

Final Project

Research Proposal

Appropriate Design:

At Look At Responses to Voter Disenfranchisement in the 2012 Presidential Election

By Camille Koué

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Dr. Owen

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Appropriate design is becoming increasingly important in our technology-driven world. As certain platforms become popular, such as web-based platforms, we have knee-jerk reactions to use them no matter how inappropriate they are at reaching target audiences, being useful for end-users, and effectively achieving goals. This is the result of failing to incorporate the end-user in the design process. Incorporating the end-user in the design process is known more generally as human-centered design. Human-centered design is built around the end-user, keeping the needs of the humans in mind during the design process through cycles of implementation, testing, and redesign. Design thinking is a type of human-centered design methodology that provides a structure for designers and non-designers alike to follow in order to create solutions that are sustainable and appropriate.

Inappropriate design can often be seen in website development. Websites have become a way of legitimizing a cause, leading people to build websites without considering their appropriateness. During the 2012 Presidential election, the threat and reality of stricter voter ID laws washed over the country, resulting in the disenfranchisement of certain voting populations, namely minorities, the elderly, the poor, the disabled, women, and students (Brennan). By November 2012, 30 states had adopted voter IDs laws, leaving many people who wanted to vote in the 2012 Presidential election to deal with a long and tedious process (National). In response, nonprofits, local and state governments, and political organizations developed websites to try and combat the confusion and aid these disenfranchised voting populations in checking their voter eligibility status and securing their right to vote.

My research will focus on the appropriateness of technological design using these websites, designed to aid disenfranchised voting populations during the 2012 Presidential election, as my case study. My research aims to answer three main questions. Firstly, were these

websites effective in aiding disenfranchised voters? Secondly, how could these websites have been design to more effectively reach and help disenfranchised voters? Thirdly, in this attempt to aid disenfranchised voters, what other platforms could have been more effective?

The importance of human-centered design is emphasized in a design methodology known as “design thinking.” Tim Brown, President and CEO of the global design firm IDEO, describes design thinking as “a human-centered approach to innovation that draws from the designer's toolkit to integrate the needs of people, the possibilities of technology, and the requirements for business success” (www.ideo.com/about). Design thinking is such an important and useful methodology because it “allows people who aren’t trained as designers to use creative tools to address a vast range of challenges” by relying on our shared human abilities “to be intuitive, to recognize patterns, to construct ideas that are emotionally meaningful as well as functional, and to express ourselves through means beyond words or symbols” (www.ideo.com/about). It is a methodology that is perfect for the design of such things as aiding disenfranchised voting populations since it requires the constant feedback of the end-user in the design process. Design thinking mandates that a design not be implemented until the end-user has been able to test the product and give feedback.

The goal of these websites was to help disenfranchised voters determine if they had the proper identification to vote, and if they do not to help them figure out what they needed and how to obtain it. However, there were two main problems associated with using a web-based platform. Firstly, these websites were designed despite the fact that their end-users in many cases did not have reliable access to the Internet. Secondly, many websites were designed hastily and ended up being confusing and difficult to use (D. Owen, 2012 Election Survey, December 19, 2012, Georgetown University).

Reaching the Target Audience, Designing for the End-User

The first hurdle for these websites is actually reaching their intended audience. For the purpose of this research, disenfranchised voting populations will be defined as populations that are disproportionately negatively affected by voter ID laws. Examples of disenfranchised populations in the 2012 Presidential election are students, the elderly, the non-white, the disabled, women, and the poor. There has been a lot written about and a lot of talk about technology, and more specifically the Internet, having the potential to be the great equalizer. This is based on the idea that all information would be available to anyone no matter class, creed, race, religion, gender or any other factor. However, access to the Internet is not universally available, and lower socioeconomic classes tend to have less access to technology and the Internet than higher socioeconomic classes. This is what is known as the digital divide, and it likely has a direct effect on the effectiveness of these websites.

If lower socioeconomic classes are highly disenfranchised by voter ID laws, but they are also highly disenfranchised by the digital divide, then creating websites is not a way to solve the problem because they do not have access to the websites. A second level of digital divide also seems to affect the way in which lower socioeconomic Internet users use the Internet, which can further impact the effectiveness of these types of websites (López-Sintas et al., 2010). That is, those in lower socioeconomic classes who do have access to the Internet may not use it to engage with these types of websites. This will be analyzed more thoroughly in the literature review

section of this proposal.

