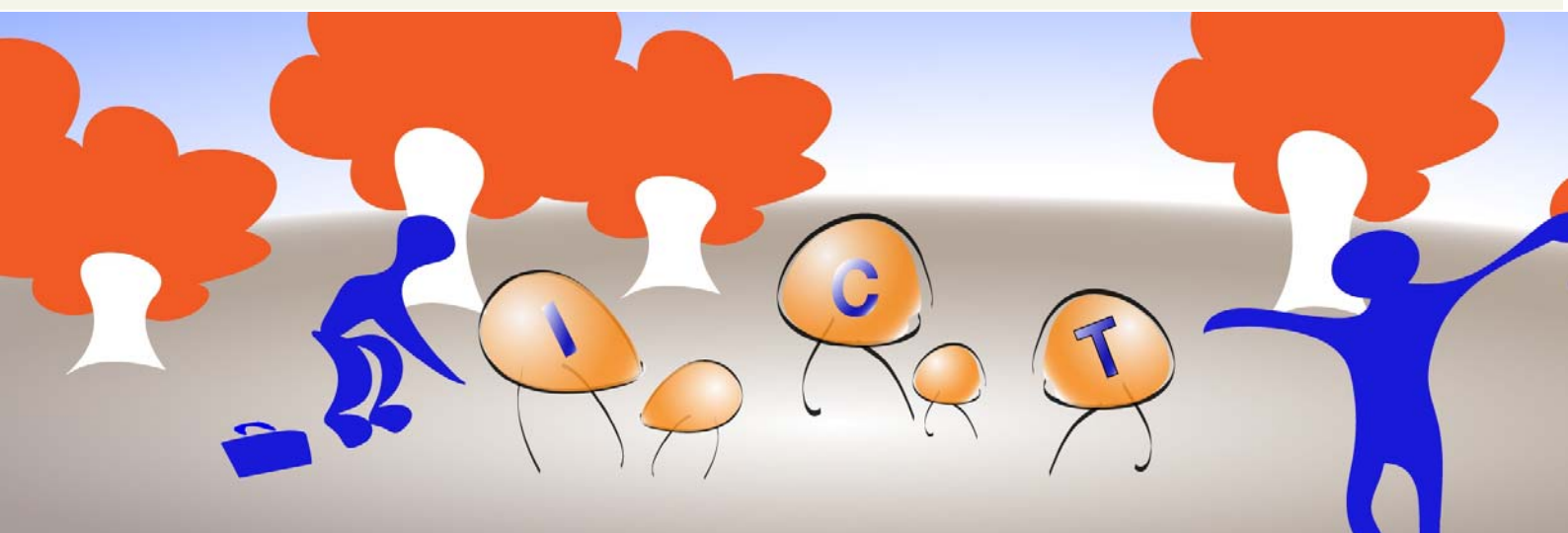


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Editorial: eParticipation



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As the European Union moves towards elections to the European Parliament in June 2009, there is a chance to reflect on the status of democracy and participation across the continent. Never before have there been such contradictory and auspicious developments in thinking about how all sections of European society can engage in policy making and political debate. On the one hand, it is clear that many have disengaged from formal politics, voter turnout is falling, membership of political parties is declining, and there is a widespread sense of a loss of trust in government and politicians. On the other hand, there is a surge of grass-root, often single issue engagement in policy making, people generally are more aware of public policy issues, and there are more outlets and channels enabling participation. Much of this is supported, and in fact driven forward, by new ICT tools. These range from the more traditional emails and electronic forums, to the Web 2.0 phenomenon of social networking, and applications which enable users to upload their own content and manipulate the content of others, as well as facilitate deliberation and debate. Indeed, many commentators have hailed President Obama as the world's first truly Internet politician, and there is no doubt that his intelligent use of ICT in political fundraising and campaigning has opened a new chapter in eParticipation.

One issue for Europe is, of course, can the established political institutions grasp and learn from such opportunities, or will traditional mindsets and structures resist change? Will eParticipation in Europe remain something done largely outside the formal governance sphere? How can we in Europe use the new tools beneficially, whilst guarding against the undoubted threats posed by the hijacking of participation processes by the already politically and digitally enfranchised? These are some of the questions addressed in this eParticipation edition of the European Journal of ePractice. Accordingly three main themes are examined in the eight articles for which there is space in this edition.

First, two articles examine eParticipation issues at the European level and what is happening in response. **Simon Smith and Effie Dalakiouridou** contextualise public eParticipation in the governance of the EU by looking at the historical development of legislative and policy initiatives at this level, and relating this to Europe's prevailing governance framework. They find some gap between rhetoric and reality, so that eParticipation is still conceived rather one-dimensionally through its bias towards established structures and actors, but that there is scope to broaden eParticipation in a more inclusive and truly bottom-up manner. Within this context, **Eleni Panopoulou** and her colleagues provide an overview of how Europe is actually progressing. Most eParticipation initiatives do take place at sub-national and national level, with only 24% of 255 surveyed initiatives having a Europe-wide or transnational character. However, Europe is playing an increasingly important role as many of the successful national initiatives have significant European funding, and the number of trans-national projects is increasing. The challenge is that the larger the scale of eParticipation the more likely it is to be purely one-way information flow rather than genuine two-way engagement. So European institutions do still need to learn from small-scale experiences and to start to embrace the potential of truly mass collaboration which is already making its mark in non-government contexts.

The second theme addressed is how to evaluate eParticipation projects, both as successful initiatives and also, and probably more importantly, in terms of their wider impacts on political discourse and democracy. **Georg Aichholzer and Hilmar Westholm** present a layered model for evaluating eParticipation projects, mainly in the areas of consultation and deliberation. They stress the need for greater precision and objectivity through more robust methods and indicators, the challenges of combining theory with practice, and to take direct account of the user perspective which can still be

neglected in many projects. They conclude that better evaluation is required of the links between eParticipation initiatives and democracy in the wider society. **Jordanka Tomkova** attempts to take up this challenge by evaluating how eConsultation is being increasingly employed by political institutions, but so far with very mixed and nebulous results. Although citizens are now being invited to the policy-making table more than ever before, which is creating new forms of debate, their real impact on reciprocal (government-citizen) learning and policy outputs appears low, and is often not recognised by politicians or civil servants. The question is raised whether such eConsultation does mark a new beginning or whether it serves only as a façade for political correctness.

The third main theme in this edition of the Journal is on examples of practical applications of eParticipation. This is addressed by four articles each of which shows how eParticipation initiatives can make a significant difference to the way politics is conducted and the quality of policy debate within their own specific context. First, **Tiago Peixoto** shows how using ICT to help citizens participate in the process of allocating budgets to public projects in Brazil can have positive impacts. For example, the level of participation using ICT was seven times higher than the traditional process, and the cost was much lower. However, other factors were also critical, including the fact that more public projects could be examined over a longer timeframe which increased the incentive to participate, and that citizens were told their inputs would have a binding effect on the final decision. In contrast, **Birgit Hohberg** and her colleagues report on initiatives in Hamburg, Berlin and Munich to create an Internet dialogue with citizens about what family-friendly living in each city should be. The success of each initiative illustrates both how politicians can harness expert local knowledge which otherwise remains hidden, and how women as a group typically not using eParticipation can be strongly motivated to engage in even larger numbers than men.

