Participation Now!
Citizenship Education and Democracy in Times of Change

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Report

Forum VIII
Opportunities and risks of Web 2.0: Participation for all?

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Inputs:

Mahmoud Salem, blog: Rantings of a Sandmonkey (Egypt)

Thorsten Schilling, Multimedia Department Bundeszentrale für politische Bildung (bpb) (Germany)

Moderation

Gregor Hackmack, Parliamentwatch.org (Germany)

Content:

The main guideline of the workshop consisted of the following: Web 2.0 has changed interest and participation in political and social developments. The enormous dissemination potential of the Net makes it possible to reach many different populations, even transnational. The upheavals in the North African countries were not least also called 'Facebook revolutions', although the degree of influence is disputed. How, though, can political interest/engagement on the Net be used constructively for active political action? What contribution can citizenship education make in order to use the diversity of new forms of participation effectively, but also to estimate their limits realistically?

The moderator Gregor Hackmack from Parliamentwach.org (Germany) focused mainly on the question on how effective social media was for the success of the Arab Spring. Were Web 2.0 tools the cause or source of the Arab Spring or is it just a trashcan filled with opinions. He also focused on the question if social media can replace traditional media like radio, TV and newspapers.

First session:

The speaker Mahmoud Salem is an Egyptian social media expert, activist and blogger and he has won several prices for his work. He focused on the benefits of social media and

started his story with the fact that participation in the public life was in decline. People were getting cynical about the government and voter turnout is decreasing on the local level. In the United States 76 percent of the people said that they wouldn't have any time to participate in their communities. Mahmoud Salem stressed that he thinks people are not interested in politics anymore because the government only makes policy for the next five years but isn't looking any further than that. Especially young people lost their interest because most young people were secular and anti-war and they are disrespectful in their attitude towards the government. Youngsters were complaining because the society was changing, they wouldn't be marrying at a young age anymore, they couldn't really find jobs, nor buy a house and they tended to get less children. That would become a big problem because demographics were the key of a healthy economy. Social media could help this young generation to connect more with the government but can also arouse problems because it could drive a wedge between people. Mahmoud Salem gave an example in which an American built an App where you can see if people in an apartment building where supporters of the Republican or Democratic Party which resulted in a terrible atmosphere because afterwards everybody knew about the others political preferences.

Then Mahmoud Salem focused on the Egyptian revolution. He told the audience that the reason of the Egyptian revolution was a decaying state and the big amount of discontent for the people. There was no freedom of speech in Egypt and when people complained about the government they always had to whisper. The Internet was the solution for many Egyptians to escape the pressures of the authoritarian police state. So at first the Egyptians were using blogs and afterwards they were also using social media. Social media was functioning as a medium where all the frustration about the regime could be channelized. During the Arab Spring revolutions in Egypt, Twitter was first used with the hash tag '#TahrirAid' whenever someone was in need of medical supplies for a wounded person. But this channel was not very effective because nobody knew whether the supplies were still needed because there was no follow up. Then an App was created which could do the same thing but there was a possibility to update the information and this procedure was far more effective.
Mahmoud Salem is also working on an emergency response App where you can make a picture of a critical emergency and people will get an alert. This is an effective way to use Web 2.0 tools in a state with a disfunctioning government.
Moreover he stressed that we live in an egalitarian world, which is hit hard by the global economic crisis and thus people shouldn't care about each other political inclination but rather help each other. Mahmoud Salem also underlined the great potential for schools in countries like Egypt to be connected with each other with Web 2.0 tools. So even in densely populated areas it would be affordable to offer the best education.
In the end Mahmoud Salem said that most of the social media initiatives in his country tend to have a short life span because they deal with emergency situations. When the critical stage of that emergency passes people would loose their interest. But luckily there would always be crises; hence there would always be a need for Web 2.0 tools for those situations. Salem concluded with the following statement: "Civilization advances because crazy people want to do things. Don't try to control it. Don't try to exploit it. Leave them alone. They might save us all!"

Second session:

The second speaker was Thorsten Schilling, head of the multimedia department of the Bundeszentrale für politische Bildung, bpb. Before he started he informed the participants that he was replacing the original speaker who was ill and he hadn't had a lot of time to

prepare his speech. After the Second World War, Germany had 60 years to rebuild all the tools and organizations for a strong civic society. There is a big contrast between the story of Thorsten Schilling and that of Mahmoud Salem. Schilling works for the bpb, which is part of the German Ministry of the Interior, so he calls himself part of the deep state system. According to Thorsten Schilling the state isn't always evil as is the case in Egypt, and the reason for this is the invention of the social welfare state Germany had invented to keep the working class satisfied. With the emerging Web 2.0 tools the public sector had to be reinvented to benefit of the most of the possibilities that Web 2.0 can offer. Web 2.0 could be used very effectively for educational issues and to promote and help the civic society.

The bpb has been using the Internet for over ten years now. They have used a website, DVDs and other multimedia tools to make the information about the functioning of the government more transparent in a Web 1.0 way. The difference between Web 1.0 and Web 2.0 is interaction. And the information the bpb spreads through Web 2.0 tools is very interactive, so people can ask the questions they have. People can also come into contact with similar organizations that promote a civic society and they can interact with these organizations. For a state institution the bpb has very high trust rates, so the information they are spreading is generally accepted as reliable.

