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From Policy-Making to Community Building: A Survey On 19 Experiences of eParticipation

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Abstract: This paper analyses the results of a survey on 19 experiences of eParticipation. It focuses on the different uses of technological tools regarding the communication needs of citizen participation processes. First, it offers an analytical framework of ICT tools and functionalities, in the context of eParticipation processes. Second, it presents empirical evidence from a comparative perspective. Third, it draws some lessons from the cases analyzed and also reflects upon some theoretical aspects of eParticipation.

Keywords: eParticipation, citizens, communication, ICT tools

1. Introduction

Liberal democracies face a crisis of legitimacy of representative political institutions. Traditional citizen participation and political membership rates decline linked to a negative perception of the political sphere and its institutions (Pharr and Putnam, 2000). Political indifference does not mean, however, that citizens are more depoliticised. Citizens participate in politics through new, non-traditional and non-institutional mechanisms, and the consolidation of the Information Society has definitively incorporated Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) into political processes (Jacobs et al., 2009).

eParticipation, defined as the use of ICT to promote citizen participation in the political sphere, is often regarded as an opportunity to tackle the legitimacy crisis of representative democracies, fostering transparency, making better collective political decisions and facilitating the inclusion of citizens in the political process (Macintosh et al., 2009). On the other hand, institutional actors can be reluctant to these changes because eParticipation can cause a loss of control in agenda setting and communication channels.

The impact of ICT has been a recurring debate since their beginnings. On the one hand, the cyberoptimistic approach highlights the positive effects improving democratic practice, both quantitative (more citizens could take part politically) and qualitative (ICT facilitate deliberation and the adoption of the best collective decisions). On the other hand, cyberpessimistic theories question the capacity of ICT to facilitate the political participation of citizens, as digital participants are the minority who already participate offline (Negroponte, 1995; Rheingold, 1993, Becker et al, 2006). Beyond some normative bias and technological determinism implicit in these two approaches, a realistic position contends that ICT offer an opportunity for citizens to participate in politics, but also that traditional political actors and institutions continue to have a relevant role. So-called Politics 2.0 would imply greater capacity for participation for stakeholders, multiple dissemination channels and information broadcasters, and a certain loss of control for traditional actors (Peña-López, 2011; Sunstein, 2007). These elements become particularly important at the local level, where information can play on equal terms with supralocal spheres and traditional mass media, which can explain the growth of Citizen Participation 2.0.

The research presented here analyses the uses of technological tools in 19 experiences of eParticipation. It aims to explore the different uses of technological tools and to find evidence about the relation between communication needs and the use of particular technological tools. Moreover, while the study of the relationships between ICT and politics (and specifically on eParticipation) is often focused on single case studies, the research presented here includes a wide range of experiences that offers the possibility of a descriptive quantitative analysis (Ward and Gibson, 2009).

The structure of the paper is as follows. First, it presents the analytical framework used here introducing on the one hand the communication stages of participation processes and on the other hand the taxonomy of technological tools upon which the experiences analysed in the research are classified. Second, it presents the results of the analysis of the cases combining a quantitative and a qualitative approach. Finally, the paper reflects upon an ideal-type distinction found in the cases

analysed that can shed light upon further lines of research and also to the debates about the goals and outcomes of eParticipation processes.

2. Analytical framework of Participation 2.0: Communicative moments and technological tools

Arnstein (1969) proposed a model that has become a reference for the analysis of citizen participation which included a number of stages: manipulation, therapy (or “educating” citizens to have a positive attitude towards participation), informing, consultation, placation (or reducing conflict), partnership (direct involvement of citizens in decision-making), delegated power and, finally, citizen control. Derived from this model we find later evolutions such as the International Association for Public Participation (IAP2, 2007), Tambouris et al. (2007) the OECD model (2001) Lukensmeyer & Torres (2006), or Macintosh & Whyte (2008). As noted by Macintosh, the seminal contribution of Arnstein has influenced the contextual framework that must be considered when promoting a citizen participation process, such as certain stages of participation, its depth, the role and the actors that take part in the process or the moment when citizen participation occurs in the cycle of public policies. In this study we will also emphasize other relevant aspects such as the rules of participation, the technological tools and the communication process of the participation project, which give rise to what we can call “moments of participation”.