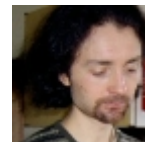
The article by **Gerard Cervelló** describes how in 2000 the Swiss government funded initiatives in three Cantons to test the effectiveness of eParticipation in the periodic consultative processes carried out across the country, specifically the use of legally binding eVoting in live elections. The initiatives commissioned different ICT tools and tested *inter alia* both their technical functionality and impact on voter turnout. Results showed that it is possible to design and employ highly robust, simple to use and secure systems. It is also clear that, with carefully designed processes and presentation, the Internet can both increase and stabilise turnout over time. Finally, **Sabrina Scherer** and colleagues describe the importance of usability engineering in designing eParticipation applications, and illustrate this through the VoiceE project which promotes dialogue between two European regions and policy makers in the European Parliament. The methodology used is based on a structured lifecycle, which helps to ensure the overall usability, and thus impact of, eParticipation applications. The important conclusion is that design must be on-going and iterative through the design and implementation of any project, and that user involvement is essential at all stages of the lifecycle.

Contextualising Public (e)Participation in the Governance of the European Union

This paper contextualises the benefits and challenges of participation and eParticipation in the EU in two respects: historically, by reviewing the last decade of legislative and policy initiatives relevant to public participation in European policy-making; and theoretically, by defining the governance regime which operates in the EU and, taking into account the governance 'reform programme' which EU institutions have also laid out, theorising the scope for public participation in this political context. While noting a certain gap or lag between rhetoric and reality, such that participation opportunities remain biased in practice towards structured events, a number of risks are identified in the apparent future strategy of 'listening better' by diffusing participation beyond the 'strong publics' which have hitherto dominated participative policy-making in Europe.

These risks are referred to as the 'low benefit – high cost' scenario, the 'pathologies of learning', the 'tyranny of light', and the difficulty of targeting marginalised groups, with the need to protect and yet connect 'enclaves' in the European public sphere.

The underlying challenge for a network governance regime like the EU is how to maintain a productive tension between system-oriented and actor-driven participation. eParticipation tools may prove useful in this balancing act.



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“ The pursuit of governmental objectives involves attempts to mobilise the self-governing capacities of individuals, groups and communities, such that 'active citizenship' is normalised as a responsibility as well as a right. ”

1 Introduction

Participation has become something of a mantra in late modern societies. As commonly used by policy-makers, it also goes by a number of near synonyms such as engagement, involvement and empowerment, any of which may be prefaced by an adjective like public or community. Typically, the benefits claimed for participation relate to service effectiveness and efficiency (e.g. more detailed knowledge of the public's needs and wants for service planning), decision-making quality and legitimacy (e.g. generating awareness, acceptance and commitment to policies), or active citizenship (e.g. generating social capital and mobilising people's voluntary labour, including their intellectual labour for problem-solving purposes). Participation using information and communication technologies (ICT) – eParticipation – may bring three additional types of benefit: reduced transaction and coordination costs in social and political relationships, greater deliberativeness due to certain qualities of the medium, and the enhanced information-processing capacity of information technology.

This paper argues that participation is 'asked' to perform different functions according to the governance context in which it occurs. Ultimately, the benefits of participation can be understood in terms of how its effects change, stabilise or improve a certain governance regime. Having traced the recent history of legislation and policy on citizens' participation in the European Union, we attempt to define the governance regime that prevails at the level of the EU, arguing that a network mode of governance provides a reasonable first approximation, and finally we deduce some implications about the role of participation and eParticipation as a governance tool for Europe.

2 Governance

Governance is usually defined in relation to government. Both are about securing "the conditions for ordered rule and collective action" (Stoker, 1998: 17). However, the growth in popularity of the term governance reflects a sense that contemporary transformations (fragmentations) of the state, markets and society have changed the nature of many governing processes, blurring the boundaries between and within public, private and non-governmental/non-profit sectors and necessitating the formation of more or less diffuse coalitions and partnerships in order to govern, where previously this was achieved through the directive power of central authorities. This gives us a definition that, in one crucial respect, is in conflict with government, since "democratic government presumes exactly what democratic governance does its utmost to erode, namely a clear distinction between system and life world" (Bang, 2003: 242). Nevertheless this paper retains a somewhat state-centric definition of governance because even if many of the tasks of governing are devolved to non-state actors, the state provides a sense of direction to societal processes. These are defined by strategies (i.e. "asymmetrical privileging of some outcomes over others" (Jessop, 2003: 108)), and refer to public values which, when fixed in space-time, have the status of 'official norms' within an always temporary but often quite stable state-society settlement, providing some sense of 'steer' to lower-order societal processes, including participation.

3 Participation

Participation, as defined here, relates mainly to inputs to policy- and decision-making for political or public policy purposes, both within formal systems but also through informal systems where these can have a real impact at any stage of the policy lifecycle. Participation will have direct impacts on, and relations to, public policy goals and values like democracy, but it is not understood only in the context of democracy or any other public value. Participation can lead to benefits which take the form of either public or private goods: often the intrinsic benefits are appropriated privately (by participants), whereas the instrumental benefits may be appropriated publicly. In addition to these criteria, this paper is concerned with participation at the European scale.

Participation is a defining characteristic of democracy, but two caveats should be added. Firstly, the reverse does not hold true: there is nothing intrinsically democratic about participation or about regimes that promote it as a governance tool. Authoritarian regimes have often been characterised by extremely high levels of participation of one form or another. Public service organisations such as health authorities or social housing providers at the local level, or autonomous regulatory agencies at the EU level, which govern (or co-govern) a specific policy domain, may make use of participatory methods to do so even though they are not democratic bodies in terms of their structures and procedures. Secondly, participation does not lead deterministically to any particular type of democracy, such as direct democracy (with which it is frequently equated). It is just as conceivable, and empirically demonstrable, that participatory methods can bolster representative democracy and undermine direct democracy. In France, for example, Premat (2006, 2008) has shown that some mayors use participatory methods such as online discussion forums to position themselves at critical nodes for the

translation of citizens' demands to the policy-making process and for reconnaissance work among constituents, thus channelling grassroots participatory energy into the formal representative system and obviating the need for more direct forms of democracy.

