

Civic Engagement in a Digital Age

Political knowledge – there’s an app for that. In fact, there are many. But are they a truly effective way of engaging prospective voters? In this article, the author explores the trend towards creating digital applications designed to raise interest and understanding of our democratic systems. Commentators suggest that these applications will be most effective when widely promoted, and are only one part of broader engagement strategies which will focus on open data initiatives and fostering two-way communication between politicians, governments and the public.

Chelsea Scherer

A growing number of digital developers are using their skills to create applications to foster greater engagement in politics among Canadians, and particularly among youth. Yet, while citizen engagement advocates agree that social media and emerging digital technologies can play an important role in reversing a decades-long decline in Canadians’ interest and involvement the country’s formal political institutions, it hasn’t happened yet and may not happen for quite some time.

This hasn’t deterred aspiring application inventors such as Allendria Brunjes, the co-founder of the Electr app, pitched as the “Tinder app of government quotes.” (Tinder is primarily used as a dating app where people within close geographic proximity are connected in conversation if they both express mutual interest in each other’s profile). Electr allows for users to agree or disagree with a quote unattributed but uttered by a federal, provincial or municipal politician; in this way they can achieve a better understanding of what their political stance is. After agreeing or disagreeing with the quote, users will have the option to see who said the quote and view when and where it was recorded. The app will also give users the ability to read the full speech or view the full interview from where the quote was taken to get more context.

“We would like to get youth engaged in political process in a format that they would recognize,” says Brunjes, who left her full-time job in April 2015 to pursue the app’s development. The main idea behind Electr is to make political statements easy to understand and access because, as she puts it, “there’s a lack of easily accessible information out there.” (See the side bar for a list of other apps that want to promote civic engagement).

Political scientist Tamara Small disagrees; she says that political information is ubiquitous on the Web but people within the 18 to 24 age bracket lack interest in it. According to Small, there are two significant issues political apps face. First, some app creators assume that just because they put information out there in a familiar and usable interface, younger people will notice it and gravitate towards it. Second, she suggests a younger generation will ultimately choose activities like watching cat videos over playing around on a political app. Brunjes responds saying that there’s still potential for this younger age bracket to be interested in politics regardless of what they choose to entertain themselves with recreationally. To her, the main issue this 18 to 24 age bracket faces is that people segregate this group from the main voting demographic. “When people are talking about young people, they often say ‘they’ instead of [referring to] them as ‘us,’” she says. “By including them we can engage them.”

Small and other experts contend these types of apps, while well-intentioned, often miss the mark. Unless they have access to advertising on a major platform they tend to get lost and even if they can be found, the people who search them out would likely already have a genuine appetite for the content and not be completely disengaged from formal politics.

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Democracy Apps

TABS

<http://tabstoronto.com/>

A volunteer-run civic engagement tool made from the Toronto Public Space Initiative. TABS stands for Transparent Accessible Bulletin System and is a tool that helps users monitor issues and actions within the City of Toronto. The tool makes searching through government records easy and accessible to anyone.

Vote Note

<http://www.voternote.ca/>

The voting app uses GPS to find riding districts for voters. It provides them with candidate information and where the closest polling station locations are. Vote Note has even teamed up with Uber, the car-sharing service, to get people to the voting station. Designed by a team of students from across Canada, the app aims to give younger people the tools they need during election time.

Politifact

<http://www.politifact.com/>

A Pulitzer Prize winner – this app uses a “Truth-O-Meter” to show whether the statements made by elected candidates and other well-known people who regularly voice their opinion on American politics are true or false.

One interface that did find a wide degree of success was CBC’s Vote Compass app for the 2011 federal election. In collaboration with Vox Pop Labs, Vote Compass was a useful tool for comparing party platforms at a basic level. Jane Hilderman, Samara Canada’s Executive Director, cautions that the people who were taking the time to fill out the Vote Compass questionnaire were, on average, more engaged than the general population; however, she argues that a national media organization like CBC was a great platform for such a comparison tool because its main website drew in tens of thousands of visitors for a variety of reasons. It found a large and ready potential audience – something smaller political apps struggle to find.

Small suggests that prospective political app-makers should play to the strengths of the medium by focusing less on text-heavy policy and instead push to be more interactive in a multimedia sense. Even then, a superbly-designed app may only be effective on a large scale if it receives promotion on platforms like television, radio and popular news websites in addition to social media exposure.

