macnaughton, 2004 cited in De Cindio, Peraboni and Sonnante, 2008), the use of ICT's was restricted as conventional technologies dominated in the most projects presented. The majority of the websites just gave

information about the ongoing process, and, in some cases, provided a discussion forum which most of the times remained inactive (De Cindio, Peraboni and Sonnante, 2008). On the contrary, groups of activists and active citizens proceed with extended use of new applications needed for their activities. Nonetheless, especially as far as citizens are concerned, this should not lead to the assumption that the interest in Web 2.0 applications goes always with political participation and deliberation.

Empirical evidence relative to deliberative forums shows that apart from the reluctance of public officials to embed online political discourse in their daily routine citizens' participation is also limited. A representative example, coming from the United Kingdom, is the Department of Communities and Local Government Forum that had only 411 citizens' posts during the six months that it was active (Chadwick, 2009, p. 17). A matter of great significance rising up is whether mass public is ignorant or not. Fishkin (2009) uses the term «non-attitudes», which, in Converse's study «The nature of belief systems in mass publics» (1964) denotes the attitudes that are completely unstable within time because people are ignorant. In Fishkin's study (2009, p.26) «non-attitudes» are attributed to the unwillingness of those asked to admit that they do not know. The citizen who reproduces an opinion without being able to comprehend it profoundly is not considered to contribute to the deliberation process. However, it is not safe not to take him into account at all.

The level of one's political awareness is not adequate for drawing safe results. A survey of 1553 participants in regulatory public comment processes that Schlosberg, Zavestoski and Shulman (2009) conducted is of particular interest as far as political deliberation is concerned. According to the results there are differences even between those who send mass-mailed letters and those who submit original comments. These differences exist not just in terms of the practices' use but also in terms of their trust in the government and feelings they have relatively to whether they are able to affect the rule-making process. Mass-mailed letters senders appear to be more cynical and not communicating in favour of substantial political discourse contrary to original comments' writers who are filled and inspired by a different mentality and follow practices that appear to have lots of the characteristics of deliberative democracy (Schlosberg, Zavestoski and Shulman, 2009, p. 134).

At the same time, along with the difficulties mentioned above, user's identity, which is hidden behind anonymity, the eventual immaturity and the expediency that may lay behind particular actions and arguments are also factors which have an impact on the practice of e-deliberation. Furthermore, representativeness of different opinions is at stake while it is common for users to select the forums that they will participate in and sometimes this results in not hearing the opposite opinions. Therefore citizens may not be able to study thoroughly all aspects of an issue (Fishkin, 2009, p. 30). Other suspending factors that public institutions use in order to attribute their refusal to embed new applications are lack of time and of the budget needed for the moderation of an online forum but also a generalized fear that the control over the policy agenda will be lost due to the enhancement of citizens' expectations about policy influence (Chadwick, 2009).

The new environment is characterized by the aggregation of huge amounts of information. Those who can mine, refine, and subsequently protect it are likely to emerge as dominant (O' Reilly, 2005). However, issues related to *corporate colonization* of cyberspace (Dahlberg, 2005, p. 162) and the way of determining the economic factor raise questions. The increasing ownership of content, software and bandwidth allows the possibility of corporate control of online communication. Corporate interests made it controllable by an elite, which is able to restrict or enhance political protest and networks of critical voices across the world (Neumayer and Raffl, 2008, p. 7). Cammaerts (2008, p. 13), while studying blogs, apart from elite's dominance, denotes four more factors that undermine the participatory character of the internet. These factors are the commodification of the Internet and the blogosphere, the online intimidation by fellow bloggers, the existence of anti-publics along with abusing the freedom of expression with the aim to weaken democracy and democratic values.

The fact that cyberspace emerged as a global sphere but many people until today are excluded because of the lack of either the infrastructures needed or the necessary skills is indicative of how difficult it is to achieve an ideal such as e-democracy. This situation reflects, among others, the concern over the digital divide shaping citizen participation, not just in the sense of physical access to the Internet, but also as «electronic» illiteracy weighing heavily on top of more traditional stratifiers of political engagement (Chadwick, 2009, p. 26).

Web 2.0: some technical characteristics

Web 2.0, on a technical level, surpasses the limits of the computer's confined platform. It refers to the development of applications designed to run code inside a web browser in ways that facilitate interactivity and the rapid retrieval, alteration, and storage of data. Most of the successful web 2.0 applications combine such capabilities with back-end databases that store user generated content able to be modified by others (Chadwick, 2009, p. 24). Its services rely on lightweight application programming interfaces (APIs). The ease of use of Web 2.0 APIs stems from a combination of JavaScript for the actual programming functionality, and XML and the JavaScript Object Notation (JSON) as the preferred formats for data transfer. This combination, which is known as AJAX (Asynchronous JavaScript and XML), for the first time enables web applications to behave more like desktop programmes. In particular, «users can now receive updated content from a website without having to wait for a reload of the entire page – overcoming a usability issue that was apparent in the first-generation Web» (Rinner, Kebler and Andrulis, 2008, p. 4).