4 Why do contemporary governance regimes aspire to become participative?

Logically, there are many circumstances in which non-participatory decision-making is legitimate and effective. Participation activities then become 'low-benefit' and 'high-cost' interventions (Irvin & Stansbury, 2004). In the situation described by these authors participation was perceived as unnecessary by the population concerned for a relatively simple policy process (flood management in a small valley), but for more complex issues there is a feeling that increased participation can be one part of a response to the limitations on the state's capacity to direct society and redistribute resources to the same extent that was the norm in the 20th century (in both 'halves' of Europe). 21st century states are attempting instead to 'enable' society to regulate itself and to 'coordinate' a new division of labour between partners from all three sectors in order to achieve collective goals and create public goods and values. They arguably find themselves confronting indeterminate issues and risks requiring exploratory solutions, in an age of unclear rules, unintended consequences and uncertain pay-offs (Jessop, 2003; Peters, 2006).

For these reasons, participation is increasingly demanded of us by modern states. The pursuit of governmental objectives involves attempts to mobilise the self-governing capacities of individuals, groups and communities, such that 'active citizenship' is normalised as a responsibility as well as a right. Thus it has been argued that 'advanced liberal government' reserves a major role for the 'technologies of agency' (Dean, 1999: 167-8). Participation has become a *moralising discourse* (responsible citizens should be active in managing their own risks, and those who cannot need to be empowered to do so), a *functional requirement* of the post-welfare state (necessary to tap localised knowledge because needs assessment is increasingly undertaken not by bureaucrats but by service users themselves), and a *normative discourse* (a means to overcome a perceived division between governors and governed in representative regimes (Jessop, 2003: 104)). Empowering people to co-govern and self-govern has become a key governance strategy because "unless they are prepared to assume responsibility for and participate actively in solving their own everyday problems, the system stands little chance of being able to connect with them and deliver them the welfare goods they demand" (Bang, 2003: 243).

There is a potential tension between system-oriented participation (what we might call co-governance) and self-governance as the practice of political freedoms on an actor's own terms. Bang's concept of culture governance implies that to utilise people's self-governing capacities to the full extent, rulers must "pay heed to the irreducibility of the 'small tactics' of lay people in the political community for making a difference" (Bang, 2003: 248) and link this popular creativity to goal-setting, if only indirectly. This means guaranteeing a space for participation within what Goffman would call back regions of the social system. Participation, as a specific form of social integration, can be thought of as 'regionalised' according to the locales in which it takes place. Each locale acts as a power container, and there exists a hierarchy of locales, through which social and system integration are articulated across time-space (Giddens, 1984). Back regions – essentially locales which are distant from power centres – resemble Habermas' literary public sphere in the sense of being insulated from dominant power relations, both governmental and commercial (Habermas, 1989).¹ Here, participation may be driven by a search for cognitive reassurance rather than the pursuit of interests.

5 The EU's 'democratic deficit'

The term democratic deficit has emerged in connection with the EU, above all to indicate the opaqueness of decision-making (Lebessis & Paterson, 1999). According to the Europa website², "The democratic deficit is a concept invoked principally in the argument that the European Union and its various bodies suffer from a lack of democracy and seem inaccessible to the ordinary citizen because their method of operating is so complex." Considerable effort has therefore been invested to create processes of transparency and accountability with regard to the exercise of public power in the EU and its legitimacy. Accountability is considered a source of

1 Discursive practice in the literary public sphere is insulated from determination by power relations, which is not the same as saying that the two are completely unconnected: the public sphere, as a component of civil society, is always in a fundamental sense in opposition to the power of the state.

2 http://europa.eu/scadplus/glossary/democratic_deficit_en.htm

legitimacy which the EU institutions are highly dependent on. Transparency is perceived as a necessary condition for democracy, as it ensures that citizens obtain all the information they need to call public authorities to account. Legitimacy demonstrates the capacity of European institutions to provide a system of good governance and fulfil their functions in an impartial manner. Citizens and other actors reflexively assess both the processes and the outputs of governance in terms of their legitimacy. Yet the relationship between these variables is quite complex (see Tsoukas 1997, Diamandouros, 2006, Lebessis and Paterson, 1997). Measures already taken to promote transparency and accountability by EU institutions might seem to provide citizens with more opportunities to be informed, but in reality citizens feel scarcely able to shape their future as Europeans, resulting in largely passive expressions of citizenship (Dalakiouridou, Tambouris & Tarabanis, 2008).

In fact, "the term 'democratic deficit' often masks an unjustified presupposition that the EU should follow similar democratic practices to those found in national arenas.... [when in fact] a legitimate and democratic Union may involve innovations for which there are no precedents in national experiences of democratic politics." (Lord, 2000: 21) These innovations could include forging links between a 'listening' Commission and citizens or their formal and informal advocates. It was in this spirit that the European Constitution was introduced as an instrument to bolster legitimacy and support for the EU, and it was intended to "politicize and democratize the EU in a way that encouraged a shared sense of citizen engagement in a common project" (Moravcsik, 2006). The same author argues, however, that there is no empirical evidence to verify that greater political participation would result in greater institutional trust and political legitimacy.

As we have already cautioned against the temptation to elide the concepts of participation and democracy, these limits to expected causalities should not surprise us. This paper is not seeking a solution to the EU's 'democratic deficit', although concern about the latter is clearly an important contextual factor in discussing participation. Concern with transparency is more directly relevant, since it would seem to constitute a necessary (but not sufficient) condition for democracy and participation alike. Below we outline how a fuller understanding of governance in the EU indicates some ways in which participation, combined with a certain level of transparency, might contribute to regime legitimization. First, however, we trace the recent history of legislation and policy on citizens' participation in the European Union.

6 EU legislation and policy on participation and eParticipation

In this section we investigate the legal constituencies embedded in primary and secondary legislation, followed by a review of policy documents that appear to be relevant to aspects of citizen empowerment.³ In the discussion that follows we refer to the institutional milestones concerning citizens' participation, transparency, openness, accountability and legitimacy.

The EU's primary legislation appears to address the issue of participation indirectly, as no references are made to participatory democracy until the Treaty of Lisbon. The Treaty on the European Union, the Treaty of Amsterdam and the Treaty of Nice anchor representative democracy through political parties and the rights of European citizens to address petitions to the European Parliament. However, the Treaty of Amsterdam fortifies the notion of transparency and the basis for consultations. It is clearly stipulated that "The Commission should consult widely before proposing legislation and, whenever appropriate, publish consultation documents, except in cases of particular urgency or confidentiality", and some of the policy documents discussed below formulate the functional basis for consultations.

It is in 2004, with the Treaty establishing a Constitution for Europe⁴ that the democratic foundations of the EU are delineated, as the principles of democratic equality, representative democracy and participatory democracy are included. The Treaty also inaugurates the right of initiative of citizens, according to which a specified number of citizens can invite the Commission to initiate specific legislation. The Treaty was drafted in an awkward period where the democratic deficit had become a concern and the response in the Treaty was to underline that decisions should be taken as openly as possible and as closely as possible to citizens, as an endeavour to bridge the communicative gap between the institutions and citizens. Nonetheless, citizen participation is still captured on a representative level, as each citizen is heard through political parties.

³ The second and third pillar of the European Union are ignored, as well as other sources of EU law, such as agreements or negotiations with third parties or other preparatory acts. The primary tool of research is EUROLEX which enabled access to legal documents.