Thorsten Schilling stressed that the government has a task to make the complex state structures more transparent. But he also noted that the use of Web 2.0 tools is not a guarantee for more democratization. The notion of freedom was quite good when it concerned social media on the superficial level. But the codes that are behind for example Google and Facebook were quite shady so it was hard to trust these companies because you don't know who makes up the rules.
For education Web 2.0 forms a challenge because the teacher isn't the authority anymore like in the eighties. Students can easily check all the facts on the Internet and find their own information. Education has to be adjusted to these new possibilities, so the bpb is using their material and asks teacher to rate and evaluate it. Teachers can also add their own material. Interaction is the key thing of Web 2.0, so we have to exploit all the possibilities that this Internet interaction can offer for promoting Civic Society and to enhance the related educational questions but we have to bear in mind the closed structures of some Web 2.0 providers like Facebook and Google.

Discussion:

After Thorsten Schilling had finished, the moderator Gregor Hackmack from Parliamentwatch.org from Germany initiated a lively discussion in both rounds. In the first round there were a lot of North Africans, so during the first discussion there was a bigger focus on the contrast between the different experiences Europeans and Africans have concerning Web 2.0 and politics. The first question Gregor Hackmack asked was how Web 2.0 can be used to enforce political action. In the Arabic countries, and especially during the Arab Spring, traditional media wasn't to be trusted; thus, the involved people used crowd-sourcing tools. This worked well in developed countries because of a well functioning state. So when something was reported, usually there would be a solution for the problem. In *developing* countries nothing was working; so in the beginning everyone was excited to use the crowd sourcing tools, but after a while this excitement for the functioning would stop for the results being considered too meagre. So in the long run, crowd sourcing wasn't really functional in developing countries, yet it could be used for crisis management. Mahmoud Salem noted that in Egypt there were so many crises, there would always be a need for short term crowd sourcing.

Thorsten Schilling then brought up the issue of representation through Web 2.0. Most people being older then 35 wouldn't really use Web 2.0, so you mustn't focus too much on these tools or else you will not reach a great part of society.

A civil servant of the Dutch Ministry of Education noted that there is a new system for their department. Whenever there was a new law, it would be published on the Internet and people (for example teachers) could give their opinion about the new law concerning education.

In Tunisia, social media was less effective, because of only a small amount of Tunisians having access to the Internet. So in that way, they published their news on their Tunisian website of Parliament-Watch and contacted traditional media to broadcast the news.

Mahmoud Salem is also cooperating with the Egyptian Finance Ministry. They developed a tool that shows the long-term effects of a budget cut. In that way Web 2.0 tools are combined with the traditional power structures.

In the second round there was a bigger emphasis on the dangers of Web 2.0. If the wrong people conceived access to your data this could form a danger. In Egypt, in the case of being arrested, the people first asked for your Facebook password, as an example. In Slovenia the government could also be a bit counterproductive concerning Web 2.0. For example, after the creation of an app that enables students to carpool to their college cities, the government tried to let the drivers pay taxes because the car-poolers were paying for the gas.

In Cyprus they had an initiative for letting people design their own government from scratch, which was quite successful. In Spain there was the 15-M movement that succeeded in mobilizing a lot of people against the budget cuts. Yet, during the elections those people didn't go and vote and thus a right-wing conservative government is still planning the budget cuts. The point was that people are using Social Media, but they had to be trained to use them properly to achieve some effective changes. Information also has to be verified, because there is such a bulk of information to be found with Web 2.0 tools.

A big revelation was that Mahmoud Salem said that the only way in Egypt to conceive real freedom of speech was to use blogs at first. When Social Media came into existence they were used for freedom of speech. During the revolts against the President of Egypt Husni Mubarak, Facebook and Twitter functioned as a speaking trumpet for criticism. When the government tried to control all that critique they shut down the Internet and that was the trigger for the convincement of bringing all the people out on the streets and voicing their opinions. So according to Mahmoud Salem the reason the Mubarak-regime fell was not because of the criticising social media, instead, it was the government's response to shut down the Internet.

The participants had to write down what the consequences were for citizenship and human rights education, what people learned from each other and where cooperation and exchange make sense.

Apparently, people learned from each other that there are lots of projects in every country, which can form an inspiration for their own countries. Someone else learned that you have to teach children how to deal with Web 2.0 properly and that you also have to consider those people that don't have access or don't want to have access to Web 2.0 tools. Another person wrote down that he_she has learnt that Europe needs to have more babies, because the

European people are aging, and in Africa there are a lot of young people. It was also noted that Google and Facebook wont survive the coming years because the Internet keeps on changing very rapidly. Another participant wrote down that first there is revolution, then anarchy and then a more structured democracy and Web 2.0 can help with that. You could make a newly democratizing government more transparent and you could educate people about the new changes. Someone else also warned that you mustn't forget to combine Web 2.0 with traditional media to keep on reaching everyone.

Conclusion:

The consequences for citizenship and human rights education can be summarized as follows: the participants wrote down that there is a need of investments in crazy ideas, experiments and already successful experiments. We also had to introduce teachers how to use Web 2.0 tools so that they are able to educate their pupils. And exchange made sense for a lot of tools because they could be implemented almost everywhere. But you had to know what the best examples are, because *they* needed to be exchanged.

To summarize, this was a very vivid and useful workshop with a lot of discussion in a very good and cosy atmosphere.