

## INTRODUCTION

There is mounting evidence that wiki technology will play a significant role in the future of online deliberation. Many politically minded technologists are predicting that the wiki will be a key tool in areas such as collaborative journalism and deliberative democracy (Lih 2004). Despite this optimism, wikis remain virtually invisible within the realm of mainstream politics. Nevertheless, the increasing use of blogs for political purposes suggests that other online tools, such as wikis, could soon play a prominent role within the political sphere. With this in mind, we present a case study of the only wiki currently in significant use by a political party: the Green Party of Canada's Living Platform.

The Green Party of Canada (GPC) is a quickly growing federal party, one of whose mandates is to improve the democratic process. The GPC is currently polling 6% nationally<sup>1</sup> and received 4% of the popular vote in the 2004 federal election<sup>2</sup>. The party created the Living Platform in an attempt to engage Canadian citizens in the yearly development of their political platform. Anyone is free to view the progress of the document, and by signing up on the site, one can also contribute to it, or participate in the discussion surrounding it.

The Living Platform is a novel application of wiki technology to an area that is only just beginning to experiment with social technologies. As such, an examination of the Living Platform offers the unique opportunity to understand the benefits, drawbacks and caveats of employing a wiki for deliberation within a political party well before it becomes a widespread possibility.

We interviewed several major participants of the Living Platform regarding their experiences with, and reflections on the project. Our analysis of these interviews is intended to guide future initiatives that consider employing a wiki towards a similar end. Specifically, we aim to answer three questions which the leaders of such initiatives would have: whether or not a wiki an effective tool for collaboratively building a political document; what problems may emerge when using a wiki in this way; and what design choices can be made to avoid these problems.

### Layout of the paper

To this end, we present a number of observations on the Living Platform, based on the interviews we conducted. We begin by explaining the Living Platform and its role within the GPC, as well the methodology for our study. We then explain the objectives of the Living Platform, in order to provide context for the rest of the analysis. We then discuss the following issues:

- *The effectiveness of the wiki for the task of platform development*, in terms of the functionality offered by the tool itself. These observations can help to determine the appropriate role of wikis in similar initiatives, as well as what additional functionality is required for effective collaboration.

---

<sup>1</sup> [www.cbc.ca/story/canada/national/2005/04/30/new\\_poll050430.html](http://www.cbc.ca/story/canada/national/2005/04/30/new_poll050430.html)

<sup>2</sup> [www.cbc.ca/story/election/national/2004/06/28/greens\\_040628.html](http://www.cbc.ca/story/election/national/2004/06/28/greens_040628.html)

- *The usefulness of the comment feature.* The functionality by which participants can “comment” on a page rather than editing it was of particular interest to us, because of its importance within the Living Platform. These observations should help to inform the development of lightweight mechanisms for dialogue within the wiki, which may be seen as crucial to engaging casual participants.
- *The extent to which the technology is a barrier to participation.* These observations should provide some guidance to administrators of future initiatives, in terms of resistance to adoption of the new technology. They also suggest possible improvements to the technology itself, in order to reduce the entrance barrier.
- *The use of the wiki for purposes beyond the original intent.* “Function creep” caused a number of problems within the wiki. Our observations here should help future administrators to cope with these issues.
- *The compatibility of the transparency afforded by wikis with mainstream politics.* Here we discuss whether projects such as the Living Platform have a place within the current political environment, with the intention of stimulating further discussion on the matter.

We conclude by evaluating the successes and failures of the Living Platform with respect to the objectives that have been laid out.

## **THE LIVING PLATFORM**

### **Overview**

According to its homepage, “The Living Platform is a public forum where people can discuss Green Party of Canada (GPC) policies, contribute to the research and development of the GPC platform.”<sup>3</sup> Specifically, the Living Platform is the officially sanctioned platform development site for the 2004 and 2005 platforms. A platform (sometimes called an election platform) is “a document which is generally created by a political party in advance of an election call. Its purpose is to provide an outline of party policy for would-be voters and it generally includes promises of future action which will be initiated if the party gets voted into government.” (Harti 2005)

The Living Platform itself is mainly a TikiWiki<sup>4</sup> wiki that has been augmented with a Yahoo! Groups<sup>5</sup> mailing list and polling site. The wiki component is used for collaboratively editing parts of the platform, while the Yahoo! Groups component is used for discussion and for polling. A wiki is essentially a collaborative word processing application that users can access through a webpage. The wiki used on the Living Platform also has a comment feature that allows users to participate in threaded discussions, similar to a bulletin board or forum.