⁴ We note that the Treaty establishing a Constitution for Europe was rejected and the Treaty of Lisbon has not been ratified as of January 2009, but we treat these documents as public statements of the values endorsed by a consensus-building process within the EU institutions. Indeed the use of a Convention to draft the former makes it a good example of the outputs of deliberation in strong publics.

Finally, the Treaty of Lisbon confirms democratic equality, as all citizens are given equal attention from the Union, representative democracy through enhanced rights for national parliaments, and participatory democracy based on the citizens' initiative and enhanced interaction with the institutions. No specific or extended references are made to the realisation of participatory democracy on a practical level.

Secondary legislation does not incorporate nor institutionalise the notion of citizens' participation, notwithstanding stand alone decisions which reaffirm the right of access to documents. Another partial exception was the 'Europe for citizens' programme decision which envisages the strengthening of European citizenship, enabling citizens to partake in the construction of Europe.

Although the Treaties provide the legal basis for citizen engagement and the status of democracy, other policy documents specify and provide the overall framework for achieving the general objectives of the Treaties. The institutional arrangements embodied in the documents analysed below have a particular bearing on accountability, good governance, transparency and legitimacy. Citizens' participation, however, only became evident after 2001, and eParticipation was explicitly mentioned in 2007 as the Commission began to realize the participatory potential of ICT. (Dalakiouridou, Tambouris & Tarabanis, 2008)

Until 2000, the predominant view of democracy was implicitly connected to public access to documents which in turn makes the legislative procedure and the institutions responsible for the legislation more accountable and transparent. The first signs of ICT used to foster accountability are expressed in the White Paper on reforming the Commission, in 2000. Further, the Commission, in the Communication on a new framework for co-operation on activities concerning the information and communication policy of the EU in 2001 acknowledges the necessity for Europe to be closer to citizens and overcome barriers related to the general communication strategy of the Commission. The Europa portal and the Europe Direct service are also mentioned as a means to achieve a higher level of communication and enhance citizens' rights to information.

Principles of good governance were formulated to address the perceived mistrust of European citizens in the European edifice. The White Paper on European Governance acknowledges the need for greater citizen involvement and openness, and sets out the minimum standards for consultations on EU policies,⁵ while national governments remain responsible for nurturing a culture of debate and dialogue as well as improving their own national consultative processes. EU-wide consultations remain limited on the Europa portal while policy formulation is not yet a multi-level partnership. In parallel, the European Commission's Interactive Policy Making online tool emerged, first as a means to analyse the reaction of citizens and enterprises, evaluate existing policies and unite interest groups under a single online panel. Later, however, it was extended to impact assessment and then became the focal point of inclusive consultations at an EU level through the Debate Europe portal.

2005 marked a significant change in communication policies, when the Commission set out the aspiration to effectively communicate EU policies and activities and better connect to citizens. The Action plan to improve Communicating Europe explicitly adopts a 'listening' attitude by pursuing feedback from consultations and other sources. The Commission had been urged for some time to enrich channels of representation and reform its communication strategy to create openness at all stages of policy making (Lebessis & Paterson, 1999). The Action plan focuses on publicity facilities as well as improvements to the Europa portal to support wider communication.

Citizen empowerment remains visible only at a conceptual level until 2005, which coincides with the negative referenda on the proposed constitution and the subsequent 'period of reflection' due to the constitutional crisis. Calling for democratic 'renewal', the Commission then adopted Plan D for Democracy, Dialogue and Debate which encompasses a variety of tools to make citizens heard, stimulate debate and generate dialogue on European issues. The majority of actions are clearly orientated around a 'going local' strategy, i.e. relying on member states and local authorities to capture citizens' apprehensions (this was seen as its most successful component), but there are also measures to maximize the impact of consultations and develop a new website devoted to debates.

Communication channels between institutions and European citizens remain fragmented due to the incapacity of the EU to base its communication strategy on the existence of a genuine European Public Sphere. The 2005 European Communication policy attempts to stimulate the formation of such a public sphere through

5 Also stipulated in the document 'General principles and minimum standards for consultation of interested parties' in 2002. The rationale behind the consultation standards is embedded in the Treaties as previously discussed, which however do not envisage its achievement through ICT.

communications technologies, such as the creation of citizens' fora, virtual meeting places, audiovisual facilities and technologically-enhanced channels of communication. From this point in time, the Your Europe website is consistently promoted as the basic communication vehicle with citizens.

Meanwhile, Plan D was revisited in 2006, refocusing on the following components: local 'European public spaces', national round-table debates, support for bottom-up civic initiatives that relate to EU policy goals, and online debate.⁶ The Commission has championed citizen consultation and involvement in policy-making, and the use of ICT to achieve this. However, no specific measures were put into place until recently.

In 2007, the Communicating Europe in Partnership document re-negotiates citizen empowerment and positions it in a different context. Activities already adopted in the context of Plan D are maintained, but a new Internet strategy now supports audiovisual networks, and pilot information networks to unite stakeholders and other communication tools are promoted to support the creation of a European Public Sphere and to centralise the communication approach, which hitherto relied on local players more than an EU-wide holistic approach. As a follow up, the 'Communicating about Europe via the Internet - engaging the citizens' document begins to demarcate an eParticipation approach, as the Commission starts to build upon the potential of ICT to legitimise the institutions and bridge the gap between the institutions and citizens. The upgrading of the EUROPA portal as a focal point for information and content creation, the enhancement of online communications activities in the Commission's representations and rendering online information easily accessible and broadly comprehensible now complement the existing communications activities.⁷

2008 marks the Commission's intention to invest in the creation of a public sphere by acknowledging the contributing role of the media and the creation of pan-european programmes. Audiovisual media were thus recognised as critically important to citizens' understanding of European politics. Last but not least, Plan D was reformulated (and renamed Debate Europe after the Commission's dedicated Plan D website) to better listen to citizens and better explain EU politics. Transparency and access to information is recognised as the first step to citizen participation, as access to information renders citizens better informed and better equipped to participate, debate and deliberate on EU issues. Participatory democracy is now approached indirectly at a local, regional, national and cross-border level through the development of specific Plan D-funded projects. A clear eParticipation follow up to Plan D is intended to further enable citizens to articulate their wishes to decision makers by holding direct debates, interactive fora, European public spaces, additional Internet debates etc.

In summary, from 2000 onwards, the documents adopted by the Commission relate to transparency and accountability, while from 2002, consultations are given more prominence as a citizen contribution to the policy making cycle. Some less formal and less static forms of interaction with civil society have been emphasised in policy documents since 2005, in keeping with the Plan D motto of 'listening better', and ICT is heralded as an important tool for 'listening' institutions. In fact, the practical efforts made by the Commission appear to correspond to the working definition of eDemocracy made by the European Parliament, as including all electronic means of communication that enable and empower citizens in the effort to hold politicians accountable for their actions in the public realm, thereby increasing the transparency of the political process, enhancing the direct involvement of citizens and improving the quality of opinion formation by opening new spaces of information and deliberation (Kies, Mendez & Schmitter, 2003). Citizen participation in the democratic process is conceptualised around the citizen who is informed and empowered to make his/her voice heard and participate in consultations or other structured events, rather than active and spontaneous contribution to the policy making cycle.