But there is another fundamental question experts are asking that concerns the initiatives of apps: does becoming more informed about politics necessarily make someone more engaged? Jean-Noé Landry, a director at Open North and a promoter of government transparency and public participation, says an interface like Vote Compass can be a fun and useful tool to compare political parties but contends that it’s still very difficult to measure the success of it. Furthermore, taking a quiz may help someone map where they are in the political spectrum but it may not directly influence their likelihood of voting.

Open North, Canada’s leading open data nonprofit, is a large part of the open data movement that focuses on making government data available and reusable for developers. Open North’s own Citizen Budget¹ online tool provides a way for residents to have greater involvement in how their municipal government spends their money. With about 50 different municipalities already using the budget calculator, Landry says they are effectively changing the way people look at citizen engagement. By harnessing social media, the tool encourages residents to share proposals online and view the effects in real-time. “It puts citizens and residents in their leaders’ shoes,” says Landry.

The difference between this type of tool and the current generation of political apps is measurable. Connecting governments with non-voters – what some political awareness apps strive to do – is only one step.

Landry says he believes political apps will be most effective once there is a more fundamental cultural change and modernization of political institutions themselves. “We need movement building,” he says. “To form a community of like-minded people and promote their values.” It’s a notion of building with, not for. Landry explains that with more transparent and accountable governments, citizens are more likely to become interested and involved. From there, leaders can start to utilize social media tools and apps to ask the questions that really matter to the citizens they represent and make genuine connections with citizens.

“Data literacy is the future because it cuts through interpretation and opinion,” Landry says. “Data should be a public utility that is free and available.” And while political apps are attempting to facilitate this information dispersal, Hilderman, who is contacted at Samara Canada by app creators once or twice a month, suggests that “it’s more challenging than just releasing data and waiting for engagement to happen.” Like Landry, she stresses that citizens need to have the capability to comment in order to get them participating in the conversation. They also need to be advised when there is change happening. This way, citizens can actively participate and not be left out of policy making.

This is the aim of the Transparent Accessible Bulletin System (TABS), a tool for monitoring issues and actions in the City of Toronto. TABS enables engaged residents, policy experts, journalists, and busy bureaucrats the ability to search through government records. It was created in response to the growing demand of open government data. At its core, the website scans public records and presents them in a way that is easily understood. “TABS makes it easier for citizens, small non-profits, and those who may not have insider knowledge, or the time and resources to keep track of everything happening at City Hall, to keep track of their issues and engage the City,” says Jayme Turney, Project Director of TABS. In short, TABS helps to simplify the complexity of government agenda items for citizens so that they can further discuss their concerns and questions at council meetings or with local councilors.

Fostering two-way communication is a particular challenge when one group – prospective voters – is increasingly suspicious of the other – politicians and candidates for office. Hilderman says that when Samara Canada launched the Democracy 360² research project, the goal was to find out what Canadians thought of when they heard the word democracy. On the whole, the word had a much more positive connotation compared to the word politics, which was more associated with liars, broken promises, and corruption.

“Thirty to 40 years ago, politicians [were] always at the bottom of the ranking of different careers that you think you want your kids to go into or that you would trust,” she says. “But I think it is important that we don’t just accept it as a foregone conclusion that some politicians are just never going to change or be seen as valuable.”

Hilderman says the negative impressions of these political leaders may have something to do with their social media presence. She says there is a lot of unevenness even between Members of Parliament utilizing their websites. A handful of the websites will have a comprehensive amount of information and contact capabilities whereas others are the bare minimum with limited interaction. Samara Canada found that 63 per cent of Canadians report being contacted by a politician or party within the last year compared with 31 per cent of Canadians who actively sought out an elected official. This may be because six out of 10 Canadians think parties are only after their votes and not their opinions. If more communities adopted tools which foster two-way communication, similar to Citizen Budget, then Canadians may be more likely to get involved.

Advancing civic technology may be the missing puzzle piece in solving a great civic engagement picture. Devising two-way communication possibilities may prove to be an incentive for voters who want to influence future governmental policy making. In addition to cultivating more interactive ways of accessing different levels of government, spreading the word about the kinds of civic resources available is crucial in the encouragement of citizen participation.

Notes

1 <http://www.opennorth.ca/>

2 <http://www.samaracanada.com/research/samara-democracy-360>