---

<sup>3</sup> lp.greenparty.ca

<sup>4</sup> tikiwiki.org

<sup>5</sup> groups.yahoo.com

At last count (January 6, 2005) the wiki had 866 registered users, there were 1024 wiki pages and an average of 1934 page views a day (Pilling 2005). According to Jeff Harti, there are currently 50 active and consistent contributors involved with the Living Platform (Harti 2005).

### **Platform Development Process using the Living Platform**

The process by which a platform is developed on the Living Platform is a complicated one, so we will provide a basic overview of the general steps. A final platform is made up a several subtopics (environment, animal rights, etc.) called planks. These planks are developed individually, and upon passing a two-stage approval process, become part of the platform. The voting process takes place on Yahoo! Groups and anyone who is signed up may vote. The planks are only supposed to be voted on by GPC members, but currently there is no way of preventing non-members from voting, and they often do. Currently, there are 125 members who can vote, but at most, only half of them vote on any given plank.

### **STUDY**

We conducted interviews with seven users of the Living Platform, all of whom were members of the GPC. All of the interviewees were heavily involved with platform development, and frequent users of the Living Platform. All had at some point used the wiki daily or semi-daily, and six out of seven had been using the wiki for six months or more. Further details about our interviewees can be seen in Table 1.

We asked our interviewees about their use of the wiki, and their opinions of it, including their initial reactions. We also asked for their observations on how others use the wiki. We paid particular attention to issues of accessibility and transparency, since one of the goals of the Living Platform is to foster these values. Finally, we asked for suggestions on how the wiki could be improved, and whether it has significantly changed the GPC’s platform development process.

<b>Name</b>	<b>Role</b>	<b>Wiki use</b>	<b>Background</b>
Barry	Plank chair	30 hrs/wk, for 6 months	Very tech savvy
Heath	Plank co-chair	Semi-daily, for 6 months	Fairly tech savvy
Ben	Plank chair	Daily, for 3 months	Very tech savvy
Patrick	Key manager	Frequently, for 3 years	Very tech savvy
Laura	Plank chair	Daily	Comfortable with PCs
Pamela	Plank co-chair	Semi-daily, for 7 months	Fairly tech savvy
Michel	Plank chair	Daily, for 1 year	Very tech savvy

**Table 1. Interviewee details.**

Throughout this paper, the names of our interviewees have been changed to protect their identities.

### **OBJECTIVES**

An explanation of the Living Platform’s objectives is necessary to provide context for the rest of our analysis. In addition to building a platform for the next federal election, the main goal of the platform wiki was to facilitate direct and deliberative democracy.

Amongst the interviewees, there was no solid consensus as to what this meant. However, it appeared to take on two main facets:

- *Increasing the accessibility and inclusiveness of the process*, in terms of:
  - *Increasing the number of participants involved in platform development.* The aim was to increase the number of people involved, both inside and outside the party. Barry and Michel felt that the wiki should bring the platform development out from the “backroom,” where it was mainly developed by a small elite, and into the open where everyone had a chance to participate. Ultimately, the process should become more of a grassroots activity.
  - *Facilitating the involvement of average citizens.* This is one of the implicit goals of direct democracy, and a goal of the Living Platform. However, not all of the participants agreed that it was an immediately important goal, or in the least, an immediately achievable one. Patrick stated: “Average citizen involvement is beyond scope of project so far. Before I left the project we were still teaching ourselves how to use the wiki and deciding how to use it.”
- *Increasing the transparency of the process.* Some of the interviewees wanted absolute transparency of party issues and platform development. Others wanted more of a balance where some party issues were kept private and only those pertaining directly to platform development were put on the wiki. However, for Michel, the goal was more of having the image of transparency associated with the party, rather than achieving transparency itself. He reasoned that given the current relatively low participation in the process, people seemed to like the fact that they could participate, rather than actually participating:

“[The wiki] is important for the image—it opens up the opportunity to participate if people so choose... and that is very critical, because we will say in other political parties if someone wants [to participate] they can’t—but here they can.”