Effective Website Design

The second hurdle for these websites is design. To assess website effectiveness I will look at two key elements: navigation and content. Effectiveness of navigation is assessed by a user being able to easily find the content they are searching for on the website and effectiveness of content is assessed by a user responding positively to the content. In this case, a positive response to content involves the user feeling that they were able to obtain helpful information. These websites need to be designed so that they are easy to navigate and so that users respond positively to their content. Websites are seen as an efficient way of helping people through the process of navigating confusing voter ID laws, but this is only true if the technologies are designed well and are effective in helping users navigate the content. Research has looked at how website design and usefulness are linked and my research will look specifically at how these particular websites have been designed and if their design meets the requirements of effectiveness. The results from a recent preliminary, unpublished survey show that these websites indeed have problems with effectiveness (D. Owen, 2012 Election Survey, December 19, 2012, Georgetown University).

This research is important because it questions whether website development is the appropriate response to this type of crisis. Creating a website has become an automatic response to crisis, and when a crisis like voter disenfranchisement is identified, many websites are hastily built in order to combat the problem. However, since much time, and in many cases money,

is spent creating these websites it is good to take a look at whether or not they are useful and necessary or simply a thoughtless response to all modern dilemmas. Websites aimed at aiding disenfranchised voting populations in the 2012 Presidential election present a solid case study for two reasons. Firstly, their importance lies mostly among groups of people who have historically been affected by the digital divide. Secondly, the fact that the websites rely on organizing and processing massive amounts of accurate data means that the website design is of the utmost importance in order for it to have any positive effect on disenfranchised groups.

Case Study

A voter ID law is a law that requires some form of identification in order to vote. The most commonly stated purpose of voter ID laws is to combat voter fraud, to make sure that a person is who she says she is when she votes. Voter ID laws range from a copy of a person's current utility bill to a federal- or state-issued photo ID card (National). In 2012, 30 states had some form of voter ID law in place. Of those 30 states, 11 required photo IDs, four of which enforced "strict" application of the law. The distinction between strict and non-strict enforcement means that in states where photo ID laws are strict, a person cannot cast a vote without a photo ID. If a voter does not have a photo ID in a strict photo ID state, that voter is given a provisional ballot to fill out which is kept separate from the other ballots, and that voter must make a subsequent trip to visit election officials within a few days and present them with a valid photo ID for their ballot to be counted. With non-strict photo IDs laws, poll workers can request that a voter show them photo ID, but cannot prevent the voter from casting a ballot if the voter does not present a photo ID.

Requiring proof of identification does not necessarily seem like too much to ask, but many Americans cannot afford these IDs or cannot produce the necessary documents needed to obtain them. There are obvious fees associated with a state ID, and then there are less obvious ones. Most state IDs cost around \$15, and most states have programs that help people who can't afford a state ID obtain one, however a person often has to take time off work in order to get one and sometimes travel long distances. These costs can make or break a person's ability to obtain an ID. Furthermore, many people face the additional hurdle of not having the identification necessary to obtain the voter ID cards. In Pennsylvania for example, a state whose strict voter ID legislation was ultimately struck down for the 2012 Presidential election, the law required that in order to obtain the proper voting ID card, a person had to first provide "a raised-seal birth certificate from the state and a Social Security card, as well as two proofs of residency" (Gerhart, 2012).

Literature Review

All residents of states with voter ID laws are affected by those laws, however, certain voting populations are more likely to be disenfranchised by these laws than others. Every state has some sort of identification regulation, but these regulations range from simply stating your name to having to show multiple forms or picture identification. And as the requirements for voting increase, certain groups like minorities, the elderly, the poor, the disabled, women, and students are more likely to see a decrease in voter turnout, voting numbers, voter eligibility and voting power (Alvarez, et al., 2008; Brennan). In this research, the response to increase in voter ID laws through online content will be investigated. I hypothesize that the development

and design of websites to aid disenfranchise voting populations was ineffective in the 2012 Presidential election.

