New Media and Citizen Engagement

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"Democracy is a living system that adapts constantly to changing circumstances", Daniel Yankelovich

Introduction

Across the world, governments and governance institutions are facing legitimacy challenges as citizens voice in an increasingly louder pitch their disenchantment due to disquiet about corruption, non-responsiveness to the needs of citizens especially the poor and inability to connect with government functionaries including elected representatives.

Over the last 5 years, Information Communication Technologies (ICTs) including social media and mobile based technologies have evolved exponentially, have become almost pervasive in all walks of life, have made their presence felt in all geographies and strata of society and are being positioned as the ultimate tool of citizen engagement.

The advent of internet and social media has brought in a paradigm change in which citizens engage with each other as well as with government. As these platforms are increasingly being used by citizens and their presence and penetration is increasing through mobile devices, they present to us an opportunity to directly engage with each and every citizen. However, simultaneously, they also present a challenge in terms of management of platforms and expectations.

Given their characteristics to potentially give "voice to all", immediate outreach and literally 24*7 engagement, ICTs and new media offers a unique opportunity to governments to engage with all their stakeholders especially citizens in real time to make policy making citizen centric. Many governments across the world including in India are using various forms of new media platforms to reach out to their citizens, businesses and experts to seek inputs into policy making, get feedback on service delivery, creating community based programmes etc.

Use of ICTs for Citizen Interaction & Empowerment

The burgeoning mobile networks and increased internet penetration offer an opportunity to enhance our outreach not only through SMS but also internet based interactions. Presence of Telecentres and cyber cafés are also adding to alternate channels of communication and engagement. The use of these platform to undertake public consultation on draft policy documents, tracking of application status, providing agri-related information etc. have become fairly common practices.

In this section, I will discuss some examples from India where mobiles, Online Media including Social Media Platforms are being used in an innovative manner to interact and

engage with government on policy making issues, getting involved in the governance process and become empowered.

Targeted Public Distribution System

The Public Distribution System (PDS) in India channels food grains at subsidised price to 160 million families through 0.4 million Fair Price Shops (FPS) (http://planningcommission.nic.in/plans/planrel/fiveyr/10th/volume2/v2_ch3_4.pdf last visited April 20, 2012). It is the largest distribution network of its kind in the world. However, owing to opaqueness in the processes of purchase, storage and distribution of grains and provisioning of ration cards, leakages are common and rent seeking is enormous. Over the last few years, both mobile and internet have been used to make the system more accountable by making public the details of quantity of grains procured, provided to each FPS, date of despatch of grain, publishing the ration card holder details etc. Typically, on the PDS website of the state, the consumer can register herself and the details of purchase of grain, distribution and movement to FPS is given over email or through SMS (http://cg.nic.in/citizen/ - Dhan Kharidi Project from Chhattisgarh, www.fcs.up.nic.in – PDS project from Uttar Pradesh). This is now being expanded and a new initiative is being undertaken under the National e-Governance Plan (NeGP) Mission Mode Project to ensure transparency in PDS at all levels in all states (http://negp.gov.in/Projects/PDS.aspx?id=1&&page=Objectives)

Reporting on Corruption and Rent Seeking

An initiative of a Bangalore based civil society organisation, www.ipaidabribe.com has emerged as one of the key platforms to discuss corruption at all levels of government. Especially important has been its role in bringing to light rent seeking in the local government departments. They also have visibility on FaceBook, Twitter and YouTube that enables them to highlight corruption and empower common man by giving them a voice. It also simultaneously provides space to laud honest officials and good government practices.

More recently, last year in August a wave of demand for the passing of Lokpal Bill swept across the country. The campaign was spearheaded by a grassroots organisation called India against Corruption (http://www.indiaagainstcorruption.org/index1.html last visited on April 20,2012). The agency was able to leverage social media and mobile technologies to organise mass rallies across the country and persuade the federal as well several state governments to introduce/enact Lokpal Bill that is aimed essentially at rooting out corruption at the point of access of public service delivery.