The choice of wiki technology to address these issues was also driven by two factors affecting the functioning of the party: limited financial resources and a geographically distributed population. Without the time or the money to fly party members across the country as often as needed, these two factors made it very difficult for party members to collaborate on platform development. Wiki technology offered a solution to this problem by allowing members to work collaboratively and asynchronously on platform development at a relatively low cost.

Before examining whether the Living Platform fulfills these goals, we will discuss issues arising from use of the wiki that may be relevant to similar projects.

## **EFFECTIVENESS OF THE WIKI**

One of the key questions with regards to projects of this nature is whether or not the core functionality and interaction model provided by wiki technology is the best match for the task at hand. While wikis are specifically geared to collaborative document building, a political environment may introduce additional requirements or goals.

### **Benefits of the wiki**

The main advantage of using a wiki to develop a platform was that it effectively facilitated distributed writing, editing and document sharing. These capabilities were highly advantageous for platform development, as the platform itself is a document. Users were able to work on discrete portions of the document, while at the same time observing ongoing development of other portions if they desired. Furthermore, multiple users working on a single portion were able to work asynchronously and without any confusion as to the current status of the document. Patrick described the resulting process as “massively parallel development.” These points are relevant to wiki use in any context. However, distributed and parallel document development is particularly advantageous for political parties because it helps to overcome the “political bottleneck” involved in creating an official document based on consensus. As Patrick describes,

“You have to build consensus and political will around an idea among X number of individuals at the top levels of a political organization, and you have to do that every time you want to pass something—that’s a bottleneck. You can’t put a whole lot of decisions through that group or any other committee—getting committees to decide things is slow and laborious.”

To a large extent, the Living Platform was able to overcome this bottleneck by distributing the decisions and work over a larger group of individuals. Before the wiki, the platform was usually only written by one or two people who would cull the ideas of everyone else. Now, with the wiki, hundreds of people are writing the platform (Pilling 2005).

Another benefit of the wiki is its facilitation of doing rather than simply talking. Patrick observed that using other collaborative technologies, people tend to spend a lot of time discussing, but do not actually put their conclusions into action, or consolidate them within a formal document: “People waste a huge amount of time on listservs. Discussions just go around and around... [The wiki] channels people to communicate in ways that are constructive.” However, the primary interaction within the wiki is editing, which entails an affirmative alteration to the end product. Conversely, tools for discussion are secondary. Thus, the wiki’s focus on making actual changes rather than discussing them means that the platform actually gets built, rather than remaining in the limbo of dialogue. At the same time, tasks such as platform development do require a significant amount of discussion, which may not be effectively accomplished using the wiki alone. Thus, additional tools may be required to complement the wiki’s functionality.

## **Shortcomings of the wiki**

Most of our interviewees agreed that on its own, the wiki has serious shortcomings with regards to facilitating an effective dialogue around the platform development process. Currently, the communication tools within the Living Platform are limited. There is no built-in mailing list, so the party is using Yahoo! Groups, which has no integration with the wiki and requires a separate log in. The necessity of maintaining two separate accounts within two separate tools is a significant nuisance for some users. The wiki software used in the Living Platform has a built-in comment feature, which allows users to participate in threaded discussions about a particular page. However, as we discuss below, the comment feature has some major drawbacks.

One of the symptoms of the wiki's dearth of communication functionality is that users often do not discuss the changes that they are making to the platform. As Michel describes: "People aren't dialoging, people are replacing rather than discussing. [They say,] I don't like this so I'm replacing it, and then people just replace it back. It's a tennis match rather than collaboration." However, these "edit wars" are common on other wiki-based projects, such as Wikipedia, where they are part of the process and where negotiation ultimately leads to a better final product (Viegas et al. 2004). As Patrick reports, "By the time fifteen people edit something, it becomes the truth."