A core idea behind the Web 2.0 paradigm is access to data over the web from multiple applications. Web feeds using RSS and Atom are very common for publishing and subscribing to XML data in a simple manner that many non-technical users now handle daily. Furthermore, «the phenomenal growth of web applications such as Google Maps, YouTube, Flickr and Slideshare is in part due to the ease with which users can embed remotely hosted material in their own websites and is accomplished by providing users with the 'snippet' code» (which may be HTML or JavaScript) (Shum, 2008, p. 3).

The terms «social software», associated with Web 2.0, refers to the ability for group interaction. Undoubtedly, the internet already offered the potential of users being connected to other users forming this way a group through applications like the e-mail or chat rooms. Nevertheless, Web 2.0 tools, except for interaction, support feedback, discourse and, as mentioned above, users' intervention and user-generated content. Social media, wiki, sharing and blogs are some of the most characteristic applications.

Chadwick (2009), based on O' Reilly's script on Web 2.0, denotes the way that applications work for e-democracy. The Internet is a platform for various types of political discourse. One representative example is the extended use of blogs in 2004 during the U.S. presidential elections, along with the shift towards online social networks, like Facebook and MySpace and social media sites, like YouTube, and in January 2007, when John Edwards and Barack Obama announced their candidacy through video on YouTube (Serfaty, 2010).

At the same time the existence of amateurs generating content free from preexisting authoritarian sources allows collective intelligence and finds implementation in user-generated content websites. Blogs are a kind of self-regulated social system where people interact through the exchange of information and ideas (Ahuja, Perez-Quinones and Kavanaugh, 2009). Blogosphere inspired citizens' perpetual vigil while political actors and elites are obligated to always stay within an environment that is impossible to avoid. Furthermore, the unusual amount of public experimentalism is most obviously illustrated by the «perpetually beta» status of many of the popular services which also reflects a value shift towards a more fluid environment. Last but not least, rich user experiences on political websites facilitate interactivity as well as encourage users to create original content, which readers can edit or rate (Chadwick, 2009).

Web 2.0 applications in use

One way to explore whether Web 2.0 use meets the expectations relative to e-deliberation is to study the research around it. The present paper uses some empirical data from a number of studies conducted in the USA (Albrechtslund, 2008, Erkul and Erkul, 2009, Serfaty, 2010), Australia (Kissane, 2008, Macnamara 2008), Norway (Kalnes, 2008, Karlsen, 2009), France (Michalska and Vedel, 2009, Serfaty, 2010) and Greece (Lappas, Kleftodimos and Yannas, 2010).

USA

The presidential campaign of Barack Obama during the 2008 elections used Web 2.0 tools intensively in order to reach the general public. The use of YouTube for Presidential Debates gave citizens «a platform» to question candidates on issues that mattered to them (Erkul and Erkul, 2009, p. 8). The website www.barakobama.com during the political campaign was used in order to achieve commitment and surveillance of the participation of citizens and groups (Albrechtslund, 2008) whereas after the elections was used as a platform for promoting the projects of Obama Administration and sharing political information. The emphasis put on interaction with users was great. Its major role was to create a common platform for all the applications to be accessible. On every page of the website, links to major tools were provided: Facebook, MySpace, YouTube, Flickr, Digg, Twitter, Eventful,

Linkedin, Blackplanet, Faithbase, Eons, Glee, MiGente, MyBatanga, AsianAve and DNC Partybuilder (Erkul and Erkul, 2009, p. 10).

The main tool for interaction between users is the blog page where they can post their comments, after having created an account, which is a practice that contributes to the constriction of unenviable comments. A paradigm of great significance as far as social networking through www.barackobama.com is concerned is the formation of groups in many different categories with interests ranging from book club to foreign policy (Erkul and Erkul, 2009). This diversity is indicative of the fact that many people found a deliberation space where they could share information and argue about a great variety of issues.

The website was mostly used to seek support rather than engage people in the decision making process. Moreover, the fact that critical opinions were sparse leads to the assumptions that most of the citizens subscribed in order to express their support. However, it should be mentioned that these tools contribute to active citizens' participation while at the same time they can stay informed. It was a very significant initiative with positive impact on the general public, a propinquity that is reinforced by the statements that supporters post on the website.

