Designing an Online Community for the Green Party of Ontario

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Introduction

This paper describes the research and development process behind creating a prototype online community for use by members of the Green Party of Ontario (GPO). Initially constructed as a community to bring together policy advocates and researchers, the scope grew to include a more social, community engagement mission. While initially structured as a development effort, we also maintained a keen interest in engaging and representing potential future technologies not yet ready for easy implementation. This effort has concluded with the GPO information technology team interested in pursuing development of this community in a manner compatible and consistent with existing party IT infrastructure and messaging goals.

End-users

Our project was designed for an end-user group that was diverse both geographically and demographically. GPO membership is scattered throughout Ontario and ranges widely in terms of age, policy interest, engagement in party operations and experience with social media technologies.

Our initial construction of the user community involved sustaining discussion and debate on policy issues outside of irregular face-to-face annual general and policy meetings. Issue advocates and policy teams are presently stitched together on an ad hoc basis, usually leveraging free communication tools such as email and Google

Documents and occasionally using individually-paid tools such as Basecamp. Indeed, it was noted by a member of the provincial executive that one immediate IT goal will be to make an inventory of this disparate collection of resources.

Based on feedback from discussions with GPO directors and members, a case for a more social and informal communication network emerged. While policy development is an important endeavour, a lot of policy work is done among trusted networks of friends – relationships that are often forged at annual general and policy meetings but are similarly not well supported between these events. Broadening out the focus of a GPO online community to general party membership increases the diversity of the user base even further.

There remains a debate about whether non-party members are eligible for participation. Certainly there is an argument for suggesting some information should be kept to private, trusted networks. However, the notable success of the mybarackobama.com community in the last American Presidential election suggests an open community for all is not a liability but a potential strength (Borins, 2009).

Related Work

Our design prototype is influenced by a range of commercial and academic design ideas and philosophies. In terms of similar interfaces we learned and borrowed from many existing social media sites, including the technology community Slashdot.org, whose content layout is governed by user activity; professional networking sites like LinkedIn, which documents different degrees of connections

between contacts; and popular social networking sites, the obvious being Facebook, where profiles are updated based on site activity.

The more experimental elements of our prototype are influenced by the Wonder Wheel technologies (Google, 2009). These technologies allow for the visualization of connections between specific content types. We were also influenced by the idea of visualizing social role and relationship structures in online groups (Weiser et al, 2007), and by the idea of aggregating various information feeds through experimental tools such as Yahoo! Pipes (Yahoo, 2009).

This investigation is framed within the larger discourse of creating sustainable and effective online communities. Audrey Carr's (2007) presentation "Designing Sustainable Conversations," posits the necessary elements that must exist for provoking and sustaining social interactions. Carr places the notion of identity at the centre of successful conversations, but relates that building block to a wider idea of community: singular identities must build relationships, and this is facilitated by the establishment of reputation.

Another important influence was McPhail et al.'s (1998) paper on the CAVEAT project, which documents the process of implementing a content management system within a largely volunteer work community. McPhail's explanation of the idiosyncratic nature of individual contributions within a volunteer network resonated with our exposure to Green Party coordinating procedures, or lack

thereof, and provided insight into the value of an integrated work and social space that facilitates cohesion and collaboration. As McPhail et al. note, in exchange for their time volunteers expect and require a certain degree of personal control over their efforts – it became evident very early that this was an expectation that would have to be respected by this project (McPhail et al. 1998).

Donald Hislop's (2002) "Mission Impossible" represents another important piece of literature on knowledge sharing through media, and also provides insight into how our design differs and expands on previous work. Hislop endorses the notion of an epistemology of practice, which challenges the "assumption that knowledge can exist in a fully explicit and codified form . . . independently of human agents" (169). In his emphasis on the importance of tacit knowledge Hislop considers the question of mechanisms for sharing an embedded social and cultural experience (167). It was in this spirit that our design came to focus on the notion of a mechanism for sharing and extending shared experience through search and visual representation in a manner that reflects user-identified connections.

Design Process

Our design process was characterized by various core decisions, the results of which necessarily structured future development. At each stage we were faced with important "either-or" decisions that would impact both how our design progressed and how it would be encountered by potential end-users. These decisions included

the question of whether the community would be public vs. private, professional vs. social in orientation, and implementable vs. experimental.

In the end we believe our project can be understood as an attempt to negotiate these tensions while progressing towards development and keeping alternative paths open to retain the possibility that surprising observations would remain possible. The first two tensions – private vs. public and social vs. professional – are, after all, policy decisions of the party and thus somewhat outside our direct influence. The latter tension of development vs. experimentation speaks to the core tension in Matt Ratto's (2009) notion of critical making – is the end goal important, or is the process of experimenting with alternatives without immediate concern to deliverables the real goal of design research? In our case, we found ourselves negotiating both sides of this question – wanting to create something potentially functional for a real client, but wanting simultaneously to keep avenues of potential investigation open and rich for exploration.