Financial Inclusion

At 145 million, India has the highest no. of unbanked households in the world and almost half of India's population is unbanked (http://rbidocs.rbi.org.in/rdocs/Speeches/PDFs/FIC060911DG.pdf last accessed on April 20, 2012).

Given the enormity of the problem, Government of India through various banking institutions decided to leverage ICTs to extend financial inclusion to rural and far flung areas of the country. Many IT companies and civil society organisations have joined hands with village level entrepreneurs who act as Banking Correspondents (BCs) to provide access to various financial services including account opening, cash-in/cash-out, micro-credit and micro-insurance. The BC model uses a combination of ICTs including high end IT application linked to the core banking system, mobile devices including phones and point-of-sale devices and biometric authentication devices. It is expected that nearly one third of India nearly 600,000 villages have been covered by March 2012 and the coverage is expected to go up to 50% by end of March 2013.

Public Diplomacy

In an attempt to engage with Indian Diaspora, the Ministry of External Affairs initiated a Public Diplomacy website (http://www.indiandiplomacy.in/default.asp) along with presence on FaceBook and Twitter presence. One of the big successes of this initiative was the evacuation of 800 Indians from Misratah, Libya facilitated by Twitter and FaceBook interactions (http://www.slideshare.net/eletseditorial/navdeep-suri, last visited on April 20, 2012). Since its inception, now a dedicated YouTube channel (~350 videos uploaded since launch) has been added and many related FaceBook pages

In addition to the Ministry of External Affairs, the Prime Minister's Office, the Planning Commission, The Directorate General of Employment and Training, several municipal agencies, traffic police and many other government agencies in India have significant presence on social media, and use mobile devices for citizen interaction.

Democratising access to information

The Government of India had enacted the Right to Information (RTI) Act to promote transparency and set practical measures for information access to citizens. While there was some positive impact on ground, many requests did not receive the desired replies and it was very difficult to seek information from government agencies. In the state of Bihar, the state government initiated a fixed line based project called Jaankari (meaning information) to expand the base of RTI access and creation of a facilitation centre (http://cic.gov.in/CIC-Articles/JAANKARI-pdf-26-03-07.pdf last accessed on April 20, 2012). The system is designed to facilitate filing of an application over single phone call to a special 6 digit code 155311 without visiting any government office or physical transfer of money as the fee is debited to the monthly phone bill of the user. According to the data provided by the state information commission, 3 call centre of Jaankari have filed 23638 petitions, 13224- First Appeal, 8373-2nd Appeal and answered 46873- Queries and 8585 other calls, between January, 2007 and November, 2011 (http://negp.gov.in/pdfs/jankari.pdf last accessed on April 20, 2012)

Comparison to traditional approaches

An oft ignored fact is that the traditional approaches to citizen engagement have also included use of ICTs – TV, Radio, Telephone. Live debates on TV or call in shows on radio are a fairly common method of interacting directly with citizens in India. However, somehow while reviewing traditional methods of citizen engagement, print and face-to-face meetings spring immediately to mind. Barring the latter approach, other media are viewed as methods that facilitate one way interaction or broadcasting of message. Such interactions are often asynchronous and there is usually time lag in getting response from citizens.

The advent of ICT and new media is transforming the way in which people connect with each other and the manner in which information is shared and distributed. It is different from traditional media such as print, radio and television in many significant ways, namely:

- User Generated Content - The amount of content that can be generated by the users themselves far exceeds the content generation by news/opinion makers;

- Viral - Its "viral" ability for potential exponential spread of information;

- Real Time Engagement - It releases the shackles of time and place for engagement and can connect policy makers to citizens in real time;

- Individual Interaction - In tradition forms of media, interaction with individual user is either not possible or is very limited. New media platform offers the ability to connect with each and every individual thereby improving the political position of marginalized or vulnerable groups, such as women, youth, and minorities that are often not taken into consideration;

- Fuzzy Role definition – Unlike traditional media where role of a spokesperson is well defined, on online media, such role is often fuzzy and lines between official and personal roles are often blurred sometimes leading to misrepresentation;

- Connectedness - This attribute showcases the media's ability to connect and re-connect like-minded people or people interested in same topics and domains and through this media, 24*7 connectedness is possible through a variety of media and access devices including PCs, Laptops, mobile phones etc.

