



E-democracy remixed

Learning from the BBC's Action Network and the shift from a static commons to a participatory multiplex

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Abstract: *This paper examines a five-year initiative by the UK's public service broadcaster, the BBC, to reinvigorate civic engagement at a time of declining public participation in politics. The Action Network project, originally called iCan, ran from 2003 to 2008 and was one of the most high profile and ambitious attempts by a public service broadcaster to foster eParticipation through an online civic commons. This study analyzes Action Network within the context of conceptualizations of the Internet as a networked, distributed and participatory environment and the shift towards what scholars describe as a networked public sphere. It suggests that the project did not have the impact anticipated as it was borne out of a paternalistic broadcast legacy. Such an approach is out of step with the trend towards distributed and collaborative discourse online that reassesses the notion of the public as resource to be managed. This paper argues that the BBC experience provides lessons in how the media, and specifically public service broadcasters, can contribute towards greater political participation and democratic dialogue through the Internet by adopting Web 2.0 approaches that enable citizens to engage on different levels and at different times, depending on contexts.*

Keywords: BBC, democracy, eParticipation, journalism, Internet, public service broadcasting

The challenges over public participation in politics in Britain are well researched, typified by low voter turnout, declining mass membership of political parties and a lack of trust in political institutions (Blumler & Coleman, 2001; Coleman, 2004a; Sambrook, 2005). It is within the context of increasing disengagement and declining trust in governing institutions that scholars frame the potential of digital technologies to encourage citizen activity and enrich democracy (Bell, 1981; Kling, 1996; Negroponte, 1998; Rheingold, 1993). The potential of the Internet as a way to address a democratic deficit is based on the networked interactivity, and transcendence of time and space, offered by the Internet to enable new communicative spaces outside of old media systems (Born, 2006), with Jones (1997) describing cyberspace as a new public space.

In Western European states, public service broadcasting is viewed as a policy tool to disseminate relevant information to citizens and facilitate public discourse. But as Moe (2008) points out, public media has been more successful at its informational role than in providing a space for citizen dialogue or for greater participation in the political process. As one of the most prominent public service broadcasters in the world, the BBC sees itself as playing a key role in this space. The corporation has argued that "the BBC is well-placed to help sustain a new era of digital public space," (BBC, 2010, p. 45), and furthermore, it "should act as one of the main guarantors of public space," (p. 3). A commitment to informed citizenship has been at the core of the BBC's remit since its launch in the 1920s. Its civic duty was underlined in 2006 when the corporation's mandate, the Royal Charter, was renewed, placing sustaining citizenship and civil society at the top of BBC's six public purposes: "The BBC supports civic life and national debate by providing trusted and impartial news and information that helps citizens make sense of the world and encourages them to engage with it," (BBC, n.d.).

Scholars caution that a public space is not synonymous with the concept of the public sphere proposed by Habermas (1992), where contending viewpoints come together and a consensus is arrived at through a process of rational deliberation. In his examination of the literature on e-democracy, Chadwick (2009) notes the allure of the net as a deliberative public sphere, with the

Internet discussed as a medium suited for public debates. But Papacharissi (2002) argues that for the Internet to be more of a public sphere and not just another space for political deliberation, it must promote a democratic exchange of ideas. In her view, "a virtual space enhances discussion; a virtual sphere enhances democracy," (2002, p. 11).

This paper examines a BBC initiative to create what can be considered as a virtual public sphere through its Action Network. The project, originally called iCan, sought to build on the public service mission of the BBC by providing online mechanisms for local civic engagement. It was one of the most high profile and ambitious attempts by a public service broadcaster to foster eParticipation through an online civic commons. It was launched in 2003 and shut down five years later in 2008.

This study looks at Action Network to examine whether the concept of an online civic commons is consistent with conceptualizations of the Internet as a networked, distributed and participatory environment and what Benkler describes as a shift towards a "networked public sphere" (2006, p. 177). I suggest that the project did not have the impact anticipated as it was based on a patriarchal, top-down, broadcast model that viewed the public as a resource to be managed. The BBC experience provides lessons in how the media, and specifically public service broadcasters, can contribute towards greater political participation and democratic dialogue through the Internet.