2.1 Moments of participation

The communicative environment in which citizen participation promoted by public institutions takes place has been barely analysed. Any participation experience implies the existence of a more or less formalised communication process between the institution promoting the process and the citizens. Generally, four elementary stages can be identified in all citizen participation processes (Rubio, 2008): mobilisation, development, closure and monitoring. These stages have specific communication needs.

Mobilisation requires communication planning aimed at the implication of potential participants in the project. Depending on whether it is aimed at citizens in general or a specific target group (for example, young adults), the channels of communication will be different. The main objective of this stage is to give credibility and visibility to the participation process. Information must be provided to citizens regarding the reasons and importance of the participation process, and the expected results or benefits -individual or collective- of the participation. The information must define organisational aspects such as who participate, when, the issue and through which mechanisms.

During the *development* of the process, communication must provide significant (and accessible) information about the issue under discussion and the dynamics of the process itself (progress made, characteristics of the contributions, etc.). However, the fundamental part of this moment is the content of effective participation, how these contents are gathered by the promoting institution and how will respond to them (or if they are disseminated among the participants to establish a deliberation process). Communication may vary depending on the depth of the participation process, according to whether the intention of the process is to provide information to citizens, make a consultation, involve them to provide input for decision-making, request their direct collaboration in the decision-making process or empower them to take the political decision collectively.

At the *closure* stage, communication basically focuses on providing feedback to citizens' contributions identifying how they have influenced the final collective decision. As in the previous stages, the characteristics of the participation process will condition the communication parameters established between the public institution and citizens.

During *monitoring*, communication must focus on the usefulness of the participation process. To the extent that the process aims to achieve measurable objectives through indicators, the moment of assessment may go beyond the gathering of subjective impressions of the participants. Thus, it must inform the citizens how their participation has influenced the success of the process.

2.2 Participation tools

ICT are used throughout the participation process, but it is possible to discriminate between the different technological tools and applications depending on their communication objective and their

directionality. Based upon previous works (Dalakiouridou et al., 2009; DEMO-net), we have built a classification of the most common technological tools available following this twofold criteria. Regarding their communication objective, tools can be particularly suitable for one-to-one communication, one-to-many communication or many-to-many communication. Regarding directionality, we find suitable tools for unidirectional or bidirectional communication, while a third group is characterised under this approach by allowing hybrid uses. Beyond other attributes (price, skills needed for their use, etc.), the use of ICT in each of the moments of the participation process basically depends on the type of communication that is to be established with the citizens who take part in this process. Table 1 classifies the tools as a result of the crossover of the qualitative and quantitative approach:

Table 1: Classification of tools

	Unidirectional	Asymmetric bidirectional	Symmetric bidirectional	Hybrid
One-to-one			MMS SMS	
One-to-many	Aggregator (1) Shared documents (2)	Surveys / Consultations (3) Events / Agenda (4) Websites / Content managers (5) Collection of signatures(6)		
Many-to-many		Blog (7) Photography (8) eCommerce platforms Podcast / Sound Webcasting / Screencasting (9) Video (10)	Collaborative documents (11) Forum (12) Collaborative management of projects Map / IMS (13) Social marking Virtual reality / 3D worlds Teleconference Wiki (14) Professional Network Social Network / Virtual Community (15) Chat (16)	
Hybrid			E-mail (17) Games Nanoblog (18) Simulations (19) Electronic vote (20)	Campaign Management Mashup
Numbers in brackets indicate examples of the use of the tool: (1) Today I Decide, (2) London Safety Plan, (3) North Western Ontario, (4) Croydon, (5) Harringay, (6) Cidade democratica, (7) Harringay, (8) Linköping, (9) Mental Health Strategy, (10) San Francisco , (11) Mental Health Strategy, (12) Talk Swindon, (13) Ask Bristol, (14) New Zealand, (15) San Francisco, (16) Nordpol, (17) Talk Swindon, (18) FEED, (19) Trikala. This is not to say that only one single tool has been identified for each case, as most of them use more than one tool.				

