Lawmaking 2.0

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Abstract

A crowdsourcing idea campaign aiming at evaluating and editing a draft for the new Law on Education was run in Russia in May - August 2010. We developed an original crowdsourcing platform and organized collaboration of more than 500 participants. 95 original versions of the Law items were created. 23 of them were approved by the community and graduated. The mechanism proved to be effective as a tool for aggregating opinions of an open community and can be used for creative law-making.

Introduction

In April 2010 we were approached by the Russian Ministry of Education with a request to develop a crowdsourcing platform for evaluating and editing the draft for the new Law on Education. For testing the model we used the chapter "General education". Our goal was to invite Russian experts, teachers and parents to an in-depth analysis of the Law, evaluating and discussing its overall concept and items, soliciting ideas for improving statements of the law and making new suggestions.

The Law on Education is an urgent discussion issue in the Russian political life. The quality of education in Russia is one of the major concerns as the vast majority of Russian families have K-12 students. Most discussed issues, such as mandatory graduation testing, religious education and deteriorating quality of public school education are openly debated. We assumed that the community for discussing the subject is very broad and set no limitations on age, affiliation or status of participants. Our approach to lawmaking is quite different from the existing practice, in which access to creating and making amendments to laws is granted only to a very limited group of "experts", whose expertise is mainly based only on their proximity to the governmental agencies. This corresponds with previous research which showed that maximum results are received in

crowdsourcing campaigns where certain level of the participants' knowledge of the field is combined with their diversity. [1]

The Framework

We build our understanding of this case on the approach, suggested by S.Geerts [2] who distinguishes between crowdcasting, crowdstorming and crowdproduction as three main applications of crowdsourcing. Our case is a hybrid between crowdstorming and crowdproduction. On the one hand, the online community members are given an opportunity to make their suggestions to improve the final product, with the help of a mechanism, similar to Dell Idea Storm. On the other hand they create a product, that can not be constructed by any other means, as it happens in the case of Wikipedia or Linux. [3]

We based our approach on the Wiki philosophy, which implies that the whole community works on creating a collaborative product and a Wiki platform, which allows all the collaborators to build a common hypertext and not bother about maintaining the linking system and rules for creating new entries. [4] We had a long successful experience of sustaining educational communities on a MediaWiki based project http://letopisi.ru . [5] In EduCrowdexpert project which implied much social value and responsibility we wanted to avoid "editing wars" and give each participant an opportunity to build his own variants of "blocks of meaning", which constitute chapters of the Law. The use of these blocks of meaning, discussed and evaluated by the open community is the keystone of our project.

A Comparative Case Study: the New Zealand Police Act Review

In 2006 an initiative aiming at the public discussion of the Police Act was undertaken in New Zealand. [6] The last Police Act was adopted in 1958 and needed serious revision. The Ministry of the Police encouraged a small project team to initiate the public discussion process, especially trying to attract "hard to hear and hard to reach" target audiences like youth, Maori and Pacific Island people, and expatriate New Zealanders. The public consultation process was arranged in three phases. At the first step eight issue papers were released . Then, in May 2007 the discussion paper 'Policing Directions in New Zealand for the 21st Century' containing the concept of the Police Act was released. It was transferred to multiple public agencies via usual mail and e-mail with a suggestion to review and comment on it.

Then the team started looking for an appropriate platform for public discussion. YouTube and MySpace were found inappropriate as quite informal and unstructured services. So they launched a MediaWiki site with limited content and high level structure, where visitors could browse through the items, comment on it and make suggestions. From what we know, the New Zealand Police Act Review wiki site was open for public on September 14 of 2007. It was initially populated with a few ideas to fast-start the process and provide contributors with a framework [6]

In several days, after media published reports on the initiative the quantity of entries became overwhelming, moderating the wiki site required full time job of at least four people. On September 30, just after two weeks of existence the number of moderated and unmoderated comments reached 30 000 and the team had to close the wiki for comments and then totally close it for public access.

In our view the course of the New Zealand Police Act review process was affected by several assumptions that the team made. First, they tried to call as large as possible number of participants with undefined motivation. After publishing the announcement about their project on Slashdot.com they simply fell victim of the Slashdot effect. A crowd

came, but they were mostly "crowdslappers" not interested in the in-depth analysis and constructive suggestions. Another factor was that wiki registration was not required for the content contributors. It made the process of moderation quite cumbersome. Then all the contributions were considered as submissions to a governmental agency, so they had to be processed and archived according to the official rules.

The Educrowdexpert Case

We arranged the process of the public discussion as a sequence of five steps. First, to start the collaborative evaluation/editing process we developed a solution hosted on the Web at edu.crowdexpert.ru. The platform, to which our methodology was applied was built on MindTouch wiki. Still we had to significantly expand its functionality with original extensions developed in deki-skript and dotNet, including user built versions, permissioning, statistics analysis and visualization. As a result of the project we developed a prototype for a specialized platform for implementation of similar projects. Now we have been building our own system, based on this prototype.
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The text of the draft Law was decomposed into 11 articles and 71 items. Each item became a subject to discussion and improvement. Each item of the Law was posted on the site as a separate page. Upon registration users could make a vote in favor or against the draft, comment on it or suggest their own versions, which was done as the result of saving a previously edited version of an item under the user's name. User created item versions were also commented and evaluated.