## **Implications**

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. They felt that it is much faster to communicate verbally than textually, and that collocated interaction builds camaraderie and trust much faster and more effectively than anything else. Appreciating the need for more offline communication around the platform development process, Ben also called for more integration of the process on the wiki with the "human" process used by the party. For instance, the wiki should be used to create a document which is debated at a general meeting. Based on these observations, it appears most appropriate that the wiki serve as a "secondary tool" for collaborative work. Most of the requisite dialogue should be carried out over mailing lists, conference calls, and if possible, in face-to-face meetings. Then, the wiki should be used to create the shared artifacts resulting from that initial discussion. Ultimately, though the benefits of the wiki make it an effective tool in this context, it is not effective when used in isolation.

## **THE COMMENT FEATURE**

The comment feature of the Living Platform's wiki was of particular interest to us, given the emphasis placed on accessibility and casual participation. This feature allows users to post threaded discussions at the bottom of each page, in a manner similar to a bulletin board or a forum. The intent behind use of the comment feature in platform development was to allow users to "make suggestions, show support, or discuss ideas."<sup>6</sup> Comments are a prominent feature within the wiki; in fact, instructions on how to comment are listed above instructions on how to edit on the Living Platform homepage. This emphasis on comments likely resulted from the perception that they are a low-barrier way for anyone to

---

<sup>6</sup> [lp.greenparty.ca/tiki-index.php?page=commenting](http://lp.greenparty.ca/tiki-index.php?page=commenting)

get involved in platform development. However, the usefulness of this feature was a point of contention amongst our interviewees. There was disagreement on two fronts: first, whether are comments are actually integrated into platform development; and second, how useful these comments actually are.

### **Importance to platform development**

Although Barry stated that comments played a de facto role in the two-step plank development process, there is no formal policy on how to handle or integrate comments during platform development. Comments are not discussed on either the “Guidelines for Plank Leaders” or the “How to Draft a Plank” pages. The result is that in some situations (largely dependent on who is in charge) comments are either fully integrated into platform development, selectively integrated or ignored.

Not surprisingly, the comments that were perceived to be useful were integrated more often than those considered to be useless or irrelevant. Some of the interviewees said that they found that many of the comments provided different interpretations of the issues. According to Ben, “Public comments inject ideas into our political space that we may not have thought of.” Patrick also noted that some industry and bureaucratic insiders who know “really good stuff” use comments to dump their knowledge, and would likely not have done so without access to the feature. However, other interviewees found that most of the comments are very general, superficial or irrelevant. Many of the comments are not even made on the correct page. Ironically, the “How to Add Comments” page is littered with comments on unrelated issues, such as the monarchy, nuclear waste and mutual funds. This problem is noticeable on many other pages, including the Living Platform homepage.

Another problem with the comment feature is that it can create the illusion of participation. People who leave comments rather than actually editing the document themselves may feel they are contributing to the process. However, there is a high chance that their comment may be ignored, depending on the circumstances. If comments are left on the wrong page, they may never even be seen at all.

### **Implications**

Given these issues with the comment feature, Patrick suggested that comments be avoided entirely. In his view, the feature is for people who do not know how to use the wiki properly. Furthermore, the feature facilitates inefficient use of the wiki, since users can rely exclusively on comments and avoid direct contributions to the document. Barry confirmed this observation, stating that many users post entire planks as comments, rather than learning how to edit a page.

Using the comments this way puts the responsibility on someone else to make sure the work is integrated. This additional overhead compromises the “massively parallel development” mentioned earlier, which is one of the wiki’s main advantages. As Patrick describes “[In expecting others to integrate your comments], you run a risk that your comments are going to be wasted by someone who just says ‘Yeah, yeah’ but doesn’t make changes or make the correct changes – using the wiki properly ensures comments

and time aren't wasted." However, whether the comment feature is included or not, its overuse suggests that there is somewhat of a technological barrier for users joining the project.