1. E-democracy and public service broadcasting

Much of the literature on political engagement in Britain focuses on the potential political and social benefits of digitization. Davies (2005) suggests that digital networks can enable "new types of politics" and support "communities in a way never seen before" (Davies, 2005, p. 68). Coleman (2004a) suggests that new media could re-invigorate political engagement by providing interactive channels for government accountability, political mobilization and policy consultation and debate. The importance of the role of the Internet is underlined by survey evidence that suggests that web users would go online first for information such as the name of their MP or details about schools or taxes (Dutton & and Helsper, 2007).

E-democracy initiatives by the UK government have sought to modernize and replicate existing practices, such as official consultations, online electioneering and Internet voting (Coleman, 2004a; Gibson, Nixon & Ward, 2003). These projects reflect the notion of nodality, one of the four tools of government policy identified by political scientists (Hood, 1993; Hood and Margetts, 2007). Government is at the centre of social and informational networks, occupying "a strategic position from which to dispense information" (Hood, 1983, p. 12).

As a result, politicians and governments have been accused of simply adapting "new communications technologies to their existing missions and agendas" (Bennett, 2003, p. 19). Coleman (2004a) goes further, arguing that the tentative initiatives taken by the UK government towards adopting the Internet as a democratic channel are flawed as they frame e-democracy as a gift handed-down to the citizens by the authorities.

In contrast, e-democracy advocates have described the BBC as "one of the key agents in the development of a 'multi-tiered public realm', because it is a trusted brand at every level between international broadcasting and grass-roots initiatives," (Davis, 2005, p. 71). Murdock has extended the traditional role of public media in Europe to the digital space, arguing that an institution such as the BBC could make up a central node in what he calls a digital commons (Murdock, 2005). Coleman has articulated a similar vision, suggesting the BBC is in a pivotal position to host an online civic commons that would "inspire and facilitate public participation (2004a, p. 96). Blumler and Coleman have proposed the idea of a publicly funded, independently funded online civic commons "to elicit, gather and coordinate citizens' deliberations upon and reactions to problems faced and proposals issued by public bodies," (2001, p. 4):

"The resulting 'electronic commons' would be neither a talking shop in splendid isolation nor a replacement of representative by direct democracy. It would be instead an open-ended,

institutionally backed extension of people's opportunities to make contributions to public policy on those matters that specially concern them" (p. 4-5)

A state-funded but independent public service broadcaster is central to this vision of the Internet as a public sphere. Coleman (2004a) argues that the BBC is in a strong position to create a civic commons, given its successful web presence and broad mandate to innovate online. But he also maintains that the BBC, as a public service broadcaster, needs to find a new role in the digital age and proposes that it could become an agent for civilized public debate. Moe (2008) builds on Coleman's proposal, arguing that facilitating dialogue online is not enough. He contends that public service media must also "assist the articulation of opinions and perspectives in moderated discussions forums" and that "well-designed spaces must be supported by both professionally produced background information and guides to an array of independent, external sources," (Moe, 2008, p. 331).

Public service broadcasting is framed as a universal public good that Scannell describes as "an indispensable guarantor of open, democratic forms of public life," (2005, p. 8). These are normative approaches to the role of a public service broadcaster during a period when the very notions of 'public', 'service' and 'broadcasting' are being called into question by social and technological changes (Born, 2004). Indeed, there is a growing body of literature devoted to rethinking the nature and scope of public service broadcasting in a digital media system (see Bardoel & d'Haenens, 2008; Moe, 2008).

2. The BBC eParticipation project

The section will outline the background to the Action Network project and its development as a platform for eParticipation.

2.1. The corporation's democratic mission

The roots of the BBC's public mission lie in the vision of its founding Director General John Reith. He saw the broadcaster as national institution that would promote social integration, enhance democratic practices and raise cultural standards, based on the trinity of information, education and entertainment. The Reithian ethos embodies a set of cultural values and practices that positions the BBC as an autonomous, non-commercial service to serve the public good. The values are enshrined in the Royal Charter that governs the BBC activities, which is reviewed every ten years.