7 The EU as a network governance regime and the scope for participation

Governance regimes are always hybridised, mixing elements of hierarchical, market-based and network modes of governance. So the governance regime which currently exists within the European Union contains elements of market-based modes of governance, for example to regulate the ICT sector itself, wherein a combination of state metagovernance and market coordination is held to be the most transparent solution feasible given the complex organisation of the sector which transcends national and even European jurisdictions (Felch, 2006). Elements of hierarchical modes of governance also persist in the European political system, notably concerning

⁶ Information note from Vice President Wallström to the Commission, Plan D - Wider and deeper Debate on Europe (2006).

⁷ For the first time, a clear budget line is given to the Internet toolbox to assist the realisation of Plan D.

the role of the European Parliament, whose powers and popular legitimacy are, however, much lower than most national parliaments. A strong argument can be made that network governance has always featured prominently in the coordination of social and economic activity at the level of the EU, both in respect of the pooling of sovereignty between member states, and more particularly with regard to the involvement of non-state actors in policy-making, including the establishment of committees (the Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions) designed to strengthen the role of civic opinion in decision making⁸. This structure is essentially corporatist, which Streeck & Schmitter (1991) consider to be a variety of network arrangements, and one of its most notable features has been what amounts to the chartering by EU institutions of peak level interest organisations⁹, and the role they have assumed in legitimising EU policy making within a system of 'bargaining democracy' and dispersed power. This nurtured an intensive, if not very extensive form of participative policy-making, revolving around 'strong publics' (Eriksen & Fossum, 2002).

A leitmotif of the discussions around the preparation and consultation of the White Paper on European Governance was the idea that the European Union was *not yet networked enough* in the light of changing conditions and fresh challenges, notably enlargement, and a general aspiration was expressed to reach out to citizens. It nevertheless remains the case that organised civil society is given a pivotal intermediary role, such that, for example, the transnational discussion processes that took place under Plan D from 2005 to 2007 as well as the recently-launched European Citizens' Consultations project have been managed by civil society organisations, enabling the Commission to speak of "consultations held by civil society" as one of its new governance tools (COM(2008)158/4).

It is important to note that what is being delegated through most of the EC's policy networks is problem-solving capacity rather than decision-making authority¹⁰ (Eriksen & Fossum, 2002: 409). Hitherto this delegation has been to strong publics such as committees, consultative fora and, since 1999, specially-chartered conventions. Latterly the attempt has been to diffuse problem-solving capacity within the general public sphere. If this is the case, there are twin risks in such a strategy. The first one is the 'low benefit – high cost' scenario: does the governance process require a high level of participation for effective functioning, and is there a social demand for it? Capturing the attention of an audience (a prerequisite for any participatory process) is more complicated than merely staging a performance (Curtin, 2007). Given a lack of popular enthusiasm for 'European' affairs and the EU project, there is a risk of misinterpreting citizens' motivations to participate by failing to make sufficiently clear links between the European problems citizens are being asked to help solve and the everyday problems of the lifeworld which are likely to preoccupy them most of the time. The re-scoping of the Debate Europe website to allow citizens more choice about the subjects for debate could be interpreted as a positive development in this light, since it promises to increase network governance capacity by relaxing central control over the participation process. The corollary, however, is an increased potential for conflict within networks about the rules as well as the outcomes of cooperation (Davies, 2005).

The second risk is what Eder (2007) calls the pathology of learning. If we assume that a relatively high level of participation is desirable within network modes of governance, then this is so to the extent that they facilitate collective learning. That is what networks are good at. But by the same token they are vulnerable to failure if an imbalance develops between participation and deliberation. Eder cites the fascist state as an extreme example of the expansion of participation at the expense of deliberation (one person deliberates and the entire society participates in 'living out' the leader's wise policies). The reverse situation – too much deliberation with too little participation – is also a pathology of learning, since it will likewise reduce the problem-solving capacity of networks. Lieber raises this concern in relation to the European Parliament: it will only be successful in taking on the role of a hub in the public sphere, which it has recently begun to stake out, on the condition that MEPs and citizens learn "to learn mutually from each other" (Lieber, 2007: 277).

8 The European Economic and Social Committee has existed since the Treaty of Rome. It is the institutionalised representative of organised civil society, whose representatives (nominated by member states for their experience and knowledge) form opinions on Community policy proposals and other aspects of European integration via a deliberative process. The Committee of the Regions, established by the Treaty of Maastricht, is the political assembly that provides local and regional authorities with an input, via consultation, whenever new proposals are made in areas that have repercussions at regional or local level.

9 And more recently also 'political foundations' affiliated to European political parties under regulation (EC) No. 1524/2007, which have an awareness-raising and 'citizen training' brief.

10 This is in keeping with a network governance approach, in which knowledge production and circulation assumes a more prominent place in the repertoire of governing than the actual taking and implementing of collective decisions and choices (Pinson, 2003).

Similar tensions exist around transparency, which is a prerequisite for participation, but not in the sense that 'maximum transparency produces maximum participation'. The logic of the EC's transparency initiative (which in practice involves publishing details of policy processes online and codifying the terms of participation in its policy networks) is to expose strong publics to the gaze of the general public. One difficulty here occurs due to the irreducibility of many types of knowledge to the types of objectified information (such as indicators, targets and benchmarks) which authorities tend to emit in the name of greater transparency. This can lead to a 'tyranny of light' under which the real needs of citizens are obscured by decontextualised, quantifiable indicators of societal 'need' (Tsoukas, 1997).

Another difficulty in making governance processes more transparent is identifying, addressing and mobilising some of the stakeholders who 'need' to participate in the more complex division of labour of a network mode of governance, but may not themselves realise that they 'need' to do so. The current phase of Debate Europe stresses the importance of targeting women and young people, groups which were under-represented in the pilot phase (though it provides little guidance about how to do so). Yet participation by some excluded social groups may actually be less likely in a more transparent environment and more likely in enclaves that are not exposed to publicity. Moreover, given that much public debate on Europe is inevitably filtered through national media and framed with reference to 'national interests', whereas there are well-founded doubts about the level of public interest in affairs which are constructed as 'European', it is important to consider ways of improving the quality of deliberation on Europe within *national* 'enclaves'. eParticipation is demonstrably good at facilitating enclave deliberation, which is usually interpreted as an anti-deliberative feature of the Internet (Wilhelm, 2000: 13) but can be a positive factor for democracy under some conditions, especially with a view to social inclusion.¹¹

8 Conclusion

In any hybridised governance regime there will be a need for different modes of participation and eParticipation in different spheres of activity or policy areas. Market-based modes of participation (the citizen acting as a 'consumer' or service user, exercising choice between predefined options) are relevant for mobilising and aggregating opinion among the diffuse general public beyond the Brussels-centric policy networks, whereas hierarchical modes of participation (the citizen as elector/constituent) could strengthen democratic accountability – the EU's achilles heel – by promoting forms of participation (i.e. vertical interaction) that link parliamentarians to their constituents and accentuate the former's intermediary role.

