

Wiki Collaboration Within Political Parties: Benefits and Challenges

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1 Introduction

We report here a case study of the only wiki that, at the time of writing, had been significantly used by a political party: the Green Party of Canada's (GPC's) Living Platform. The GPC is a quickly growing federal party whose mandate is to address environmental issues and improve the democratic process. The party created the Living Platform to engage Canadian citizens in the development of its political platform. Anyone was free to view and edit the document. We interviewed several major participants about their experiences with and reflections on the project. Our analysis of these interviews is intended to guide future initiatives that employ a wiki towards a similar end.

2 Effectiveness of the Wiki

The main advantage of the Green Party's use of a wiki to develop its platform was that it effectively facilitated distributed writing, editing, and document sharing. Users were able to work on discrete portions of the document while at the same time observing ongoing development of other portions. Furthermore, multiple users working on a single portion could work asynchronously and without any confusion as to the most recent status of the document. Distributed and parallel document development were particularly advantageous in this case because they helped to overcome the

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'political bottleneck' involved in creating a document based on consensus, where a large number of decisions must be made by a small group of individuals. The wiki allowed decisions to be distributed over a larger number of people.

Another benefit of the wiki was that it facilitated 'doing' rather than simply talking, as is often the case with other collaborative technologies. The wiki's focus on editing a document directly rather than just discussing it meant that the platform actually got built rather than remaining in the limbo of dialogue about what it should be. The flipside of this advantage was that the wiki often did not facilitate an effective dialogue around the platform development process. For example, users would often make changes to the document without any consultation with other users.

Consequently, a number of interviewees emphasized that the wiki should augment rather than replace traditional modes of communication such as phone calls and face-to-face meetings. Based on these observations, it appears most appropriate that wikis serve as a 'secondary tool' for similar collaborative work.

3 Technological Barrier

There was near consensus that the Living Platform presented some degree of a technological barrier involved in using. Even those participants with strong technical backgrounds reported needing some initial training.

The main function of this training was not only to help participants learn an unfamiliar technology but also to change the way they thought about writing and authorship. According to one interviewee:

There is a substantial learning curve that goes against [the] way people use the Web and what an author is. You're really cranking over a paradigm in people's heads... The first time people use [a] wiki they turn it into a discussion board. The challenge of the technology is to overcome people's preconceptions.

After the initial learning period, all of the interviewees seemed to like using the wiki. These reports suggest that the required skills are more of an initial barrier than an ongoing problem for users.

4 Issues of Transparency

Another major point of contention among the people we spoke to was the issue of transparency. One of the goals of using a wiki was to increase the transparency of the GPC's platform development process. However, party members disagreed about how transparent the process should actually be.

At one point, members posted on the wiki criticisms of the party, spurring conflict among members and party leaders. Advocates for reduced transparency argued that as a political party the GPC needs to be careful about what happens on the wiki. For example, certain elements of the platform may need to be kept hidden from other parties so that the other parties do not gain an advantage in an election. There were also concerns about the party's public image, as well as liability issues.

Those who advocated for a completely transparent process argued that content regulation defeats the purpose of the Living Platform and goes against the very culture of the GPC. Furthermore, if there is a legitimate criticism of the party, the Living Platform could be used as a way to create positive change. The solution is not to suppress the criticism, but instead to address the issues that are raised.

Conflict on the Living Platform tangibly demonstrates what other parties who choose to use wikis for public discourse will likely face. While the most apparent solution would be to strike an appropriate balance between transparency and privacy, this may not be the best course of action for parties with mandates to reinvigorate politics.

5 'Function Creep'

Party leaders originally intended members to use the Living Platform exclusively for platform development. However, the site became a vehicle for other activities as well. For example, the wiki became a forum for users to air their grievances regarding party leadership and related issues. The wiki was also being employed towards less controversial ends, such as for administrative purposes and policy development.

The flexibility of wiki technology makes it very easy for users to appropriate a single wiki for a number of purposes but very difficult for administrators to restrict usage to a single area. The implications of function creep can be both positive and negative. On the one hand, unofficial or unintended usage may result in disagreements over what constitutes appropriate use, and can become an excuse to censor or control content. On the other hand, it can be advantageous to permit 'function creep' because it allows users to utilize the tool in a variety of helpful and novel ways. Thus, those who employ wikis in similar initiatives should be prepared for users to take advantage of the tool in unexpected ways.