Based on early ideation and low-fidelity prototype testing, user preference for a social rather than a strictly professional space and our own interest in creating something that could be implementable shaped our decision to engage a first-generation prototype of a live Ning social networking space, which will be described in the next section. This prototype was immediately supplemented with experimental prototypes and potential ideas which could eventually supplement the Ning page, such as searchable tagging (Figure 2) and Google Wonder Wheel

technologies (Figure 3) that allow for discussions to be searchable in a way that also illustrates connections between different content. This division between live and experimental visions is analogous to the common software development practice of version branching (Appleton et al., 1998) where designers attempt to solve initial problem and potential solutions in parallel.

Description of version one of the high fidelity prototype

Ultimately our prototype is situated within the abilities – and constraints – of the social networking site Ning, which we felt was most conducive to integrating ideas gained from our requirements gathering. Version one of our high fidelity prototype for a GPO community embodies the results of taking a socially- rather than professionally-focused approach to network creation. Early in the requirements gathering phase, we had been told by GPO members that they wanted a fairly informal type of community that would emphasize the social element while allowing some opportunity for more formal discussions to organically occur. The informal and social ambience that Ning communities generally convey seemed more apt to this goal. The exemplary use of the Humber graduate PR program's Ning site (http://humberpr.ning.com) was also a strong inspiration.

The resulting prototype takes these considerations into account by providing a fairly open framework for GPO members to gather and discuss topics related to anything of interest to them at the time. For instance – in posting an event – there is no rigid categorization that one must adhere to. The event may be informal, such as

a party, or formal, such as an executive meeting. There is functionality for photos, videos, chat, news postings, RSS aggregation, and even Twitter. Again, these add-ons may be used for social and/or professional purposes. As evidenced by Figure 4, our Ning community design conveys a fairly relaxed and social atmosphere in its aesthetics. The background image, for instance, illustrates people in silhouette conversing openly with each other as if in a social setting. Members ought not to feel obligated, then, to adhere to a rigidly professional, business-like etiquette in the context of this network.

Testing of version one of the high fidelity prototype

Michael Jones carried out the testing of this prototype in a two hour meeting with the GPO Information Technology team on December 13, 2009. This meeting consisted of six individuals, excluding Jones. The general purpose of the meeting was to discuss GPO IT integration – a mission that included the notion of a member's zone, based on previous prototypes and attempts (including our own).

Jones was able to feature the first version of the prototype prominently in the meeting. Various tasks and use cases were showcased through an open, semi-guided investigation of interface and function on a dummy account. Jones also showed the team our experimental space for the hi-fi prototype and another medium-fidelity Ning page used to experiment with various options and add-ons before making decisions on what to include in the actual prototype. The RSS Pipes content aggregation proved especially interesting to the team, and the integration of Twitter was noted as an immediate need in party messaging. We were surprised to

learn that our attempt at cultural probes – the Issue Challenge feature – was not as well received. Perhaps this was due to the generic and rather simple nature of the challenges – but the team did agree that some probing of discussion and debate would be necessary to successfully populate and drive discussion.

The GPO team was intrigued with the idea of an experimental space, correctly noting that the current GPO website was permanently live. This frustrates any dabbling with experimental efforts which could, in theory, bring down the entire site. The team concluded that future development would have to be framed by a branched version philosophy, and is presently investigating test and live server configurations.

The team immediately voiced concerns with security, stating a preference for a more secure, less public member zone. The team placed much emphasis on context – they determined that placing the network within the confines of the Drupal-based official GPO website would be a better solution from both a security and messaging point of view. That way, they will be able to more easily tie the network into their existing membership database. Concern was also raised about hosting a community on the American system Ning – an important organizational and political factor in an international Internet environment where sensitive information and discussion could be monitored due to the USA Patriot Act.

The notion of building a network that allows for both public and private discussion is likely to be a continuing debate. A private, members-only zone for the GPO still has no means of cultivating public opinion and activity – perhaps a major downside for a political party. However, it should be noted that one key player, the GPO membership director, was not part of this testing session. At the recent party policy conference, the membership director engaged party members in a discussion of the Barack Obama campaign, on which he was a social media volunteer (Routledge, 2009). Given his experience and enthusiasm for building membership and community, it is safe to believe that with his input, the notion of a more public forum is far from dead.