## **THE TECHNOLOGICAL BARRIER**

There was near consensus that there is some degree of a technological entrance barrier in using the Living Platform. Even those participants with strong technical backgrounds reported having to get over an initial hurdle. This hurdle ranged from being entirely overwhelmed, to being mildly unsure about a few details before they could properly use the wiki. As one can expect, the difficulty was much higher for those with less of a technical background.

### **Nature of the barrier**

Patrick reported that of the people wanting to use the wiki, forty percent were able to figure it out on their own, forty percent needed about an hour of training over the phone, and twenty percent needed more than an hour of hands-on training. Furthermore, the main function of this training was not only to help participants learn a new technology, but also to change the way they thought about writing documents. As Patrick observes,

“There is a substantial learning curve that goes against way people use the web and what an author is. You're really cranking over a paradigm in people's heads. Most people are used to dialectic—getting them to stop thinking that way is difficult. The first time people use wiki they turn it into a discussion board. The challenge of the technology is to overcome people's preconceptions that documents come from one author and make the technology more dead simple because many people overwhelmed by complexity of it. We need to ruthlessly reduce what people have to see to be productive.”

In addition to participants' direct feedback, there are a number of other observations that suggest that there is a technological barrier. The most apparent phenomenon was a resistance to learning how to use the technology. As discussed above, many users will fall back on their familiarity of the comment feature rather than editing pages themselves. In earlier platform development, Patrick reported that some users avoided using the wiki altogether, instead e-mailing their comments directly to him for integration. A number of interviewees noted that this resistance stemmed from the fact that a lot of users have commitments outside of the party. Thus, they do not have the time or the desire to learn yet another tool.

After the initial learning period, all of the interviewees seemed to like using the wiki. For example, Laura who was comfortable using computers, but “not as good as those twenty-something hot shots,” reported picking up the wiki within five minutes after being given an “initial clue.” These reports suggest that the technological barrier is more of an initial preclusion, rather than an ongoing problem for users. Nevertheless, there are still a number of GPC members who remain resentful of having to learn a new tool or are ideologically opposed to using computers.

## **Implications**

One challenge for future initiatives is to make the initial entry into the wiki more intuitive and simple. The technology should aid users in making the switch from the ideology of solitary plain text editing to collaborative, multi-author rich-text editing. These changes will likely be even more crucial for traditional political parties who do not have the unusually tech-savvy member base of the GPC. Of course, it is also an important change for the GPC itself, as it is somewhat of a paradox to have an unnecessarily high technological barrier for a tool aimed at being accessible to average citizens.

## **ISSUES OF TRANSPARENCY**

Another major point of contention among the people we spoke to was the issue of transparency. As discussed above, one of the goals of using a wiki was to increase the transparency of the GPC's platform development process. However, it recently became apparent that there was some disagreement about how transparent the process should actually be. This dispute became quite overt in early 2005 when users of the Living Platform began to speak out against perceived problems with the party leadership. The Living Platform was not a cause of these issues, but became a medium for the conflict to unfold. Ultimately, the wiki had achieved such a degree of transparency that it caused significant political friction. As a result, the party leadership shut down the Living Platform for a number of days in order to "clean up" ostensibly slanderous material. They then put in place restrictions on what kinds of material could be posted on the site.

### **The argument for transparency**

Those who advocate for a completely transparent process argue that content regulation defeats the purpose of the Living Platform and goes against the very culture of the GPC. As Ben describes:

"Green parties are sites of a constant battle of cultures—an attempt is made in green parties to... create environment of inclusion both inside and outside of party which creates possibility for outside views and conflicts. In green parties (unlike other parties) dissenters are not filtered out, but allowed to participate and given resources to make their inclusion equal to everyone else."