The Costs of Voting on Minority Voters

Hershey (2009) argues that as the cost of voting increases, voter turnout decreases and even small cost increases can lead to decreases in voter turnout. By cost, Hershey is referring to financial, emotional, physical, time, and any additional energy that must be expended in whatever form. She argues that the reason some groups are disproportionately affected by voter ID laws is that the costs of those laws are more prevalent in some groups than others. She argues that stricter regulations correlate with a decrease in turnout, but that race may be disproportionately affected as a byproduct of socioeconomic class.

People in low socioeconomic classes are the groups that tend to be mostly affected, a conclusion also reached by Alvarez, Bailey and Katz (2008). Since minority races disproportionately fall into lower economic classes in the United States, they would thus be disproportionately affected by voter ID laws. Hershey (2009) goes on to discuss racial elements that have been identified in the enforcement of voter ID laws. She names one 15-state study that showed that during the 2007 Presidential election and the 2008 Super Tuesday voting events, black voters reported being asked to supply proper voter identification more than white voters. Thus, while socioeconomic class seems to be the most important factor in being able to register to vote, race does seem to be a factor when actually voting. Hershey (2009) concludes that voter ID laws do reduce voter turnout and that reduction shows up mostly in the least educated and least wealthy among us. She identifies other groups that should be studied because they

might also be at a disadvantage when it comes to overcoming voter ID costs. Those include the disabled, ethnic minorities and groups with language barriers.

Alvarez, Bailey and Katz (2008) submit that further research needs to be conducted on the effect of photo ID requirements on voter turnout by pointing out that at the time of their study only two states required photo identification to vote and three requested it, all laws which had gone into effect in 2006, only two years before their study was conducted. Today, however, four states require photo IDs and seven request them (National) and six years have gone by, along with plenty of election, to be able to compile deeper data. Additionally, another 19 states have non-photo voter ID laws in place that can be studied as well (National). With the heightened controversy surrounding this topic in the 2012 Presidential election, there will likely be a number of new studies coming out with updated and more thorough data.

Internet Access and Internet Engagement

López-Sintas, Filimon and García-Álvarez (2010) look at Internet use among the Hispanic and Spanish-speaking populations in the United States. They break Internet engagement down into two areas, Internet adoption, or first-level digital divide, and Internet use, or second-level digital divide. They focus on the second level of digital divide and argue that even if adoption of the Internet does not seem to be different among different socioeconomic classes, the way in which one uses the Internet does seem to differ based on socioeconomic status. “In other words, having Internet (technological) access and skills is not enough. If there are differences in social and informational linkage needs due to social standing, the digital divide will remain“ (López-Sintas et al., 2010, p. 109). They summarize a past study done by Kraut et

al. titled “Internet paradox: A social technology that reduces social involvement and psychological well-being?” published in the *American Psychologist* in 1998 that showed that Internet use seemed to have more positive social and psychological outcomes for people with more social support than for people with less social support (López-Sintas et al., 2010, p. 109). This second level of digital divide affects the way in which lower socioeconomic Internet users use the Internet, which further impacts the effectiveness of voting websites. That is, those in lower socioeconomic classes who do have access to the Internet may not use the Internet to engage with these types websites even if they do have Internet access.

When it comes to website design and usability, Spool et al. (1999) argue that website usability must be measured based on what the user is trying to accomplish and what the organization’s goals are for creating the website. Usability differs if the user is surfing the web versus using the web for research or consumerism. Usability also differs if the website is aimed at marketing or providing information. The websites that I am looking at are the latter, their purpose is to provide information to people about their voting status and how to change their voting status if they need to. Spool et al. (1999) argue that in order to provide people with the information that they are searching for, websites need to follow certain criteria. Websites cannot rely on graphics to relay information to their users. In their study, Spool et al. (1999) found that graphics played no significant role in helping users find the information they were looking for, but they acknowledge that graphics might play an important role in conveying marketing messages and increasing repeat visits. Additionally, it is helpful if websites utilize certain navigation tools, such as site maps, a search box and a Frequently Asked Questions (FAQ) section (Spool et al., 1999, p. 29 - 30).

