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Political applications on the Web 2.0 -- Learning from Web 1.0

Venue: Ravelijn, RA1315

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Abstract:

In May 2012, faculty from the technical and social sciences at the University Twente and at the University Dar es Salaam launched a multi-year research project *titled Sensors, Empowerment and Accountability*. At the heart of the research is a political application on the web 2.0. The concept is deceptively simple. Citizens send SMS messages via standard mobile phones to report intensely felt grievances. The data is publicly disclosed in real time on Google Earth. Officials can view this information and respond by alerting citizens that the problem is acknowledged and will be resolved.

The topic of the paper is this: Sound empirical evidence on the potential of political applications on the web 2.0 for empowerment and accountability is scarce, and the research project will hopefully make a contribution in this respect. But, the hype around political apps on the web 2.0, also referred to as liberation technologies, is soaring. What explains the hype?

I discuss two wide-spread assumptions—*equivalence* and *automaticity*—that nourish the hype. Equivalence assumes that political apps have similar dynamics to popular killer apps in the spheres of commerce, social interaction and collaborative production of knowledge. The automaticity assumption refers to the behavior of citizens: the idea is that a magnetic-like linkage exists between grievances intensely felt by citizens and citizens' susceptibility to protest. The automaticity assumption also refers to government behavior: the idea is that government will immediately slip into the role of accountant and respond to citizens' high-quality data flows pointing to service problems.

I present cases from the web 1.0 era that show what happens when the accountability doctrine interfaces with information management strategies of officeholders. Such strategies can take various forms (Hood 2011). Some may pinpoint accountability, others may diffuse it. Their success or failure depends on how well they cohere with the cultural worldviews of the bureaucracy and civil society. Such lessons may help us evaluate political applications on the web 2.0 that are still in process and radically incomplete.