In the conflict described above, the wiki became a forum for this battle of cultures. In the view of those who support transparency, if there is a legitimate issue, the Living Platform can be used as a way to create change within the party. The solution is not to suppress the criticism, but to deal with it. Similarly, if the goal is to get the public involved, Ben pointed out that they will say things the party may not like. Thus, it is unclear where to draw the line in terms of limiting discourse. Furthermore, Barry noted that the Living Platform is very appealing to those who feel alienated by traditional politics. This appeal is greatly diminished if the Living Platform is not completely free and transparent, because it makes the GPC more in line with conventional mainstream political thinking.

### **The argument against transparency**

Advocates for reduced transparency and content regulation argue that as a political party, the GPC needs to be careful about what goes on the wiki. For example, the platform is

somewhat dependent on a specific election strategy, which needs to be kept hidden from other parties so that they do not gain an advantage. There is also the issue of the public image of the GPC, as public conflict can damage the party's public image. Finally, there are liability issues, as the party may be held responsible for slanderous or libelous content. According to Michel, this was the justification for shutting down the site during the conflict described above.

## **Implications**

The conflict on the Living Platform is a very real demonstration of a situation that 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. The arguments made by those against full transparency are all founded in the current realities of obtaining power through mainstream politics. Conversely, those who favour transparency are more concerned with leading by example. Ben and Laura argued that it is more important for the GPC to forward its vision of Canada, rather than buying into the existing system. They did not think that simply getting the party into power was a means to effective change, because "you risk being changed by the system, rather than changing it."

Concerns about negative public perception resulting from public infighting are an ideological problem that stem from the perception of the wiki as a broadcasting tool, like other websites. People who are familiar with wikis understand the distinction between transparent collaboration and a finished webpage or document. However, the general public or party leaders may not share this understanding. Unfortunately, the only solution to this problem seems to be changing public perception across the board.

## **FUNCTION CREEP**

The Living Platform was originally intended for platform development exclusively. However, as shown above, the site became a vehicle for other activities as well. The wiki became a forum for users to air their grievances regarding party leadership and related issues. The wiki is also being employed towards less controversial ends, such as for administrative purposes. For example, Pamela described how the party's shadow cabinet used the wiki to post minutes from their meetings.

Barry also pointed out that the wiki is increasingly becoming a site of policy development, rather than platform development. Policy is broader in scope than a platform and is ongoing, whereas platform development draws on existing policy in preparation for an election. Barry predicted that the existing wiki will eventually be divided into three wikis: one for platform development, one for policy development, and one for internal administration. In Patrick's eyes, this function creep within the Living Platform is evidence of how useful wikis can be to political parties. Despite the debate over transparency, the wiki has "really taken off within the party."

## **Implications**

The flexibility of wiki technology makes it very easy for users to appropriate a single wiki for a number of purposes, and makes it very difficult for administrators to restrict usage to a single area. The implications of function creep can be both good at bad. On the one hand, unofficial or unintended use may result in disagreements over what constitutes appropriate use, and can become an excuse to censor or control content. On the other hand, function creep can also be advantageous because it allows users to utilize the tool in a variety of helpful ways. Unforeseen uses may even be preferable to those that were originally intended, whether they are more helpful to the party, or simply a better match with wiki technology. For example, Barry noted that the wiki was more conducive to policy development rather than platform development. Thus, those who employ wikis in similar initiatives should be prepared for users to take advantage of the tool in unexpected ways. They should also be prepared to adapt to the users' behaviour, instead of maintaining strict controls on appropriate use.

## **DISCUSSION**

Most interviewees agreed that the wiki has performed reasonably well in terms of fulfilling the initially stated objectives of accessibility, inclusiveness, and transparency. According to Laura and Patrick, many more people are involved in platform development than were previously, and the user demographic has broadened slightly. These changes are probably a result of the wiki's capability for "massively parallel development" which Patrick noted. Not unsurprisingly, the use of a technology which supports development amongst a multitude of authors has allowed the participation of many more individuals than was previously possible. The wiki has proven to be an awkward fit for platform development, but in the least has provided the fundamental capabilities necessary for a more open and inclusive process. Future changes to the Living Platform, whether they involve replacing the wiki or simply refining, will likely be less of a paradigm shift for users than the initial jump to the wiki itself.