But insofar as network governance features prominently in the EU governance regime, this characterisation also disguises a need for varied modes and locales of participation. Organised groups still dominate the significant policy networks within the EU, but their role has become wider and more flexible. They play the multiple roles of supplier of expert knowledge, unofficial opposition in a consensus-based political system, agent of popular legitimacy and source of demands for more participation. Referring to the role of civil society organisations in the Plan D process, the Commission calls them multipliers and disseminators "through their political and media networks" (COM(2008)158/4). It is notable, however, that European institutions do not yet make much use of, and have not really developed policies about how to link to participation and eParticipation processes hosted by third parties such as media organisations (where considerable public debate about European affairs goes on). Thus there remains a tension between the chartering or co-opting of networks by European institutions and a more bottom-up form of networking that starts from and works with the associations of citizens as they emerge and re-group spontaneously.

Furthermore, since open and inclusive networks tend to generate conflict, governments are often confronted with the choice of either reimposing hierarchical means of securing compliance with 'system-oriented' goals (which may well undermine trust and therefore subdue participation itself), or not intervening and therefore having to deal with networks which may either pursue goals that conflict with government strategies, or self-destruct due to indivisible conflicts between stakeholders (Davies 2005). European institutions do not, apparently, have the same power to intervene as national governments, but they do choose both the terms of debate for the participation processes they initiate, and which other networks (*whose* networks) to partner with.

11 The European Citizens' Consultation portal (www.european-citizens-consultations.eu) is structured according to the principle that debate is best fostered within national 'enclaves' to start with, followed by the subsequent integration of proposals at a face-to-face European Citizens' Summit in Brussels, before the final set of recommendations for policy-makers is subjected to further discussion, again within national online 'public spheres'. This tiered model may conceivably facilitate wider participation.

A “dialectical relationship between network and hierarchy” (Davies, 2005: 342) will always underlie these choices, necessitating a compromise between conflicting benefits of participation.

Our analysis of recent EU policy documents suggests that participation is conceived rather one-dimensionally, based on a particular construction of the citizen, and it lacks an appreciation of the complex spatial and temporal 'regionalisation' of participation as actually practised in European societies. We therefore argue that one of the main challenges for the future lies in ensuring a sufficient diversity of learning environments connected to European policy-making. It is less a question of raising the overall level of participation than of securing the existence of channels for different modes of participation which could complement one another. A key priority should be to create and safeguard a public sphere composed of enclaves in which different kinds of collective learning and problem-solving can thrive (with different access rights and different ways of establishing legitimacy and representativeness). This can be justified from both a bottom-up (actor-oriented) and a top-down (system-oriented) perspective. In the first respect, such a public sphere would allow space for types of participation that actors themselves choose in order to realise autonomous goals oriented towards achieving cognitive reassurance (Pinson, 2003) or 'everyday making' (Bang, 2003). This is crucial for motivating people to participate. The Commission partially recognises this in framing Debate Europe as a way of “chang[ing] the perception that EU matters are too abstract and disconnected from the national public sphere to be of interest to citizens” (COM(2008)158/4), although the same should apply for other enclaves based around non-national identities. From a top-down perspective, a European public sphere composed of diverse enclaves of participation carries the risk of group polarisation, but this is arguably outweighed by its importance as a means of preserving a repertoire of alternative development paths essential for the long-term ability of social systems to adapt to changing circumstances. eParticipation may be one route towards making more effective links between enclaves. More generally eParticipation tools can bridge between actor-driven and system-oriented modes of participation (as demonstrated empirically by Monnoyer-Smith, 2006¹²). In doing so – by providing a flexible, multi-channel menu of participation options, including those that emerge in the back regions of the European public sphere – it could allay some of the risks connected to a strategy of participatory governance which were highlighted above.

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¹² In the case of a public consultation around the choice of site for a third airport for Paris, an online forum proved to be a very effective tool for ordinary citizens to regain some control of the debate (which also helped to widen participation) because it enabled participants to revisit fundamental issues about transport and the environment which had been 'scoped' out of the heavily-orchestrated offline events. Certain technological and cultural affordances of the online environment "favour a redefinition of the subjects [of debate] that actors find pertinent" (Monnoyer-Smith, 2006).

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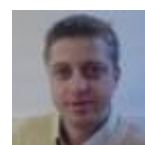
eParticipation initiatives: How is Europe progressing?

This paper aims to determine the progress and current trends of eParticipation activities across Europe. For this purpose, a European survey took place aiming to identify, record and analyse fully operational (i.e. not pilot or research) initiatives originating from or targeting at the geographical area of Europe, including both EU and non EU member states. As a result, we identified 255 eParticipation initiatives originating from 18 different countries and being offered in more than 30 different languages. Apart from country of origin and language, we also recorded a number of additional characteristics for each initiative. These include the participation area (e.g. consultation, discourse, deliberation, etc.) in which the activity focuses; the scope of the initiative in terms of participation level (European, national, local, etc.); the type of funding utilised; and the operation status.

The results suggest that the majority of the initiatives have been identified at the local and national level of participation and focus to participation areas such as information provision, deliberation, consultation and discourse. Moreover, results indicate a connection between participation areas and participation level of the identified initiatives, drawing the conclusion that as the target audience of eParticipation initiatives narrows, the more specific these initiatives become, allowing more active participation and greater capacity to reach tangible decisions. In terms of operation, most of the identified initiatives are currently still in operation, while in terms of funding, eParticipation initiatives seem to utilise mainly EU funds.



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“ The EU may need to reconsider the actual potential of eParticipation and to revise priorities and expectations from the field, while at the same time try to learn from small-scale experience. ”

1 Introduction

According to the European Commission (2008a), many people today are losing interest and confidence in the way their countries are being governed. Issues of trust, openness and transparency are being frequently and intensely discussed (Millard et al, 2008) as the public manifests lack of confidence in public servants and governmental institutions. At the same time, public apathy and dissatisfaction is also evident through decreasing turnout rates at elections, which further lead to representatives elected by a minority of the electorate and to a feeling of loss of ownership of the democratic process. In this context, citizens increasingly demand greater transparency and accountability from the government, and favour public participation in the shaping of policies that affect them (OECD, 2001).