Website Design and Functionality

Spool et al. (1999) argue that what is vital to users finding the information they are searching for are hyperlinks. Their research found that text links, over image links, are how users prefer to navigate websites. They acknowledge that more research needs to be done on how to create effective text links. Spool et al. (1999) found that an additional criteria for effective design and functionality is that navigation and content must be inseparable. Through their research they found that the sites that were most successful at helping the user find information were sites in which content and navigation were inextricably linked. This is to say that “shell sites” in which the navigation and content are created separately and are clearly separable within the site were ineffective because of their tendency to include many generic links which made it difficult for users to “predict what they will find,” (Spool et al., 1999, p. 15). Spool et al. (1999) found that when users chose links they chose them “based on their expectation of the page the link will take them to” thus this expectation is key in website usability. Links must match a user's expectation to be useful.

Design Thinking

In his essay in the *Harvard Business Review*, Tim Brown (2008) describes the origins of design thinking as coming from Thomas Edison's ability to see the complete spectrum of possible human innovation, to understand people's wants and needs, their likes and dislikes and, rather than trying to validate preconceived hypotheses, provide a continuous learning experience through trial and error. Design thinking uses an interdisciplinary approach to solving problems. By getting people with different backgrounds together to tackle a problem, the group is able to approach the problem from multiple points of view, and offer solutions based on their unique

backgrounds, interests, expertise, and life experiences. Rather than a linear process, design thinking provides a “system of spaces” that connect related activities and help to keep innovation flowing (Brown, 2008). Using the methodology of design thinking, design projects pass through three spaces, inspiration, ideation, and implementation (Brown, 2008).

Inspiration centers around the circumstance that motivates a search for a solution, ideation centers around “generating, developing and testing” of possible solutions, and implementation centers around turning tested solutions into functioning systems (Brown, 2008). A successful project will almost always cycle through these spaces more than once, especially through the inspiration and ideation spaces, allowing for solution adjustments based on end-user feedback or allowing for a complete rehaul as some solutions are scrapped and others are conceived. Design thinking is sensitive to culture and cultural differences. It emphasizes the importance of not jumping to conclusions about best solutions based on your own culture and imposing those solutions on others, but taking the time to understand the people and cultures you are designing for, the constraints you face - technically, financially, etc - and using this well-rounded information to produce a solution that is sustainable over time and, most importantly, useful for the end-user. Rather than looking at the solution as a separate part, it is about taking a “systems view,” looking at how the solution fits into the system as a whole (Brown, 2008). By focusing on the system and the people at the heart of the system, design thinking provides a methodology that can produce sustainable and appropriate solutions to our daily nuisances and our most dire problems.

Theory

I will conduct my research using a theoretical framework. I will use the concepts I have touched upon in this proposal, such as effective website design, disenfranchised voting populations, target audience, end-user and digital divide, to build on top of existing research, including that which has been reviewed in the literature review of this proposal, in order to examine the appropriateness of websites developed to aid disenfranchised voting populations in the 2012 Presidential election. I will then examine these websites through the lens of design thinking. Using the methodology of design thinking, I will analyze how these websites might have been designed differently or, more intriguingly to me, what other non-web-based platforms could have been more useful to the end-user.

Method

My research will incorporate quantitative and qualitative data focusing on the websites designed to aid disenfranchised voting populations in the 2012 Presidential election as my research object. I will use these websites as my case study and I will put this case study into historical context by looking at past issues regarding inappropriate design. My quantitative data will come from survey results designed to gather information on the effectiveness of the websites. This will include data on how often these websites were used, how they were received by the user, how easy it was for the users to find the information they were looking for, and how many users acted on that information. Additionally, I will collect quantitative data on these websites themselves. This information will include how many websites were actually developed and who developed them - a non-profit, a government, a political party, etc.

My qualitative data will come from ethnographic research, focus groups, and interviews. I will convene focus groups from the websites' target audiences and ask them to engage with the websites, observing their engagements, followed by a conversational feedback period in order to get participant reactions to the sites and glean information on what adjustments could be made to the websites to make them more effective. The interviews will allow me to gather more specific information on disenfranchised voting populations, such as Internet access and Internet use. Through interviews I will be able to dig deeper into how effective web-based platforms are in reaching this target audience and what other platforms might be more effective going forward.

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