Then, potential participants were invited. We did not try to solicit a vast number of potential contributors; a right balance between the number, expertise and diversity of the "crowd" was essential. During the testing period in May - August 2010 512 users joined the community and participated in discussing and evaluating the Law. This number proved to be quite adequate for the targeted goals, as larger number of participants could negatively affect the service performance. We identified 3 different types of user behaviors that resulted in the aggregated product.

1. Low diversity participants who came through mailing lists for educators active in Internet communities who came into the project as individuals. Mostly they did not have any significant ambitions and their major input was not bringing in divergent ideas, but doing everyday routines, i.e. editing, formatting, correcting spelling etc.

2. Diverse individual participants who heard about the project from various sources and joined it as they hoped that it will help them to change existing practices for the better. Nearly each of them had their own position and a set of values which they tried to bring into the project. Still they demonstrated high ability to cooperate and discuss versions of other people. Their major input was new ideas.

3. Low diversity participants who came into the project as a group. Mostly they were parents, sharing a desire to add to the law an article on family education, inspired by their leader, whom they followed. They showed instant ambitions to set their own rules of the game and needed special attention from moderators.

On the third step, public experts posted their comments agreeing and disagreeing with the items. In case of disagreement they could create and publish their own version of an item. In some cases there were up to six versions of the same item. There was much discussion about which version to chose. For such situations we used the voting functionality.

As an example the initial version of the item "Forms", where home education by the

definition of the government, was considered illegitimate received a very low resulting voting score of "-209". 94 comments, where the users explained why they disliked the definition, were posted. The most commentators expressed their concern that if this article is adopted, home education in Russia will be banned. On May 24 user T posted their own version of this item, suggesting a mild improvement of the initial version, which, in theory legitimized home education but did not speak of it clearly. This revision received a score of - 39 and the community opinion suggested that the search for a better definition should be continued. On June, 29 user P posted his version which clearly stated that home education has equal rights with public education and should not be anyhow derogated by the government. This definition was actively discussed, received 114 comments and ended up with a very high resulting score of +169   Two more attempts to improve the initial version were made on July 2 by user M and user A, but they could not outperform the P's version with scores of -3 and +17 respectfully. So the version of user P ended up with the highest rank. It graduated and was included into the final draft of the document.

In case participants had a new idea which was not part of the original draft, they could post it as a "new item". Totally 5 such items, completely new to the initial draft were included. These items referred to the home education and its principles, individual teaching practices, the arts education, failure at the exams and the rights of parents and family. A dashboard reflecting the current number of participants, the most viewed and commented articles and the ranking of the participants, measured on the number of their own versions, comments and votes from other users was measured. It helped to monitor the progress of the project and create a feeling of "healthy competition" among the participants. In case participants had a new idea which was not part of the original draft, they could post it as a "new item". Totally 5 such items, completely new to the initial draft were included. These items referred to the home education and its principles, individual teaching practices, the arts education, failure at the exams and the rights of parents and family.

On average one participant made 3,1 comments, 4,1 votes and 0,2 own versions. In general we had 4 new users joining the project every day. The most challenging for us was a period from June 29 till August 03, when 70 participants (17,5 times more than average) joined the project every day. For four days, when a large group of parents joined the project the number of participants increased in 3 times. This boosted the activity in the whole system. The new participants came as a group, united by values and ambitions. Initially they tried to impose their vision on other members of the community, but after additional discussions with the moderator of the service a way to make their efforts more productive was found.

Then, the final draft of the document was composed. As a result of the work 95 original versions of the Law items were created. 23 of them were approved by the community and graduated. In the end the new, community approved draft of the Law was automatically put together and submitted to the Russian government for further discussion.

Conclusion and Recommendations

We assume that the suggested mechanism proved to be effective as a tool for aggregating opinions of an open community and can be used for creative lawmaking. In the Russian context an initiative in this area can be successful only if it is initiated by an independent non-governmental agency with a high degree of trust from the network community.

The Wiki technology seems highly appropriate for managing cases similar to ours. Still we found that none of the existent "out of the box" wikis, i.e. MediaWiki, MindTouch etc. are by default suitable for handling all the array of processes and functionalities that such

project might imply. We partially solved it creating extensions to MindTouch, which helped to fulfill the project successfully but immediately after finishing it we started to develop our own platform.

We did not notice any difficulties for the new participants in learning the Wiki approach to collaborative document editing. Some participants already had experience with MediaWiki, GoogleDocs etc, others picked it up quite easily. Obligatory registration, filling the profile was important to eliminate conflicts, flames, trolling etc.

The number of about motivated 500 participants seems quite adequate for handling the task. We expect that a broad advertising campaign would only hamper the progress and lead to confusion and unnecessary arguments. The Wiki philosophy of the process leads to building an ecology around the Law and constructing social capital, which can be used in the similar initiatives.

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