3. Analysis

The cases chosen represent good and innovative practices in the use of technological tools and the procedure itself. Data sources included banks of good practices and other internationally recognised experiences such as ePractice, DEMO-net, PeP-Net, Momentum, or People and Participation. Cases were incorporated from different countries such as Brazil, Canada, New Zealand, Estonia, Sweden, Greece or England. The research had a particular concern about local participation but the experiences analysed not only belong to this level of administration as the focus of the study is on how ICT can bridge the gap between citizens and representative institutions at a general level.

The research technique used is contents analysis, a methodology that enables valid inferences from contents or communication data such as the characteristics of the sender or the public it addresses, beyond a simple descriptive document analysis, and combined a qualitative and qualitative approach (Weber, 1985; Krippendorff, 1990). The cases were classified following a scheme that included *target* (general or specific), *scope* (territorial or not), *issue* (general participation or a particular policy area) *tools* (technological resources), and *moment* (of communication). A datasheet was drawn up with

these categories for each of the 19 cases and analyzed following the quantitative/qualitative distinction.

A first exploratory analysis showed how two out of three cases are conceived as general citizen participation processes. Among those with a specific theme, there are a large number of cases linked to young people (which have a double dimension: issue and target group) and to the various areas of town-planning. The quantitative analysis presented in the next section focuses on which tools are used in the participation experiences and, particularly, with what purpose. Secondly, the qualitative analysis focuses on the use and performance of citizen participation processes, presented as seven 'learning lessons'.

3.1 Quantitative analysis

The analysis of the participation experiences found 20 different tools, and usually different applications are available for each tool (that is, a blog is a tool while Blogger or WordPress are applications). The most frequently used tools in the cases analysed are surveys/consultations (used in 9 of the 19 participation experiences), forums (in 8 experiences), and social networks (in 6). On the contrary, five tools have been applied only in a single case: simulation, chat, collaborative documents, calendars and blogs. The uses show a progressive incorporation of advanced technologies rather than innovative uses. In fact, the most frequent tools are typical of the first stage of the Internet (38 uses), although Web 2.0 tools have acquired a significant use too (29 uses). Only one of the experiences, *Federated eParticipation Systems for Cross-Societal Project*, introduces third generation Internet tools (so-called semantic or intelligent Web). The tools used in the 19 international were classified following the distinction between type of communication and directionality:

Table 2: Frequency use by types of tools

	Unidirectional	Asymmetric bidirectional	Symmetric bidirectional	Total (horizontal)
One-to-many	8	23		31
Many-to-many		7	23	30
Hybrid			6	6
Total (vertical)	8	30	29	Total (67)

Bearing in mind the criterion of the type of communication, one-to-many (31) and many-to-many communication (30) tools -which are more typical of Web 2.0- are numerically similar. On the contrary, there are few tools enabling hybrid communication (both one-to-many and many-to-many). With regard to the direction of communication, the most frequent tools allow for bidirectionality (59). Within these tools, the distribution is quite similar between asymmetrical (such as surveys, agenda or webcast) and symmetrical communication between users (forum, wiki, social network, etc.). From this perspective, two sub-groups can be identified: tools enabling one-to-many communication with asymmetric bidirectionality; and tools enabling many-to-many communication with symmetric bidirectionality. Rather unsurprisingly, the analysis suggests a widespread use of bidirectional tools between the organisation promoting the participation initiative and the target public. This points to an emerging trend: from participation based on a vertical style of communication, aimed at providing information to citizens, towards a more horizontal model, open to participants' opinions and demands.

Finally, table 3 shows -with horizontal percentages- that the use of tools is more intensive in the mobilisation and particularly the implementation stages. 16 out of 20 tools have been used during the moment of mobilisation of the participation initiative and 19 during the moment of implementation. The number of tools applied during the closure and monitoring stages of the citizen participation initiatives is 7 and 8, respectively. Therefore, the cases examined have used technological tools for two main purposes: first, to inform about the citizen participation initiatives and to obtain the involvement of the target public; and second, to execute or implement the participation initiatives.