- Collaboration - The connections achieved on this media, enable people to collaborate and create knowledge bases whether open or closed such as wikis or ExpertNet

- Community - Connectedness and collaboration helps create and sustain communities that can create awareness about various issues and can be used for seeking inputs into policy making, building goodwill or even seeking feedback into delivery of public services

Interaction in an e-society and threats

E-society may be defined as communities in which ICTs plays catalytic role in relationship between governments, markets, and citizens. As ICTs become more pervasive, with emails, e-commerce and e-services becoming an intrinsic part of lives of an increasing no. of people, they are creating impacts on all walks of lives. However, while potential virtues of e-society are being promoted, there are conflicting results on ground. For example, as more and more people go online, ever larger number is seeking digital unplugging (23rd March is the National Unplugging Day in USA http://mashable.com/2012/03/22/national-day-of-unplugging/ last visited on April 20, 2012). Similarly, while one study shows that average internet user network is more diverse than those who do not (http://pewinternet.org/Reports/2011/Technology-and-social-networks/Part-3/Diversity-of-social-networks.aspx last visited on April 20, 2012), another study shows that people are unable to establish meaningful relationships online (http://psychcentral.com/blog/archives/2009/03/05/lonely-people-find-no-comfort-in-chatting-with-online-strangers/ last visited on April 20, 2012). On one hand people are meeting their life partners online, on the other excessive online activity is leading to divorces.

For businesses either, there are no clear cut indications. For example, in its largest e-consumer base, despite large investments in e-Commerce solutions, online purchases constituted about 5% of total retail spending in US (http://www.internetretailer.com/2011/02/17/e-commerce-sales-rise-148-2010 last visited on April 20, 2012). In India too, only about half of internet users who looked for information online made online purchases, and only 20% accounted for non travel related purchases (http://www.imediaconnection.in/article/91/Digital/Internet/ecommerce-in-india-statistics-trends-and-insights.html last visited on April 20, 2012).

For governments too, the task is equally daunting. Perception of trust, security and privacy in a world that is increasingly mediated by ICTs that enable surveillance with or without consent of citizens is limiting the usage of e-services and creation of joined up-services. There are also concerns regarding civil liberties that may be impacts by these technologies (http://is2.lse.ac.uk/wp/pdf/wp173.pdf last visited on April 20, 2012)

At ground level, interactions in e-society are limited by challenges related to digital literacy - management of change from human interface to technology interface and e-accessibility - ownership of access devices, differential access to such services and compounded by the varied "absorptive capacity" (Cohen & Levinthal, 1989) or "social capability" (Abramovitz, 1986).

"On Online platforms 1-5% create content, 10-15% react or re-post remaining 80% are passive consumers" Ajit Balakrishnan, CEO Rediff.com

The above observation made at WITFOR 2012 showcases the primary challenge of fruitful engagement of citizens over long periods of time. Clearly this is a cultural and organisational

issue that cannot be solved by merely turning to technology. However, technology can be an enabler for change.

From my experience, the top five threats to interactions in e-society are same as those in non-e-society

a) **Limited Trust in Government**: The primary challenge to initiating consultation is trust building. It is seen that generally, government actions are often low on public trust. There is also scepticism towards the reason why participation is being encouraged including tokenism.

b) **Political Reluctance**: Public participation is essentially a political process and is often not formalised or conducted in a structured manner. As such, people are often reluctant to participate.

c) **Limited capacity to engage**: In order to engage meaningfully in public policy debates, it is essential that the participants have knowledge about issues at hand and policy-making processes. However, given the limited availability of knowledge and sometimes requirement of specialised skill sets viz. Legal, technical etc. many people believe that their capacity to engage in such processes in limited.

d) **Lack of Commitment**: Engagement in policy making processes is a long drawn process and often requires individuals to make long term commitments about time and other resources. These are usually limited, thereby limiting the type and continuity of participation.

e) **Exclusion**: Consultative processes may also be seen as a way of legitimising the view of the dominant groups. In addition, the manner of consultation – time, location, mechanism of participation, language etc. may also result in exclusion of most marginalized and vulnerable groups.