Public participation is about citizen power. It provides the means for deliberately including all citizens in policy and decision making by incorporating their concerns, needs and values into these processes (Arnstein, 1969 and Creighton, 2005). This is achieved by setting in place the appropriate procedures for informing, consulting and involving citizens affected by a decision to have an input into that decision (Smith and Nell, 1997). Current Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) have made it possible to enhance traditional participation procedures by electronic means, introducing in this way the concept of electronic Participation (eParticipation). eParticipation “*refers to efforts to broaden and deepen political participation by enabling citizens to connect with one another, with civil servants, and with elected representatives using ICTs*” (O'Donnell et al, 2007). Contrary to traditional participatory procedures, contemporary technologies provide the opportunity to reach wider audiences in a more accessible (at anytime and from anyplace) and understandable format (Macintosh, 2004), as well as in a way that is possibly faster and more efficient. So, eParticipation emerges today as the medium for tackling the contemporary political challenges of democratic societies and for reconnecting ordinary people with politics and policy-making (European Commission, 2008a).

Intending to exploit this promising field, the European Union has funded more than 35 eParticipation research projects with a total budget of over 120M€ during the last decade mainly through the FP5 and the Preparatory Action programmes (Tambouris et al, 2008). But although eParticipation research projects and their results have been previously documented and discussed (DEMO-net, 2008), there is still insufficient acknowledgement, documentation and analysis of practitioner projects in the field of eParticipation. Admittedly, there have been efforts to do so at the national level, for example in Germany (Albrecht et al, 2008), but no structured efforts to understand the current state of the art of fully operational eParticipation initiatives across Europe exist. According to the European Commission (2008b), over the last five years numerous eParticipation trials and programmes have been run at national and local levels across Europe and many systems are now routinely in place, gaining thus much experience in the field. So, the challenge to be addressed at this point is to identify and document this experience from across Europe, and to recognise good practice with the intention of eventually learning from past experience and successfully transferring good practice into other contexts.

This paper aims at examining eParticipation activities across Europe with the objective of understanding the current state of the art, trends and progress in the field. For this purpose, a survey has been conducted aiming to identify, record and analyse fully operational (i.e. not pilot or research) initiatives originating from or targeting the geographical area of Europe. Thus, the scope of this survey is mainly on European eParticipation initiatives either implemented in an EU Member State or in a country geographically belonging to the European continent. In addition, a limited number of international initiatives by international organisations and civil society organisations have been included as they are also targeting Europe.

This paper is structured as follows. Section 2 describes the methodology followed to conduct the survey, while section 3 presents the results. Finally, section 4 discusses these results and presents the limitations of the survey, while section 5 concludes the paper and describes future work.

2 Methodology

The methodology followed in our research consists of three steps:

- Preparation of a template for reporting survey findings
- Identification of eParticipation initiatives utilising three different types of sources
- Populating the reporting instrument and analysis of results.

2.1 Reporting template

As a first step, a specific template has been developed for reporting the gathered eParticipation initiatives. At this point, the intention has been to develop a template that would provide a summary of what each initiative is about and highlight specific characteristics of interest to our research such as scope, origin, language, etc. So, it was deliberately not our intention to record detailed information on each eParticipation initiative, since this level of analysis would surely require collaboration with the owners of the initiatives in order to reach safe conclusions. Hence, the template has been kept short but fairly descriptive, including only what was considered absolutely necessary for describing each eParticipation initiative. Overall, it includes the following eleven elements for describing each eParticipation initiative:

- Title
- Short description
- Web address
- Participation area(s)
- Participation level
- Country
- Language(s)
- Funding type(s)
- Start date
- End date
- Contact details

Title, *short description* and *Web address* of each initiative are obviously the first elements to report under this survey. Furthermore, the *participation area(s)* element refers to the specific participation activities implemented in each eParticipation initiative. According to the literature, all participation activities fall within specific areas of citizen engagement and involvement in the democratic process (DEMO-net, 2006; Tambouris et al 2007; Kalampokis et al 2008, Smith et al, 2008). For this survey the authors decided to adopt the categorisation of participation areas as defined by DEMO-net (2006):

- Information Provision. ICT to structure, represent and manage information in participation contexts.
- Community Building /Collaborative Environments. ICT to support individuals coming together to form communities, to progress shared agendas and to shape and empower such communities.
- Consultation. ICT in official initiatives by public or private agencies to allow stakeholders to contribute their opinion, either privately or publicly, on specific issues.
- Campaigning. ICT in protest, lobbying, petitioning and other forms of collective action (except of election campaigns covered under electioneering area).
- Electioneering. ICT to support politicians, political parties and lobbyists in the context of election campaigns.
- Deliberation. ICT to support virtual, small and large-group discussions, allowing reflection and consideration of issues. In our survey deliberation also includes discussion and consideration of issues in an unstructured and non-moderated manner.
- Discourse. ICT to support analysis and representation of discourse. In our survey discourse differentiates from deliberation in that it covers conversation and dialogue between citizens and elected representatives.
- Mediation. ICT to resolve disputes or conflicts in an online context.
- Spatial planning. ICT in urban planning and environmental assessment.
- Polling. ICT to measure public opinion and sentiment.
- Voting. ICT in the context of public voting in elections, referenda or local plebiscites.

The *participation level* element refers to the scope of each eParticipation initiative in terms of governmental level. In our survey we distinguish initiatives under the following categories: international, transnational, European, national, regional or local. International are initiatives originating mainly from important civil society organisations and other international organisations of universal interests and actions, whilst transnational are initiatives targeting a certain group of countries or regions; for example two neighbouring regions in different countries may start together an eParticipation initiative in order to propose solutions on a specific topic.

Additionally, under *country* the origin of each eParticipation initiative at the national, regional and local level is reported. The *language* element refers to the operational language(s) of each eParticipation initiative, namely the actual language(s) in which participation takes place; not languages in which information is provided or general dissemination of the initiative is made. Obviously, the *start date* and *end date* of each initiative are also important to include in this survey, as well as the type of funding utilised. Finally, the availability of *contact details* for each initiative is also reported for facilitating future communication with the owners of the initiatives.

2.2 Initiatives identification

Three sources for identifying eParticipation initiatives have been utilised:

1. Through award schemes or online databases relevant to eParticipation or eGovernment domains,
2. Through desktop research in the literature and the web,
3. Through communication with experts and project owners in the eParticipation domain.

Award schemes and online databases in the fields of eParticipation and in eGovernment have proven to be a significant source for identifying initiatives relevant to our research. Such sources include:

- eEurope Awards for eGovernment¹
- UK e-Government National Awards²
- Stockholm Challenge Awards³
- epractice.eu database⁴
- eParticipation preparatory action⁵
- e-participation.net database⁶
- peopleandparticipation.net database⁷

A large number of cases have been identified through desktop research, namely through literature references and through Web surfing. To this end, keywords such as “eParticipation”, “consultation”, “petitioning”, “citizen forum”, etc., have been used in search engines on the Web. Especially for European level cases the authors exploited the results of an extensive desktop research within numerous EU institutions (Dalakiouridou et al, 2008), the College of Commissioners, EU policy documents as well as political parties and civil society organizations; the latter being also sources of international level eParticipation initiatives.

