

Social Media Revisited

User Generated Content as a Social Innovation for eInclusion

Christoph Kaletka, Ralf Kopp, Bastian Pelka

Dr. Christoph Kaletka, Dr. Ralf Kopp and Dr. Bastian Pelka are researchers at
Technische Universität Dortmund, Sozialforschungsstelle, Germany
kaletka@sfs-dortmund.de, kopp@sfs-dortmund.de, pelka@sfs-dortmund.de

Abstract

The paper raises the question whether Web 2.0 can be seen as a technological or a social innovation and describes interdependencies between these two phenomena. The paper argues that the core innovation of Web 2.0 is the communication of “user generated content” as a new social routine, which is largely congruent with the definition of “Web 2.0” in the communication science discourse (which the authors speak for). The authors distinguish between a technological and a social layer of this innovation. The concrete usage by a broad and heterogeneous audience of the different technologies is seen as the main driver for the spread of web 2.0 and the paradigmatic changes it exerts on numerous fields of life. While technology is seen as a “catalyst”, the innovation itself (user generated content) is considered a social one. In a final step, the paper describes the usage of social media in the field of adult learning and the way web 2.0 based learning principles can contribute to social inclusion. In “telecentres”, social media have started to prove their potential as easy-to-use applications for activating and integrating target groups with low ICT skills into the “digital society”.

Hypotheses

1. Social media are not a technological but a social innovation. Social innovations emerge not through technology itself, but through the way people use technology.
2. Social and technological innovations foster each other and can catalyse complex social phenomena (see also Zapf 1989; Howaldt/Schwarz 2010).
3. Social innovations can be defined by the following key criteria:
 - a. They are intended (in contrast to “*social change*” which “happens” unintended)
 - b. They solve problems better than other approaches (core of every “*innovation*”)
 - c. They are concretely and regularly used (in contrast to a “*social invention*”,

which is new, but not necessarily successfully applied).

4. The “core innovation” of social media can be found in the principle of “user generated content” (ugc)
5. ugc fosters a paradigmatic change in communication: every user can contribute actively to public communication, public knowledge and public decision making. This will continuously challenge professional communication workers (e.g. teachers, journalists).
6. ugc has the potential and also the prerequisite to activate users. This bears great opportunities for learning, political participation and social inclusion.
7. Learning from good practices (I): Policy Design can learn from socio-digital designs in Enterprise 2.0 how to motivate user driven collaboration
8. Learning from good practices (II): Telecentres are an experimental field for “good practices” in the field of using social media for civil society purposes: Telecentres have gained comprehensive experiences in how to facilitate discussions and learning in social media, how to motivate citizens and how to involve especially “vulnerable” target groups in a process of social inclusion.

1. Background: What is “Web 2.0”?

The „Web 2.0“ is widely seen as one of the most important recent innovations in the field of ICT. It is regarded as an innovation itself and a place that again bears media innovations (like Wikipedia, youtube or flickr). In the ICT discourse, Web 2.0 is mainly seen as a new technology that is an innovation in comparison to the “web 1.0”. This understanding condensates in the approach to define Web 2.0 by collecting all applications that are declared to be Web 2.0. This self-reflexive definition is expressed in the tag cloud

that Wikipedia uses to describe Web 2.0. The tag cloud implies concrete applications (wikis, blogs), principles (modularity, joy of use), technologies (AJAX, RSS), and usage phenomena (long tail, folksonomies, user generated content).

Still, most of the necessary and implemented technologies are much older (Reißmann 2005) than the rise of Web 2.0, and many applications can be seen as varieties of older applications which have developed over decades (Maaß/Pietsch /2007, Rheingold 1992, Bühl 1997). The OECD report “Participative web: user created content” has taken a different approach which is in various aspects congruent with the authors’ understanding of web 2.0.

In their definition, the participative web consists of “i) content made publicly available over the Internet, ii) which reflects a ‘certain amount of creative effort’, and iii) which is ‘created outside of professional routines and practices’”.

2. Approach: Technologies “catalyse” the creation of user generated content in social media

The scientific discourse on „media“ has long since introduced an important distinction the authors refer to: It differentiates between technological and social, or „first layer“ and „second layer“ media. (Kubicek 1997: 33) For a coherent use of technologies in a society, they have to be embedded into media which institutionalise the way technologies are being used and set the „rules of the game“ (Wirth/ Schweiger 1999: 46). In line with this argumentation, we are looking for the way technologies are applied by users to generate content.