Australia

Unlike the USA elections, during the 2007 Australian federal elections the use of new media by most politicians was limited and the communication was based on an one-way controlled approach used by politicians and major political parties. Furthermore, it was found that, in many cases, 'comments' were often turned off or, when allowed, were almost always moderated by 'gatekeepers', resulting in dialogue being restricted almost exclusively to «fan mail» (Macnamara, 2008, p. 7). The existence of «gatekeepers» is also revealed by the fact that the number of negative posts on each website was too small.

In addition new media sites of elected federal politicians were not assessed to be very interactive. Significantly, 185 elected federal politicians' new media sites (81.9 per cent) were completely focused on one-way information dissemination with no possibility for comment or input by members of the public and only 20 per cent of politicians could be reached by direct e-mail. This finding is of particular interest as it suggests that, while the level of new media use is growing, the method of using new media echoes traditional media practices (Macnamara, 2008, p. 8).

Nevertheless at the same time, when the majority of politicians were dubious towards new media, there were politicians like Kevin Rudd who has 22,296 friends on MySpace. These are examples that contributed to the shift towards a new setting (Kissane, 2008). It may not have been the «YouTube election» as claimed in some media but there was a significant increase in citizens' engagement compared to previous elections. Moreover, there were a great number of activists and bloggers who interacted with citizens and offered opportunities for political participation.

Norway

During 2007 Facebook became the most popular website in Norway, with YouTube reaching the third position. Political parties had no choice but follow the lead. It is important to mention that in Norway Internet access and use is among the highest in the world (Karlsen, 2009, p. 34). During their campaign political parties

were obligated to participate in blogging fora created by the media. It should be noted that, according to this particular research, there was no relation between party size and activity in terms of postings or comments in contrast with Greece where, as it will be mentioned below, it worked the other way around.

Top politicians were absent while five parties decided to make use of YouTube despite the fact that they dealt with it on the same terms as Facebook. Several groups for the national party organizations were established but most of them were not official in the sense that the establishers were local officers, candidates or representatives (Kalnes, 2008, p. 13). In addition, eight out of ten were created by users without the party organization's knowledge or consent. The goal of political discourse came to a dead end while disorder was dominant. The parties did not have any control and none of the groups had more than a thousand members (Karlsen, 2009).

The three different types of approaches relative to the use of Web 2.0 by political parties, presented by Kalnes (2008, p.18), are of particular interest. The first one is called «institutional approach» and refers to those parties which establish themselves in the new environment. In Norway only one party appertains to this category. The second approach, the «individual activist» one, is where parties leave the initiative to activists that may know it or not. The last one is the «passive approach» where neither parties nor their supporters show any activity. It seems parties with no economical resources are likely to fall in this category.

France

During the 2007 presidential election in France all candidates had a website which, most of the times, replicated the offline modes of campaigning. In a manner similar to that of Australia, one-way communication was dominant and there was no interaction between citizens and politicians. As far as Web 2.0 use is concerned it seems that some candidates use most of the new applications while others none (Michalska and Vedel, 2009, p. 11). This fact is often attributed to the factor of ideology. Video channels were used in a great extent for presenting their political platforms.

Suggestively it is noted that Sarkozy's website was distant and had no link to outside social networks. On the contrary, Ségolène Royal chose to include videos and blogs by supporters, as well as links to a popular video sharing site, Daily Motion. In other words, Royal chose to embrace the popular culture of social networking and increased transparency (Serfaty, 2010).

As far as users are concerned it appears that traffic of a website is equivalent to a keen interest in politics. Furthermore, users who have a profile in social networks are more likely to participate in political discourse. However, apart from the pre-election period it is not yet absolutely sure that citizens have embedded deliberation practices in their daily routine. People who do not necessarily have the profile of political activists or are not especially active in offline or conventional politics may engage in some kind of political activity, starting with visiting political web sites. This may be attributed to the fact that the Internet increases the chance of encountering political information, be it by accident (Michalska and Vedel, 2009, p. 21).

Greece

Greek parties use the new applications that Web 2.0 offers based on their belief on finding or not a sufficient number of voters. Parties that have profiles on Facebook are using three different walls. The first one is dedicated to party posts, the second one is dedicated to other individual posts and the third wall merges the other two into one (Lappas, Klefodimos and Yannas, 2010, p. 10). «Likes» and «Comments» constitute indicative characteristics through which citizens are able to express their opinions, whereas comments contribute to the beginning of political discourse between citizens. At this point it should be noted that in most of the cases parties do not join in these conversations. As mentioned above, this is one of the most common suspending factors that public institutions use to attribute their refusal to embed new applications (Chadwick, 2009) and leads to absence of political discourse. The use of Facebook by political parties does not result in two-way communication.