The democratic mission of the BBC was highlighted in the run-up to the charter renewal in 2007. In official documents, the corporation stressed that one of its key objectives was "to deliver a fundamental component of British democracy: truthful and reliable news, rigorous analysis and wide-ranging, intelligent debate that allow citizens to formulate their own opinions and exercise their votes" (BBC, 2004, p. 30). The documents also drew attention to the BBC's intention to provide "ways for audiences to become more active citizens and contributors to the national debate" (BBC, 2004, p. 65) by creating more opportunities for people to engage with political and civic life.

Documents produced by the BBC in 2004 and 2005 during the charter renewal process provide further evidence of how the corporation saw a role for itself in establishing something akin to an online civic commons:

"The Internet is creating new forums for individuals and communities to engage with each other through social or political expression. Weblogs (or 'blogs'), discussion boards and online communities are an early signal of how content generated by audiences may come to revolutionize media. There are big implications for how the BBC will facilitate debate. Its aim is to be a trusted hub for open, intelligent and independent debate in forums at local, UK-wide and global levels" (BBC, 2005, p. 17)

The BBC would not be able to undertake an active role in fostering democratic engagement if it did not occupy a dominant position in the media ecosystem, reaching more than 90% of people in Britain in an average week (BBC Executive, 2007). In the digital space, research suggests the BBC's website has become a key resource for news and information about politics in the UK. Escher and Margetts (2007) found that the site was a relatively popular source for information related to government and politics. Other research indicated that about 70% of people obtained news about the 2005 general election from the BBC website (Schifferes, 2006). Moreover, scholars maintain that the corporation also has the financial and technical resources to construct an "open, multi-purpose space on the Internet equivalent to urban parks" (Stewart et al, 2004: 353) that would serve to stimulate political discussion and engagement.

2.2. The Action Network project

The BBC project was called iCan at the time of its launch in 2003 and rebranded as Action Network in 2005. It created a free public space online where people could share information and experiences, start a campaign or connect with like-minded individuals (Coleman, 2006). The project ran for five years, from November 2003 to April 2008, with a BBC investment of £1,320,253 over this period (Samarasinghe, 2008).

From the start, Action Network initiative enjoyed support from politicians. At the time of the launch, a leading advocate of e-democracy, Tom Watson MP, described the project as "exactly what a publicly funded, publicly accountable corporation should be spending our money on" (Watson, quoted in Kevill, 2003b). Leading scholars on the BBC said Action Network had "the potential to become a facilitative online space for political self-representation and self-organization," (Born, 2006, p. 110). The project was also positively reviewed by civic action advocates (see, for example Das, 2007) and recognized internationally (BBC News, 2005).

The aim of Action Network was to provide the tools for people to engage in local issues by providing an online network that would encourage and foster civic action. A senior BBC executive described it as a "database of democracy" (Kevill, 2003a). An explanatory note on the Action Network website sought to stress how it was intended to promote civic action:

"Unlike many websites we want you to do more than just add your comments to the site. Action Network is here to help people campaign about an issue, make contacts and get advice, then make a difference in their local community" (BBC Action Network, 2005)

The site provided BBC-authored resources such as links to local government and information on pressure groups, NGOs and MPs. The site was also expected to generate local news stories for the BBC based on the grassroots campaigns.

The project followed a BBC review of its political programming that found that many people felt disengaged from the political mainstream. Action Network was intended to address the democratic deficit by its focus on local issues since a BBC survey following the UK general election in 2001 found that though people were less interested in party politics, they were still interested in individual issues. This description by BBC project leader Martin Vogel indicates how the BBC was trying to shift the focus of political action:

"iCan took those challenges and tried to come up with a way for people to engage in politics through their own definitions of the issues that concern them, so instead of looking at the Westminster village, looking at the issues that affect me and helping people to have an influence on them through connecting with other and finding sources of information which get you started" (Vogel, quoted in Coleman, 2004b, p. 5-6)

The discourse within the BBC about the project suggests that the broadcaster saw itself in a unique position to foster political participation via the Internet, in line with the corporation's role to foster an informed citizenship. The Action Network project was part of the BBC's New Politics Initiative, which sought to revitalize how the corporation reported and reflected politics. The head of the initiative, Sian Kevill, indicated the public service broadcaster should be taking a leading role in

developing the democratic potential of the web, arguing "the BBC is well placed to become a key facilitator in this emerging e-democracy world, using its strong trusted brand combined with its ability to attract audiences through both its online and broadcast output," (Kevill, 2003a).