Towards Version 2: Discussion and Conclusion

We were pleased to learn that future development of a member zone would become a short-term goal for the party based in part on our research. In order to balance concerns about openness, security and community, the member zone will be developed and integrated into the GPO space, initially on a test server using the Open Atrium Drupal framework. Open Atrium is an intranet solution that may provide the necessary features for the GPO and the team decided that they will start experimenting with this tool soon. Another task that Jones outlined – profile page creation – sparked discussion about integrating the network with CiviCRM, the GPO's database of volunteer contact information. Rather than requiring that each volunteer sets up their own individual profile page from scratch, integrating the CiviCRM tool into the network would automate and streamline the profile page

creation process for people and better track a user's interest in volunteering for various committees and projects.

We feel our design project for a GPO community was certainly successful in that it generated discussion and ultimately advanced the core idea, albeit in a way that will have to be integrated more formally into the GPO sphere in a more complex development effort. Future iterations of the GPO online community will have to balance questions of privacy, security, identity and community while embedding the community within the existing GPO online infrastructure, but we are pleased that our work has been positively received and that it has made an impact on the discussions and development that will follow.

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Figures

Figure 1: tagging content

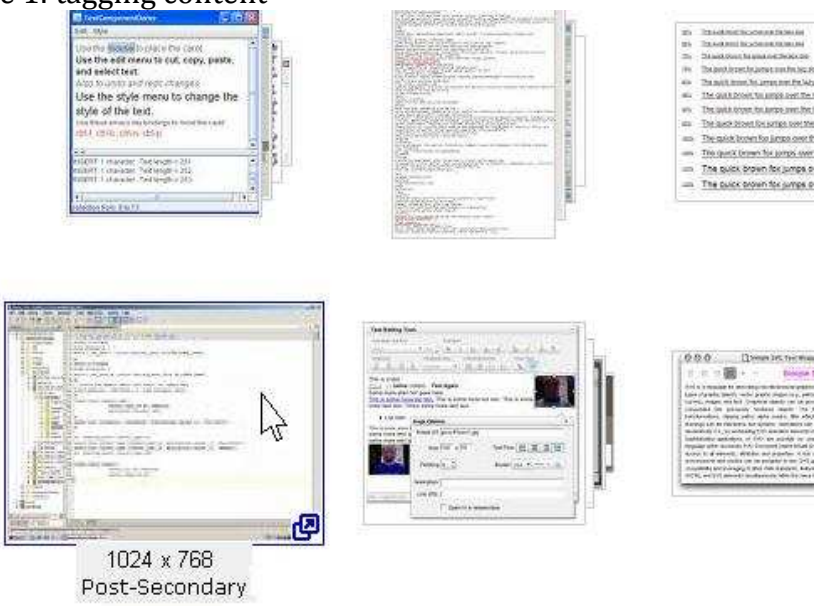

Figure 2: searching content

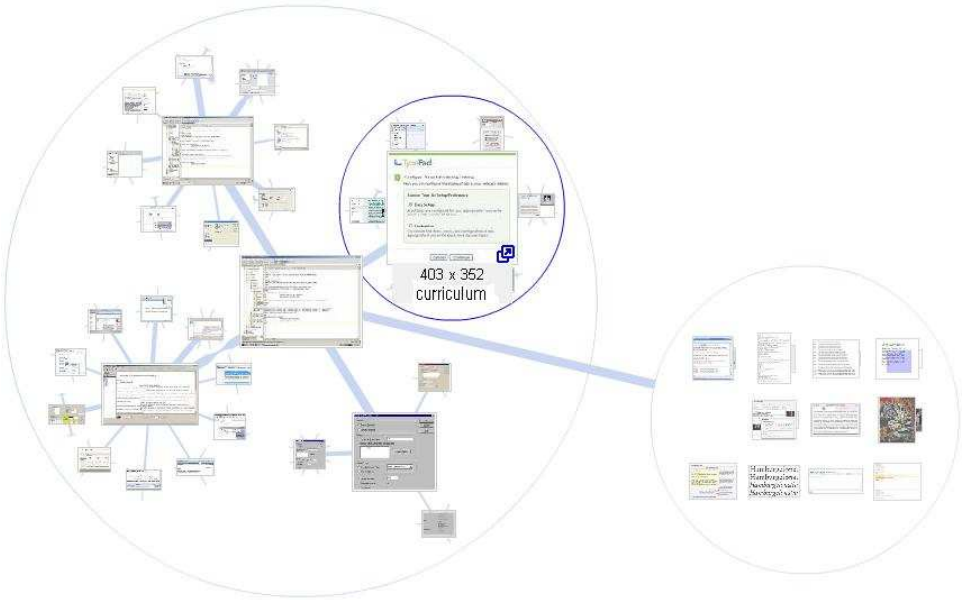

Figure 3: tagged content showing connections

Figure 4: GPO Ning Prototype