Political campaigns of the two major parties showed that they are leader-centered since there is almost no space to give prominence to other stems' activities. This is indicative of the way that an enhancement tool of e-democracy is at the leader's disposal and not the other members of the party. A characteristic example is the course of the European Parliament elections, where both parties offered their candidate's only one post in order to address themselves to voters (Lappas, Klefodimos and Yannas, 2010, p. 14).

The indicators used reveal an interesting participatory pattern with users more likely to comment on posts of parties exercising power. Many of the users were already related to that party offline, while «gatekeeping» on comments was noticeable, in a way similar to that of Norway. Another outcome was that citizens were activated mostly in periods of crisis than in election periods because of their heightened anxiety levels. The leading party still has the most posts maybe because of the citizens' need to act and participate in the decision-making process. However, user-generated communication finds no receiver since there is no feedback at all. This use of Facebook incorporates some of the Web 2.0 features but retains firm control of the communication. Furthermore, taking into consideration that Greece is in the middle of a crisis, the leading party seems to be ambivalent between deliberation and edicts (Demertzis, 2010, p. 8).

Comparative

Aforementioned research results show that there are several similarities as far as social media's use by politicians and citizens is concerned. USA stand out as Web 2.0 tools are used both by politicians and by citizens to a great extent. In contrast to the other cases, last presidential campaigns showed the trend towards the exploitation of social media. The road to active online political participation is now open despite the fact that at this particular moment citizens were not yet completely engaged in the decision making process.

On the contrary the rest of the countries seem to have a long way to the ideal of e-deliberation. It seems that the politicians are not eager to incorporate social media's use either because they find it somehow intimidating or because they are strongly attached to the traditional media practices. Norway's case is distinguishable and of particular interest. In a country where Internet use is among the highest in the

world one should expect e-deliberation to be among the highest in the world also. However, in spite of the fact that political parties followed the lead that made Facebook the most popular website in the country, the study of the Norwegian campaign reveals that the Internet was an important information source for a relatively small part of the electorate (Karlsen, 2009, p. 47). Other channels of political communication were considered more important than online ones and along with an extended disorder in parties' websites that confused citizens' e-deliberation was not fully realized.

Cases of Australia, France and Greece are similar as far as limited social media's use in the electoral campaigns is concerned. None of the politicians took advantage of the social media and the ability to engage citizens in political discourse. Communication was mostly one-way and traditional practices dominant. Nevertheless, taking into consideration the differences between societies; it should be noted that there are also some disparities. Australia has its exceptions like Kevin Rudd, 26th Prime Minister of Australia, who made extensive use of MySpace. In France it was Ségolène Royal who made the difference and adopted new ways of communication with citizens while the politicians were split in two directions; a part of them used most of the applications provided while others none. Finally, in Greece political parties focused on Facebook use and it is of particular interest the fact that the vast majority of citizens' comments were made on leading party's wall independently of their political preference.

Conclusion

Web 2.0 unfolds new potentials and can create a space where citizens will be in discourse either with politicians or with other citizens and actively participate in the decision-making process. The release from time and space, the possibility of interaction, self-regulation, co-creation of content and sharing of information are only some of the possibilities that new applications enable providing the tools for the transformation of passive people into active citizens.

It is obvious that the use of the new applications offered by Web 2.0 is not yet conducted in a way that promotes e-deliberation. The degree of Internet penetration in a country no matter how high it is, does not seem to be enough for the adoption of practices that will contribute to political discourse. Both citizens and politicians – the latter in a greater degree – do not seem ready to take advantage of the potentials offered. This is attributed to ignorance, reluctance or even anxiety experienced in the face of a new practice with unknown and not easily predictable results. Moreover, corporate dominance as well as the fact that Web 2.0 is still limited to Western countries and elites around the globe (Neumayer and Raffl, 2008) reveals that we have a long way till we reach e-democracy.

Governments are able to and should create a mechanism through which citizens will confirm that their opinions are taken into consideration. Politicians must communicate with citizens without the mediation of gatekeepers whose role is to narrow constructive political discourse to positive comments for each party. At the same time, citizens should use the new tools for their own benefit in order to comprehend the internal connections between ideas and argue on an issue.

The online environment represents a social reflection of the outside world (Neumayer and Raffl, 2008). Social hierarchies are reflected and within this context the way that people will handle the new order of things is of significant importance as they can reproduce or deaden current inequalities. The technology needed is now available but the use of the new applications and its future course depends on the ideology and culture of users and developers. The fact that, at present, Web 2.0 does not seem to meet the high ideal of a deliberative political public sphere is not adequate in order to predict an outcome. On the contrary, it can serve as a major incentive for reaction practices against all obstacles that stand in the way. New models of political interaction (Bruns, 2008) need to be developed and we should make the most of social media in order for politicians to become more receptive to the concerns and opinions of citizens.

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