Action Network can be considered as fulfilling some of the aspects of the online civic commons envisaged by Blumler & Coleman (2001) and later developed by Coleman (2004a; 2006). The site provided a moderated and trustworthy discussion space which research suggests has an impact on the outcomes of online dialogue (Albrecht, 2006). However, Action Network ceased to exist as a website on April 30 2008, five years after its launch. The following considers the reasons for the closure.

3. Assessing the BBC's eParticipation project

The BBC experience provides a valuable case study of the challenges of eParticipation and the limitations of projects that seek to adopt digital communication technologies to support and promote e-democracy. My argument is that there was a fundamental tension between the BBC's desire to empower grassroots civic action and the corporation's historical and entrenched obligations as an impartial public service broadcaster governed by a paternalistic and elitist Reithian ethos.

3.1. The impartiality imperative

Action Network was designed and implemented by the BBC as a space for activists yet it functioned within the constraints of the corporation as a publicly funded institution. User activity had to take place within the ideal of the BBC as an impartial institution, and as such sought to make an arguably arbitrary distinction between civic and political activism. BBC editorial guidelines for Action Network underscored the need to protect the BBC's impartiality. They stated that "users should not use Action Network to campaign explicitly for or against political parties or candidates," and excluded politicians in office from using the platform to organize campaigns (BBC Editorial Guidelines, n.d.). Impartiality is a central tenet of the public service broadcaster and its editorial guidelines stress that "impartiality lies at the heart of the BBC's commitment to its audiences" (BBC Editorial Guidelines, n.d.).

The emphasis on impartiality is manifest in public comments by BBC staff involved with Action Network. Project leader Martin Vogel framed the site as "a neutral platform to help anyone in the UK become more involved in local civic and democratic activities" (Vogel, quoted in BBC press release, 2005). Senior executives reinforced the notion of Action Network as an impartial platform for action:

"The civic space it creates is a neutral area, a place where anyone can put any issue on the agenda, as long as they comply with basic house rules. Participants are likely to encounter opponents to their point of view, but the environment encourages them to engage in a dialogue, rather than a diatribe" (Sambrook, 2005, p. 15)

It is instructional to consider Action Network based on Peters' (1993) analysis of the characteristics of an ideal public sphere. Peters suggests that everyone should have an equal right to express themselves and be heard on any theme. The house rules of the project placed restrictions on who could contribute and excluded a wide range of issues that were deemed too political. The structuring of Action Network in such a way that it attempted to separate the civic and political spheres has been identified by Coleman and Blumler (2009) as a major weakness. They suggest that the lack of 'real world politics' meant the project was at risk of "cultivating a sham representation of citizenship," (2009, p. 126).

3.2. A broadcast legacy

Benkler points out that "the practices that define the public sphere are structured by an interaction of culture, organization, institutions, economics, and technical communications infrastructure," (2006, p. 178). The creation of a civic commons under the auspices of the BBC meant that it was shaped by the institutional and organizational Reithian culture of the public service broadcaster. From its inception, the BBC's practices were informed by internal reflection on the corporation's "proper cultural, journalistic and ethical stance," (Born, 2003, p. 65), and these affected how Action Network was managed.

The leading online civic campaigner Tom Steinberg described the project as "a very sound idea, very badly implemented for management reasons. The BBC never took account of user feedback and it was never iterated, never improved" (Steinberg, quoted in E-Government Bulletin, 2008). In his analysis of the project, Jones argues that the BBC's notion of grassroots activism had a negative impact on the initiative. He wrote that "my clients, BBC designers and planners, had their own ideas of this activity deriving from new media 'best practice' and emerging discourses (such as 'social software') within their industry" (Jones, 2005, p. 32). His study is indicative of the tensions in creating structures to facilitate participation while at the same time applying institutional notions of how this participation should take place.