Four large groups can be identified based upon this analysis depending on the number of moments in which they are used. The first group includes tools that are only applied in one moment of the participation process: blogs, collaborative documents, shared documents and simulation. Moreover,

most of them appear only in one participation experience, that is, these are scarcely used specific tools for one moment in the participation process (implementation or development).

Table 3: Use of by participation moments (horizontal %).

Tool	Moment 1 Mobilisation	Moment 2 Development	Moment 3 Closure	Moment 4 Monitoring
Aggregator	40%	20%	20%	20%
Blog	100%			
Collaborative document		100%		
Shared document		100%		
Electronic vote	20%	40%	20%	20%
Survey/Consultation		45%	55%	
Events/Agenda	40%	60%		
Forum	23.1%	61.5%	7.7%	7.7%
Photography	33.3%	33.3%		33.4%
Map	33.3%	66.6%		
Nanoblog	50%	50%		
Websites	55.5%	11.1%	33.3%	
Petitions	28.6%	42.8%	14.3%	14.3%
Simulation		100%		
Video	66.6%	33.3%		
Electronic vote		50%	50%	
Webcast	50%	25%		25%
Table 3 (Cont.) Tool	Moment 1 Mobilisation	Moment 2 Development	Moment 3 Closure	Moment 4 Monitoring
Wiki	25%	75%		
Social Network	63.6%	18.2%		18.2%
Chat	33.3%	33.3%		33.3%

To better understand the use of these tools it is worth referring to some of the cases. For instance, the *London Safety Plan* Project aims to define a plan of action for the London Fire Department, while the City of Trikala (Greece) aims to create a new methodology of eParticipation, including the use of shared documents to guide the citizen consultation and debates contemplated in the different projects. Something similar could be said regarding the use of the collaborative document tool in the *Mental Health Strategy for Canada* project, an initiative that aims to share ideas for policy agenda setting for which, among other tools, a space is used where users can send their opinions and experiences, in order to help the rest reach their own opinion on the issue.

The second group is formed by six tools that are usually concentrated in two moments of the participation process. Survey/consultation is used in the implementation and closure stages, while events/agenda, map, nanoblog, video and wiki are used in the mobilisation and development stages.

Survey/consultation deserves specific attention, as it is the most frequently used as it performs an important function when demanding citizens' opinions and preferences in relation with the specific themes, such as the definition of priorities and new ideas in the health policy for the Ontario province (*Share Your Story, Shape Your Care*) or the discussion of matters of political interest (*Talk Swindon*). Surveys are also used in the closure stage of the participation process, particularly to determine which of the presented alternatives is preferred by the users, as in *Ask Bristol* or in the *Scottish Youth Parliament*, where the survey of young people also works as a kind of vote on the different proposals to be incorporated in the *Youth Manifesto*. As mentioned above, some of the tools in this group are used simultaneously in the mobilisation and implementation stages. For example, the events/agenda tool is used in the *Talk Swindon* Project to inform about events of interest for capturing the attention of citizens and obtaining their involvement in the deliberation process (mobilisation), as well as guiding the discussion among citizens (implementation).

The third group comprises tools which are applied in three of the moments of the participation process –photography, websites, webcast, social network and chat-, basically in the first two moments and in the fourth. The main function of these tools is to inform about the results of the participation experience, not as a closed event, but as a reality susceptible to review and assessment. This can be seen, for example, in the *Mental Health Strategy for Canada* project that incorporates a webcast (in real-time) on users' experience during the process. Social network is the most used tool, particularly for mobilising citizens in the participation initiatives. A good example of the potential of this tool is the case of the *San Francisco Facebook*. Although it is not a specific citizen participation project, the large number of followers and the level of activity shows its usefulness for transmitting information about local activities, acting as a civic portal to the administration and facilitating the civic monitoring of town council's activities.

The last group comprises the most versatile tools used in the four stages of the participation processes: aggregator, e-mail, petitions, electronic vote and forum. A clear example of the recurrent application of these tools is the project *Today I Decide* of Estonia, aimed at incentivising citizen participation in the process of drafting legislation, and where citizens are up-to-date with the proposals that are to be transferred to the public administration with the monitoring of the debate surrounding the matters and the final vote among the users.