However, most interviewees also agreed that the wiki still has a long way to go in terms of fulfilling the objectives behind the Living Platform. The project has yet to reach a critical mass of participants and much of the work is still done by a small, dedicated group of volunteers.

Based on our analysis, it is clear that there are also a number of impediments that reduce the efficacy of the process and prevent increased participation. One problem is that the wiki technology itself lacks robust tools for communication, which is an absolute necessity when drafting a political document. Similarly, the wiki's comment feature, while intended to support informal contributions and casual participation, does not actually provide a clear mechanism for doing so.

One of the other significant problems inhibiting participation is a noticeable entrance barrier posed by the technology. Entrance barriers are always a problem when a new technology is introduced into an existing process, both in terms of the learning curve and access to the necessary resources. However, the situation with the Living Platform is complicated by the complexity of previous platform development process which had to

be reworked for use with the wiki. New participants are required to learn not only the technology, but the entire multi-tier platform development procedure as well. Patrick reported that many people had difficulty understanding the process and often found it more complicated than learning the wiki technology itself. Likewise, Pamela and Laura noted a need for increased administrative guidance within the wiki. Pamela in particular noted that a single tech support staff member was not enough, and there was a need for administrators who could help participants troubleshoot the process apart from the technology as well. Thus, in the case of the Living Platform, the entrance barrier is twofold.

Ultimately, however, six out of seven our interviewees stated that the wiki was beneficial to the party and should continue to be used for future platform development. There was also near consensus that despite its drawbacks, developing the platform using the Living Platform was still better than the old traditional method. One particularly telling observation from Pamela was that when the wiki was briefly made unavailable earlier in the year, many people were upset about the outage. In Barry's view, the wiki is currently in an awkward stage of development, with a promising future ahead of it:

“It was born with a lot of promise, and a lot of ideas of what this is going to be. We all thought that the wiki is going to grow up to be... you know, our kid is going to be a doctor or a lawyer. And right now, the wiki's sort of a teenager... and it's sort of like the teenager is rebelling now. And we're starting to sort of reevaluate the goals that we had for it originally... But I think what it's evolving into is something that is going to be very successful—something that is going to change the way politics is done.”

## **CONCLUSION**

We have presented an analysis of the GPC's use of a wiki for its Living Platform project, based on interviews with a number of its users. Our analysis was intended to elucidate the results of this initiative, with a particular emphasis on issues that may be of interest to those engaging in similar wiki-based initiatives. Specifically, we aimed to answer three questions: is a wiki an effective tool for collaboratively building a political document; what problems may emerge when using a wiki in this way; and what design choices can be made to avoid these problems.

To this end, we examined a number of issues. First, we found that the wiki was effective for distributed writing, editing and document sharing, but lacked the necessary tools for communication and discussion. Thus, the most appropriate role for the wiki was as a secondary tool for collaboration, augmenting traditional forms of communication. Second, we found that the wiki's comment feature, while intended to support informal contributions and casual participation, does not actually provide a clear mechanism for doing so. Some interviewees advocated elimination of the comment feature entirely. Furthermore, misuse of the feature indicated misunderstanding of the technology amongst some users. Third, we found that there exists a technological entrance barrier for new users, due largely to the paradigmatic shift involved in transitioning from traditional tools to a wiki. Thus, those aiming to introduce a wiki into an existing process should

take especial care to properly reeducate their users. Fourth, we found that the transparency afforded by the wiki is a point of contention amongst users. Some considered increased transparency to be the entire point of the Living Platform, while others considered the possibility of slanderous material to be a considerable risk to the party's image. Negotiating a balance between privacy and transparency will be a significant issue for any other political party that introduces a publicly accessible wiki. Finally, we found that actual use of the wiki grew beyond its planned use, and that this was not necessarily a bad thing. Administrators of future initiatives should be prepared for users to take advantage of the wiki in unexpected ways.

### **Acknowledgements**

Thanks to Tim Lukian and Jeff Harti, and to all the interviewees.