In particular, Jones explains how the site was initially conceived "to totalize the life of a campaign as a new media experience, and as something to be wholly mediated through iCan" (2005, p. 36). In other words, campaigning is structured to take place under the auspices of the BBC, with the broadcaster as a central node for civic activism. Jones notes that the corporation later noted that grassroots campaigns are "emergent in nature" and "rooted in experiential being together" (2005, p. 46), suggesting the BBC recognized the limitations of its initial framework.

3.3. From Web 1.0 to Web 2.0

The development and launch of Action Network took place during a phase in the history of the Internet categorized as Web 1.0 as the net was evolving towards a phase labeled as Web 2.0. The term Web 2.0 was first proposed by Tim O'Reilly (2005) to describe the progression of the web from a network of static pages towards the web as a platform based on networked software services. Rather than focus on specific technologies or services, Chang and Kannan define Web 2.0 as "a networked world that supports individual users creating content individually and collectively, sharing and updating information and knowledge using sophisticated, diverse sharing devices and tools, and remixing and improving on content created by each other," (2008, p. 10).

The BBC initiative aimed to provide a structure for users to voice their concerns and offer campaign tools to allow them to work collectively. The site was conceived and implemented as an enclosed and purpose-specific online space with a stable order, rather than as an open, fluid and network environment. Action Network was rooted in a model of civic engagement where citizens are waiting for opportunities to make themselves heard and once these facilities are created, they will come and use them. Participation was structured according to what Chadwick has called the 1990s e-democracy paradigm of the deliberative spaces. He suggests this approach is based on the assumption that these online spaces "would provide for rich, critical, self-reflective, tolerant, and sustained citizen engagement," (2009, p. 15). Chadwick argues that these particular models of behavior account for the shortcomings of many e-democracy initiatives.

The participation figures for Action Network indicate the limited reach and impact of the BBC's e-democracy project. By late 2005, the site had 14,000 registered members and 170,000 visitors a month (Sambrook, 2005). By April 2006, the numbers had risen to some 20,000 registered participants and about 235,000 visitors a month (Behrens, 2006). Official BBC figures show the Action Network had 41,718 registered users just before it was closed down in April 2008 (Stiller, 2008). The number of visits and users is of limited value in assessing engagement. An analysis of the number of active users indicates low levels of engagement. At the time of its closure, the site had 687 active users in a month. The highest number of active users for any one month was 2,106

in March 2006 – just under 0.00005% of the 45 million registered voters in the UK (Ministry of Justice, 2008).

The figures for engagement are indicative of the shortcomings of institutional online spaces. Research suggests that creating top-down structures for participation online does not guarantee these will be used. Margetts (2008) cites a Dutch example from 2000 where a discussion on congestion was taking place on a website called Pub of the Tired Cyclist, rather than on a bulletin board set up a government agency. In another case, she highlights how Asthma UK had to take account of the fact that there were 20,000 people discussing asthma on Facebook that may never have visited the website of the organization (Margetts, 2008).

4. Rethinking online engagement

This section considers how to reposition the democratic role of the public service broadcaster within the collaborative and distributed framework of Web 2.0 environments. My argument builds on Chadwick's (2009) proposal that the sociotechnical characteristics of Web 2.0 enable citizens to engage on different levels and at different times, depending on contexts.

4.1. Empowering the networked individual

This paper suggests that the central limitation of the BBC project was that it did not recognize the ability of people to create their own networks. Beckett argues this is because the Internet is "all about generative creativity" (Beckett, 2008). Zittrain explores this concept in terms of computer science, arguing that:

"The generative capacity for unrelated and unaccredited audiences to build and distribute code and content through the Internet to its tens of millions of attached personal computers has ignited growth and innovation in information technology and has facilitated new creative endeavors" (Zittrain, 2006, p. 1975)

The same can be said for the ability of online users to organize digitally. Arguably, the Internet creates a society characterized by widespread online networks, inhabited by network-empowered individuals. Wellman et al (2003) refer to this as networked individualism, where each person operates a personal community network, and switches rapidly among multiple sub-networks. Coleman, in his discussion on civic networks, refers to this as the emergence of a "hyper-pluralism of multiple networks" (Coleman, 2004b, p. 19).