(http://mit.gov.in/sites/upload_files/dit/files/Framework_for_Citizen_Engagement_in_NeGP_4_0(1)
.pdf)

The solution to the problem does not lie in abandoning the Internet or social media as a tool for democratic engagement and consultation, but in creating new opportunities for connecting citizens provided by public kiosks, cyber-cafes and community centres, as well as via interactive TV and other digital platforms including mobile phones.

Optimising the impact of e-participation

As in non-ICT enabled interactions, the level of engagement is driven by self-interest, the ability to create communities and enhanced visibility of the cause. To make the engagement successful, this essentially means creating awareness in, training of and continuous engagement with both the service provider as well as the service seeker using new tools for improved service and more effective interaction with public. In addition, as in the context of offline participation, participatory techniques must be matched to objectives of citizen

participation programs whether it is seeking feedback from citizens on proposed public policies, Issue based as well as Generic interaction, Brand Building or Public Relations or Generating Awareness and education on National Action Plans and implementation Strategies.

Some of the strategies that may be used to mitigate challenges mentioned in previous section include:

a) **Trust Building**: This is an ongoing process and requires long term commitment. For starters, the objective of engagement must be made clear from the beginning. Second, all inputs and feedbacks whether considered and incorporated or not must be shared and reasons for non consideration also be shared to ensure transparency in consultation. It is also essential that all participating government officials should identify clearly who they are, what are their roles and responsibilities in participation. Moreover, they must publish in first person to create a personal rapport. Disclaimer may be used when appropriate. Finally, there should be congruence between responses posted on social media and those in traditional media

b) **Defining Degree of engagement**: Managing expectations in a participatory process is a critical aspect. As most new media technologies enable 24*7 engagement, it is essential that intervention points and degree of engagement is defined at the outset e.g. the scope of response – given/not given, type of response – official/unofficial, response time – 1 day/1 week etc. so that expectations are set correctly. Some of the ways to ensure timely or proactive response is Email integration and RSS feed. From the citizen's perspective the degree of engagement would make her define her own role and scope in engagement based on commitment and capacity to engage. It is NOT necessary to respond to each and every comment.

c) **Openness & Inclusion**: The principal of openness is - be open to comments – whether positive or negative. Inclusion involves speaking the language of the stakeholder – ICTs enable various forms of engagement – text based, voice based, video based, they even enable translation, text to voice and voice to text conversion. Use whatever technologies are disposal to encourage inclusion and enable access through multiple devices including mobile phones, contact centres, internet etc.

d) **Integration with existing participation process**: Although ICTs have made inroads into our lives, yet a large population especially those who are vulnerable and marginalised have minimal access to ICTs. Therefore it is essential that e-participation methods are used alongside offline methods to ensure wider participation.

e) **Skill Building**: Basic Literacy and digital Literacy continue to be a challenge with vulnerable and marginalised groups in societies. It is therefore essential that literacy and e-literacy programmes are an essential building block of any e-participation initiative.

Conclusion

In the discussion above, I have attempted to highlight through some examples from India the various use of ICTs for Citizen Interaction & Empowerment. The paper has also discussed some contradictions in the hype associated with e-enabled interactions. Most importantly, the paper has shown that the challenges and ways of mitigating challenges for e-participation are similar to those used in traditional methods of interactions and that technology while adding an additional layer of complexity is perhaps the least of the challenges.

References

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Connectivity

Collaboration

Community

Swedish Association
of Local Authorities
and Regions

1

Examples from India where mobiles, Online Media including Social Media Platforms are being used

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2. Reporting on Corruption and Rent Seeking
3. Financial Inclusion
4. Public Diplomacy
5. Democratizing access to information

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2. Political Reluctance
3. Limited capacity to engage
4. Lack of Commitment
5. Exclusion

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1. Trust Building
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