3.2 Qualitative analysis

Besides the quantitative evidence presented in the previous section, a qualitative analysis of the information about the specific use of technological tools in the 19 experiences of eParticipation included in the research allows to draw some conclusions that may be helpful for public participation initiatives. These elements can be summarised as seven learning lessons related to different aspects of the participation process:

- Registration of the users of electronic participation tools

Some of the experiences require the citizens interested in transmitting their comments and opinions to register, in order to prevent misuse or offensive contents. To encourage inscription it is a good idea to state that the inscription process is very simple and does not take up too much time. For the participation tools that do not contemplate the entry of comments (such as the survey) a registration system is not so necessary (in *Imagine Croydon*, for example, it is not required). Thus, the question of registration raises a trade-off between, on the one hand, the cost of registering (basically time) and, on the other, the benefit for the quality of participation (for example, personal insults are avoided).

- Complementary nature of online and offline tools

The use of online tools does not exclude the possibility of offline participation. In fact, one of the keys to the success of some of the initiatives (such as *Nordpol*) comes from the combined use of both types of strategies. This is particularly relevant during the first stages of the participation process, when disseminating the participation initiative and involving the target public can involve the use of online and offline tools, from e-mail, social networks or events/agenda, to leaflets, booklets, or information and advertising in traditional media.

- Clear and concise description of the objectives and functioning of the participation initiatives

The participation initiatives must offer concise and clearly visible information on key questions such as the description of the initiative, leading institution, objectives, duration, etc. Lack of information can generate confusion and reluctance among potential users. While this can seem obvious, basic data

about the participation process is not explicitly stated in some analysed experiences. One clear example is *Talk Swindon*, an online discussion forum that has been working since 2006 and is very dynamic in both themes and participation. However, the objectives and the promoting institution are not clearly defined on the website (although it does specify the rules for participating in the forum). Brief and educational explanation about the different technological tools and their function is also an important aspect, including if it is necessary to register or not, guidance on how to attach documents, and so on. Another element is the indication of basic rules for participation. For instance, *Talk Swindon* is a good example as it indicates a detailed set of rules, specifically regarding the use of the forum, defamation, cookies and privacy, and the current legislation on intellectual property and copyright.

- Free versus proprietary software

Free software tools offer some advantages for online participation processes. They usually are cheaper than proprietary technology though they usually still need specific IT development and management especially when customisation is required. On the other hand, it facilitates the possibility of reproducing it in other territorial areas and sectors. It also provides a greater control over the tool, a freedom that is lost when the tools are offered by a private company.

- The visibility of the project administrator

As mentioned above, precise information has to be provided regarding the promoting institution but it must also have an active and visible role throughout all the stages of the citizen participation process. It is good that users are able to identify that there is an administrator of the initiative that looks out for its correct development, providing relevant information, moderating –when required- a discussion forum, summarizing opinions, disseminating results, etc. Otherwise, users may feel that the promoting institution is not sufficiently involved in the initiative and that their comments and opinions will get lost. Again, *Talk Swindon* is a good example: the administrator is visible in many of the themes discussed on the forum, in the role of facilitator and enabler of the debates.

- Accessibility of the participation initiatives

The perception of accessibility and proximity to citizens of the initiatives conditions the final level of citizens' participation and involvement. Even when a project looks for active participation, if citizens consider it to be far from their reality and interests it is unlikely to be successful. Some of the examined initiatives have designed the contents of their websites based on this approach. This is basically seen in two aspects. First, incorporation of bidirectional communication –whether symmetric or asymmetric- tools favours citizens' involvement in the participation process. Second, the specification of a section entitled “contact us” section, via e-mail or postal address, etc., where users can send opinions and suggestions must be accompanied by a commitment to deal with the comments received. This channel of communication must be visible and easily accessible so that users can have a point of reference to contact with the managers of the initiative.

- Proactive role of users

Some of the citizen participation experiences appeal to the proactive nature of the users, not just to take part in the experience but to disseminate it among people they know. Of the examined cases, *Imagine Croydon* is a case in point of this strategy. The website makes available a set of various ideas and tools for participants to apply them in meetings with friends and neighbours, including supporting materials such as boards or cameras or specific guidelines to manage group dynamics.