Such an approach, coupled with the affordances of Web 2.0 technologies, suggests that there is little need to replicate physical institutional structures online to provide a centralized space for political action. The closure of Action Network led to a reassessment within the BBC of its role in sustaining citizenship. The BBC acknowledged the shortcomings of Action Network when it shut down the project and took the website offline. In a final note on the site, the corporation said it was closing down the service due to the proliferation of online sites and tools offering alternative solutions for civic action online:

"The last few years blogs have led to a revolution in online publishing. Today there are 71m blogs on the web and more and more of our campaigners are enthusiastically blogging or joining social networking sites to get their message out. At the same time other fantastic democracy websites have launched, such as TheyWorkForYou and E-Petitions, which are being used by our members along with all the other tools available on the web" (BBC Action Network, 2008)

Comments by BBC executives suggest a shift in the way the corporation considered its role in sustaining engaged citizenship. In his assessment of Action Network, senior BBC News executive Peter Horrocks acknowledged that "we have learnt from that experiment and are now pointing users to alternative ways, inside and outside the BBC, of getting their voices heard. The general

conversation on the web is freely available to all. The BBC does not have to host that either,” (Horrocks, 2008).

4.2. Public service media as an enabler

Bardoel & d’Haenens (2008) suggest that public broadcasters in Europe remain vital conveyors of political communication to the public, contributing to civic life and national debate – a purpose enshrined in the BBC’s Charter. Public service broadcasters such as the BBC are in the midst of transformational change, as they extend their activities beyond traditional radio and television to digital media services. Arguably, the process of change goes beyond adapting existing practices to new media platforms, and extends into repositioning the democratic role of public service media within collaborative and distributed Web 2.0 environments. Such an approach implies a reassessment of the institutional and centralized model of eParticipation. Bryant and Wilcox suggest, “the real debate and the real action are elsewhere – within people’s own networks” (2006), enabled by what Coleman and Blumler (2009) describe as the paradigm shift in the social uses of the Internet. Given its standing in British civil society, the BBC is in a influential position to play a leading role in a networked public sphere where eParticipation occurs through loose networks and relationships supported by Web 2.0 technologies and services.

A key asset of the BBC is the scope and depth of its television, radio and online political content, offering more day-to-day coverage of politics than any other news outlet on a local, regional and national level. In a broadcast environment, audiences are expected to tune in at specific times on specific platforms to access this information. In a Web 2.0 collaborative environment, the corporation has an opportunity to empower citizens to share, use and customize BBC content across blogs, social networking sites and more. The traditional media flow is reversed, from expecting citizens to visit a website to distributing content where the citizens are online.

Such an approach is cognizant of how media habits are changing. Citizens can already, to some degree, tailor news content by creating customized RSS feeds using the BBC search engine. But there is greater scope for helping the public to choose and aggregate content online and support the content creation efforts of the public. The provision of news and information to help citizens make informed decisions becomes a service, rather than a product.

There are indications that the BBC has been moving in this direction. Citizens can embed video from its Democracy Live portal which aggregates live and on-demand video coverage of the UK’s political institutions and the European Parliament, as well as providing background material on the different institutions’ work and elected representatives. The BBC has described Democracy Live, launched in November 2009, as an example of how digital media “opens up exciting new opportunities to create new kinds of content and services specifically made for and native to interactive media, providing audiences with the wider benefits that the Internet can offer rather than simply supporting other platforms,” (BBC, 2010: 34).

In another earlier initiative in October 2008, the BBC created channels on third-party video sites to solicit comments on one of the US presidential debates. Described as an experiment, the purpose was “to join in conversations wherever they were happening rather than expect people to come to us and host them on the BBC’s platforms” (Eltringham, 2008). The trial provides an indication of the shift away from the notion of the BBC as a host for the public sphere and instead as an enabler for public discourse.