Wikis, blogs and communities are the three most striking applications that are seen as part of the Web 2.0 and which can help to examine its innovative character. These applications help us understand the “phenomenon social media” as well as technological development and social acceptance processes which are conducive to their success. The “social innovation binoculars” can help us to understand socio-technological phenomena by explicitly making a difference between a technological and a social layer.

For wikis, blogs and communities, we distinguish between software (the technology layer), content (the mediated communication) and institutionalized usage in social routines. The latter describes the “rules of the game” for an interplay of software and content under which users cooperate, communicate, and interact (Pelka 2008).

An analysis of wikis, blogs and communities leads us to the result that these applications are a new way of using “old” technology in order to create content outside of professional routines and practices to make it available via internet. These applications catalyse new “rules of the game”: social routines which satisfy expectations of user generated content. From this point on, we argue that this

user generated content is the core innovation that best describes the innovative character of Web 2.0.

During the last years, more and more areas of life have been influenced by web 2.0 based communication. As stated in the hypotheses above, this influence in fact means paradigmatic changes for the way we live, work, and learn. If, as said above, user generated content is really created outside professional, but still communicated in easily understandable social routines, such content poses a challenge for professional selection instances and journalism as a whole in the same way book printing challenged the role of the church as dominating gatekeeper in the religious discourse.

3. Practical use: web 2.0 based learning and working for eInclusion purposes

This change of perspectives on the subject “web 2.0” allows a new look at the discussion of technologies and media evolution, but also at very concrete fields of web 2.0 practice. Especially, it helps us find answers not only to the question which prerequisites and rules are the basis for specific user generated content as a social innovation, but also to the question of how Web 2.0 applications may be intentionally used: in many social sub-systems web 2.0 is either highly relevant already or considered to bear enormous potential.

Two examples which highlight the innovative capacity of web 2.0 are knowledge management innovations in enterprises through the application of web 2.0 and its underlying communication principles (“enterprise 2.0”), and eInclusion approaches for adult learners implemented in “telecenters” (TC).

TCs are public institutions where people (often without private ICT and internet access) have the possibility to access the internet as well as a variety of learning opportunities in a “low barrier environment”. Easy-to-use software helps „digital illiterates“ catch up with demands set by the labour market and the contemporary way of life. New learning opportunities which often reflect local and regional needs for action are created for special target groups.

TCs are publicly funded, the users are supported by facilitators and the TC does not only support ICT-skills, but sees individual ICT-skills embedded in the development of a local community. In this context, web 2.0 applications are a promising approach to empower users with low ICT-skills to communicate, cooperate and collaborate on the internet with other people and so find a connection to the digital world.

In order to facilitate lifelong learning, TCs address the development of social media based curricula and the qualification of “e-facilitators” in public telecentres. In two EU-funded development projects, the authors have participated

in using social media for eInclusion of people with low ICT skills. This target group is addressed by Telecentres that have knowledge about how to approach for example elderly, unemployed or lowly skilled persons. In combination with face-to-face support, social support and motivation approaches, social media have proven their potential to activate these target groups to participate in the digital society by producing user generated content.

Another example of using web 2.0 as a communication paradigm refers to an emergent of business organization: enterprise 2.0 as a socio-digital innovation system (Kopp 2011). It enables insights into structures, processes and qualifications for generating user driven content and collaboration. Furthermore, it shows how to foster self-organization, participation, motivation.

One of the learning effects in enterprise 2.0 is the need of qualification (competence of interaction) on “both sides” of the enterprise (internal and external). This point connects to the topic of eInclusion, which is focused in the first example.

Conclusion

We have, very shortly, indicated the connections between user generated content as a social innovation and the potential of its application in selected fields of life. We can come back to the idea we started with and concludingly apply the example of telecentres to the triangular figure of the paper’s headline.

Telecenters make use of *user generated content*: web 2.0 applications actively involve the learners in the creation of learning content. While there are developed curricula as the backbone of all learning opportunities, wikis and blog structures allow the learners to better “translate” content to their own social reality. This user activation principle stands for a possible paradigmatic change in adult learning addressed in the hypotheses above. It is a “possible” paradigmatic change because TC-based adult education is, of course, only a marginal element in regional lifelong learning systems and also has a high need for professionalization. Still, it is a prime example for raising e-Inclusion potential through the use of web 2.0. At the beginning, we argued that a social innovation always implies that it is put to use routinely. In order to become more successful, more effective and mainstream, the *social innovation* process around web 2.0 in telecentres has to continue. This complex process involves the further development of web 2.0 learning opportunities, a continuing professionalization of e-facilitators as learning moderators, political acceptance and support of TCs as experts for eInclusion through innovative adult learning, and other aspects.

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