4. Concluding remarks: Overcoming the ‘moments’? From policy-making to community-building

The evidence presented in this paper shows there is a wide range of tools available for the specific communication moments of a participation process. Many of the cases analysed aimed at generating a specific output, whilst other emphasised citizens' engagement although they do not have a specific purpose. In other words, there is a differentiation between processes aimed at producing a public decision that could be qualified as *policy-oriented*, and participation processes that emphasise citizens' involvement generating a sense of belonging to the community, referring to what we can call *community-building*. These two models are not mutually exclusive but rather ideal-types that can be present in the same participation process, and may have many dimensions that help reflect on the different related elements of online citizen participation processes.

As suggested in Table 4, different elements can be associated with each participation model. A first element is the distinction between the most formalised processes with a structured design where every stage performs a specific function aimed at producing a specific result, and those more open processes, where users' participation is more informal and, therefore, generates more possibilities in different ways but also bear less possibilities of controlling the final result. The models aimed at specific policies emphasize the production of a pre-established result (whether a decision or a clear position regarding a public question), while the second fosters the interaction between community members and has a more relational nature. While the first model could be closer to traditional participation where the representation of citizens is formulated in a procedure aimed at generating a specific result, the second model is linked to the generation of a sense of belonging and engagement to the community, associated with social capital theories or the participation in social networks.

Table 4: Decision-making and community building

Elements	Policy-oriented	Community-building
Design	Formalised	Open
Aim	Decision-making	Relational
Citizen role	Representation	Engagement
Participation	"Traditional" participation	"Network" participation
Management	Guiding role	Facilitator role
Tools	From one-to-many	From many-to-many
(Communication)		
Tools	Unidirectional/Asymmetric	Symmetric
(Directionality)		

From the point of view of the organisation, the two models also have different implications. The organisation and people leading the process can take the role of guide and moderator when dealing with a structured participation process, where a series of steps is required at each stage of the decision-making process, from managing the communication to the methodology. In the case of community building projects the role of the organisation will tend towards actions in terms of facilitator and enabler of the network community where users participate.

Use of the tools can also vary depending on the nature of participation. In policy-oriented processes, the tools will be oriented at a specific function, whether it be an online questionnaire for gathering information, a newsletter for monitoring the process or electronic voting to produce a collective decision. Thus, on the one hand, one-to-many communication tools will play an important role for developing scheduled communication strategies to send the same information to a very large group of users. In the community-building model we find a significant presence of many-to-many communication tools with a strong bidirectional and especially symmetric component. The users themselves largely control the development of the participation process and facilitate the contents, emphasising the open and relational possibilities of participation.

These two ideal-types can be also interpreted in terms of the approach used to develop the participation process. In the first case, the local administration designs and centralises the project following a top-down approach, while in the second one citizens acquire greater influence and the administration is more open to their opinions and demands under a bottom-up approach. Moreover, experiences other than those promoted by the administration must be taken into account such as blogs, forums or social networks that generate opinions and debates regarding a municipality, a specific issue or group, and so on.

In terms of credibility and democratic legitimacy the costs of not following this new logic can be high for public institutions because they will be increasingly left out of the dynamic that is the driving force behind many of the daily activities of its citizens. The terms of inclusivity have been inverted: it is no longer the case of citizens being left out of participation processes but the institutions that can be left out of the citizen participation. In any case, this transition implies accepting the consequences of the new 2.0 politics. Otherwise, the risk is in a loss of visibility and nodality of the administrations in a changing environment (especially among the younger generations). On the other hand, it is possible to make the most of the fact that citizens have adopted Web 2.0 tools and are participating outside the traditional channels of institutionalised participation. Therefore, the key question is not whether the new media can capture, moderate and summarise citizens' voices, but whether the political institutions are able and want to enter into a non-hierarchical relation with them. The free environment

of these tools implies that it is the institution that must approach the citizens rather than a participation process where it is the citizen who approaches the sphere of the administration.

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