4.3. Innovation to build public value

Going further, a public service media organization of the size and influence of the BBC is in a valuable position to foster innovation. The corporation has opened up its content through its Backstage project that allows developers to create new applications and services based on BBC content and data. Allowing audiences to use professionally-produced content in new ways for non-commercial purposes falls within the corporation’s wider remit to “build public value” by sharing content for others to use creatively (BBC Backstage, n.d.). This approach could prove particularly

valuable in engaging young people. Coleman and Rowe (2005) argue that since remixing and sampling are part of contemporary culture, "the democratic potential of the Internet for young people lies in its scope for sampling and remixing" (2005, p. iii).

There is a potential to adapt ideas of commons-based peer production to enhance democratic accountability through the provision of online tools that empower people to scrutinize and question political elites. Coleman and Blumler argue that a government-funded agency "should be at the forefront of research into innovative technologies and cultural forms likely to generate a more informed, inclusive, reflective and consequential online deliberation," (2009, p. 183). The BBC has stressed that it "continues to play a particularly important role in securing the technological underpinnings of digital public space," (BBC, 2010, p. 48). An example of how this could work in practice is The Guardian's "Investigate Your MP's Expenses" project (<http://mps-expenses.guardian.co.uk/>) which provided an interface for citizens to examine parliamentary documents.

The Guardian project is an example of how some media organizations are adopting crowdsourcing (Howe, 2006), taking what would have traditionally been the task of a journalist and outsourcing it to an undefined, large group of people. News organizations like the BBC have access to a wealth of data but finite resources to mine it. This data could be made accessible through easy-to-use web interfaces, empowering citizens to examine areas of interest. Leadbeater and Miller (2004) have described such citizens as Pro-Ams, professional amateurs, who are:

"Knowledgeable, educated, committed and networked by new technology. The 20th century was shaped by large hierarchical organizations with professionals at the top. Pro-Ams are creating new, distributed organizational models that will be innovative, adaptive, and low-cost" (p. 12)

Some of these tools already exist in the UK, created by a non-profit called MySociety. But there are benefits from having the backing of a public institution such as the BBC for initiatives that offer citizens a sense of empowerment.

5. Conclusion

This paper examined one of the most innovative experiments in online democracy by a leading public service broadcaster, exploring the reasons for its launch and subsequent closure. Action Network presents a case study of the tensions in democratic theory explored by Bennett (2007) between models of eParticipation promoted by incumbent institutions – in this case, the BBC – and autonomous and loosely organized social networks led by citizens.

There is clearly a need for researchers to discuss and investigate the political potential of digital technologies, particularly whether the social uses of Web 2.0 tools are creating new pathways of civic and political engagement. As Papacharissi has noted, "our political experience online has shown that so far, the Internet presents a public space, but does not yet constitute a public sphere" (2002, p. 23). Yet at the same time, there is an explosion of online political groups and activism. As Coleman and Rowe (2005) conclude in their study on youth engagement and politics, "the Internet has created an experimental space in which elements of contemporary citizenship are being sampled and remixed" (p. 14).

The experience of Action Network suggests that the ways technologies are adopted by established organizations is critical. The BBC, I have argued, adopted an institutional mindset based on its paternalistic broadcast legacy that was out of step with the trend towards distributed and collaborative discourse online. The Achilles' heel of Action Network was the premise of a centralized online space, managed from above. Leading e-democracy scholars Coleman and Blumler (2009) conclude, "the Internet is most likely to engage users when it is conceived as a distributive space – a network of networks in which power is polycentrically dispersed," (p. 181). In this space, they conclude, "a Reithian ethos would not be welcomed," (p. 184).

I am not arguing that there is no role at all for e-democracy activities centered around institutions. Rather I have sought to examine how media organizations with a public service remit, such as the BBC, could rethink their democratic responsibilities, drawing on the opportunities and challenges of contemporary networked technologies. A trusted institution with the reputation and reach of the BBC has a duty to explore new ways of eParticipation to facilitate and enhance civic life.

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