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Extracting a basic use case to let policy makers interact with citizens on Social Networking Sites

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A report on initial results

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Abstract: The following paper describes a basic use case to let policy makers interact with citizens on Social Networking Sites such as Facebook and Twitter. This use case is extracted from the exploration of a couple of more detailed eParticipation scenarios. As result we determined the core actions, extract topics from Social Networking Sites, respond to topics and launch new topics.

Keywords: eParticipation, eSociety, political debates, opinion mining, hot topics, behavioral analysis

S ocial Networking Sites like Facebook, Twitter, YouTube and Delicious provides major new opportunities for policy makers (eGovernment) to engage with the community (eSociety). With WeGov the policy maker is presented with a web based application wherein all the diverse social network inputs from citizens are collated, aggregated, analyzed and presented using visualization technologies that make the data more accessible and easier to understand. Functionalities such as hot topic extraction, tag clouds, opinion mining and behavioral analysis will be employed via the applications dashboard in order to enable decision makers to monitor and evaluate in an organized manner, the flow of citizen inputs scattered across Social Networking Sites.

Within the first year of the project a number of use case scenarios were designed; to explore how the application could be integrated into policy making processes and to make sure that the technical development is based on stakeholders needs. Another aim was to examine the use of the WeGov application concerning legal and ethical aspects. While all use cases come from very different social and political domains - with focus on health care, consumer protection and nuclear waste disposal - yet a basic use case could be identified as the underlying core use case scenario. The reason is that all conceivable communication scenarios between policy makers and citizens - how comprehensive they ever may be thought - are rest upon a small number of possible rudimental actions. The following paper is exactly to describe this basic use case.

1. Background

Each of the underlying use cases were designed and discussed with stakeholders on the basis of mockups. Three use case partners are in charge of the outcome: Hansard Society[1] in the UK, with a scenario on public healthcare; Gov2u[2] in Greece, with a scenario on consumer protection; and GESIS – Leibniz Institute for the Social Sciences[3] in Germany, with a scenario on nuclear waste disposal. There are existing two projects, which outcome influenced the WeGov project concerning the design process of the two-way dialogue between policy makers and citizens: The health service comment website choices[4], originally set up in 2006 in the northwest of England, and VoicE[5], as a trial project for implementing a new model of e-participation within European regions.

2. Basic Use Case Scenario

The basic use case scenario, determined within the WeGov project, includes the following actions: (1) Monitoring relevant debates and exploring citizens' opinions; (2) Responding to already existing opinions and interfering with existing online discussions; and (3) Initiating a discussion with a statement as a topic. Figure 1 shows an UML diagram with these three actions inside the left-handed rectangle. This box is representing the WeGov dashboard, the web based application, whereby the policy maker is possible to access these functionalities to get in the two-way dialogue with citizens on Social Networking Sites. The right-handed rectangle is representing Facebook as one Social Networking Site representative. Inside this platform Facebook users discuss any political subject. Technically both systems are connected wire the Facebook API.
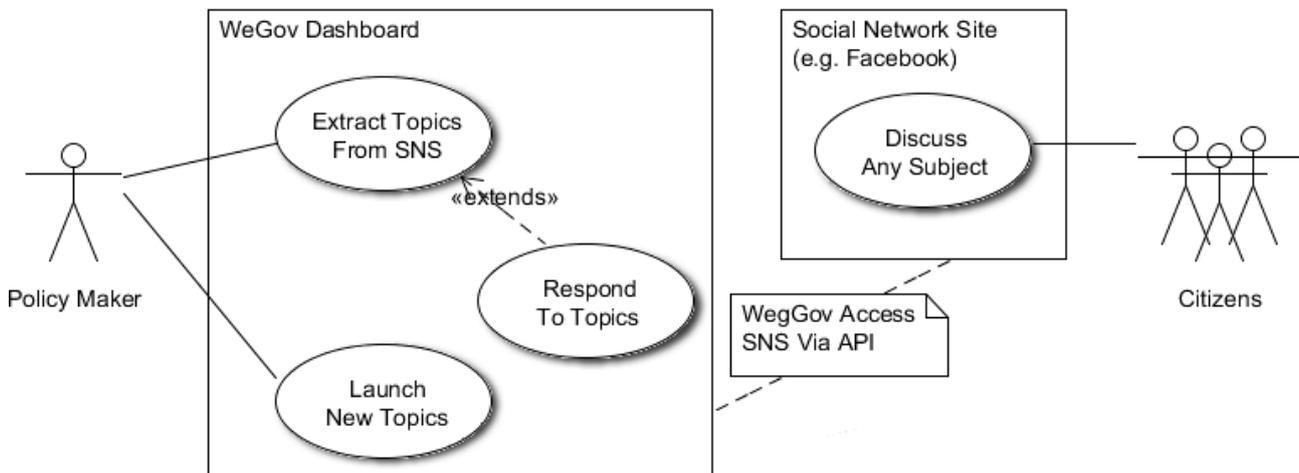

Figure 1: UML diagram covers WeGov basic use case

2.1. Extract Topics from SNS

This monitoring functionality supports policy makers with hot topics, 'relevant' debates and opinions on Facebook. For instance, one topic in Germany is nuclear power with the major

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[1] URL: http://www.hansardsociety.org.uk/ (Retrieved February 6, 2011)

[2] URL: http://www.gov2u.org/ (Retrieved February 6, 2011)

[3] URL: http://www.gesis.org/ (Retrieved February 6, 2011)

[4] URL: http://www.nhs.uk/ (Retrieved February 6, 2011)

[5] URL: http://www.give-your-voice.eu/ (Retrieved February 6, 2011)

problems of nuclear waste disposal; and user opinions differ very strong on that topic; WeGov alerts the stakeholder with those kinds of topics and the 'relevant' user opinions like pros and cons.

2.2.   Respond to Topics

This action extends 2.1 Extract topics from SNS. After the policy maker picked up an interesting opinion, he responds directly with his own statement into the recommended debate. This stakeholder injection is monitored automatically by the WeGov analyzing tool, to support the policy maker with a short selection of interesting comments on his statements.

2.3.   Launch new Topics

With the action "launch new topics", the policy maker posts his own statement wherever he wants and is authorized into the Social Networking Site Facebook. The stakeholder might use this action for quickly 'testing' a statement inside a real digital environment and gather the diverse users' feedback, inside a structured selection of opinions. The outcome of users feedback may then go into the political decision making process. For instance, the stakeholder posts a video on Facebook with the statement of stopping nuclear power and closing the debatable nuclear waste disposal. This action could also be seen as a stakeholder's reaction on results of the 2.1 Extract Topics from SNS action.

3. Legal & Ethical Issues

All of the designed use cases were checked back with ILAWS – the Institute for Law and the Web at Southampton[6], against legal and ethical issues. For example the policy maker retains full control on the WeGov dashboard and the policy maker is considered a data controller for the purposes of data protection legislation and must observe and perform the eight data protection principles.

4. Prospect

At the time of writing, the dashboard was not yet ready. Concerning the project timetable the initial prototype, which covers the described basic use case, will be ready in 2011 for initial evaluation.

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About the Author

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[6] URL: http://www.soton.ac.uk/ilaws/ (Retrieved February 6, 2011)

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