Finally, authors have utilised their connections to key experts and project owners in the field for communicating this research and the intention to gather eParticipation initiatives across Europe. Specifically, this research has been communicated in the “eParticipation and eDemocracy Network” community⁸ in ePractice.eu portal, in the “Democracies Online”⁹ forum, in workshops by the European eParticipation study¹⁰ and in the different conferences attended by the authors.

At this point, it would be appropriate to mention that desktop research has been limited due to the language barrier faced during this survey. Self-evidently, authors were able to mainly work in the English language, and especially in the case of web search and search engine utilisation, all used keywords originated from the English vocabulary. This automatically implies that an eParticipation case had to be offered or at least documented in the English language in order to be identified through desktop research.

2.3 Results reporting

The last step of the methodology is the reporting of all identified eParticipation initiatives across Europe in the template developed for this purpose. The results of this survey are provided in the following section.

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- 1 www.e-europeawards.org/
 - 2 www.e-governmentawards.co.uk/
 - 3 www.stockholmchallenge.se
 - 4 www.epractice.eu/
 - 5 http://ec.europa.eu/information_society/activities/egovernment/implementation/prep_action/index_en.htm
 - 6 www.e-participation.net/
 - 7 www.peopleandparticipation.net
 - 8 www.epractice.eu/community/eParticipation
 - 9 dowire.org
 - 10 www.european-e-participation.eu/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=28&Itemid=94

The language barrier mentioned previously has also influenced this methodology step. So, although each website of the identified initiatives has been visited by the authors, it has been extremely difficult to understand the functionality of the website if it was offered in an unknown language. Hence, authors have been able to fully understand and report initiatives offered either in the English language or in other commonly spoken languages, such as German, French and Spanish. Information on websites offered in other languages has been borrowed from initiatives' descriptions found in different sources, such as site descriptions and summaries, publications and awards.

Moreover, all initiatives have been reported as they have been perceived from a guest user's view. This means that authors did not register on any of these websites for checking their full functionality for registered users. Such a decision, and combined with the aforementioned language limitation, would lead to unfair consideration of cases, as for only some of them it would be possible to understand the additional opportunities for registered users.

Overall, authors have tried to provide as complete information as possible for each of the reported websites and by employing different sources in this process (the website per se, references to it, award candidate descriptions). Moreover, authors have tried to identify as many as possible eParticipation initiatives and do not in any way claim that they have managed to identify the full set of initiatives taking place currently in this field across Europe.

3 eParticipation initiatives in Europe

The overall findings of our survey amount to 255 eParticipation initiatives. Most of them refer to the local and national level (31% and 28% respectively) followed by initiatives at the European level (19%) and at the regional level (17%). Only 2 transnational initiatives could be identified throughout Europe, while we also include 10 initiatives with an international scope (Figure 1).

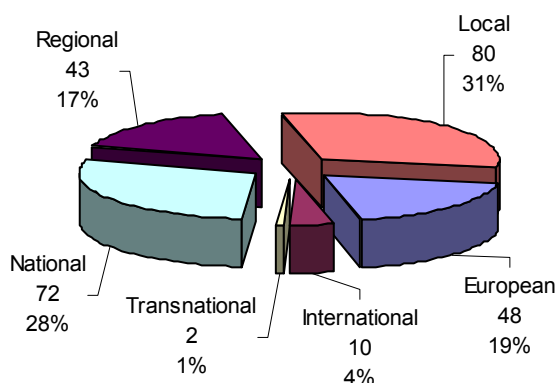


Figure 1 – Participation level

The 48 initiatives with a European scope include initiatives by European Institutions (mostly the European Parliament and the European Commission), by Agencies of the European Union, by political parties, and initiatives relevant to EU presidencies and to Plan-D¹¹ activities (European Commission, 2005). Furthermore, the 10 international initiatives originate from important civil society organisations and other international organisations, such as Amnesty international, Greenpeace and the Aarhus Clearinghouse.

In terms of offered activities, eParticipation initiatives may be categorised in 10 different areas (Figure 2), noting that each initiative usually offers activities in more than one participation areas. Most of the initiatives provide information to the public, while a great number of initiatives offer the possibility to participate in deliberation and consultation activities. Other areas frequently encountered are discourse, spatial planning, campaigning, community building and polling.

¹¹ The European Commission has proposed Plan D for Democracy, Dialogue and Debate in order to stimulate a wider debate between the European Union's democratic institutions and citizens. It is seen as complementary to the already existing or proposed initiatives and programmes such as those in the field of education, youth, culture and promoting active European citizenship (European Commission, 2005).

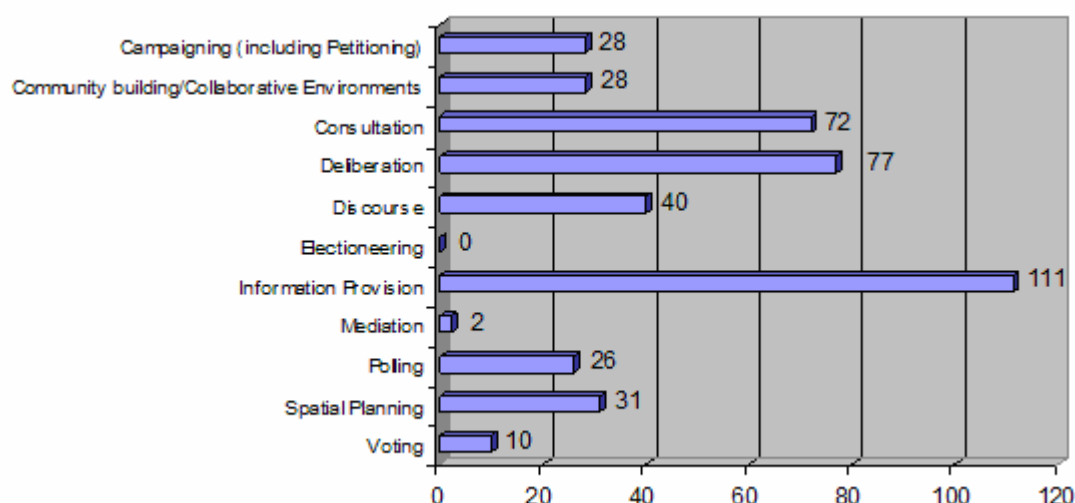


Figure 2 – Participation areas

Looking closer at participation areas, it is interesting to notice that their degree of utilisation may differ according to participation level. For facilitating clearer comparison we provide in Figure 3 the participation areas normalised by the overall number of initiatives per participation level. Results indicate that some areas have approximately the same degree of utilisation (i.e. community building, polling, mediation), while great differences may be observed for other areas. Specifically, information provision activities are much more frequent at the European level than at the national or local levels. On the other hand, consultation activities display a clear trend of being more common as the participation level narrows. The same trend is much more evident for spatial planning activities; according to our survey spatial planning activities are limited at the national level (2 activities identified), and become more frequent at the regional and local levels (6 and 23 identified activities respectively). In fact, at the local level spatial planning activities are nearly as frequent as the deliberation, consultation, and information provision activities.

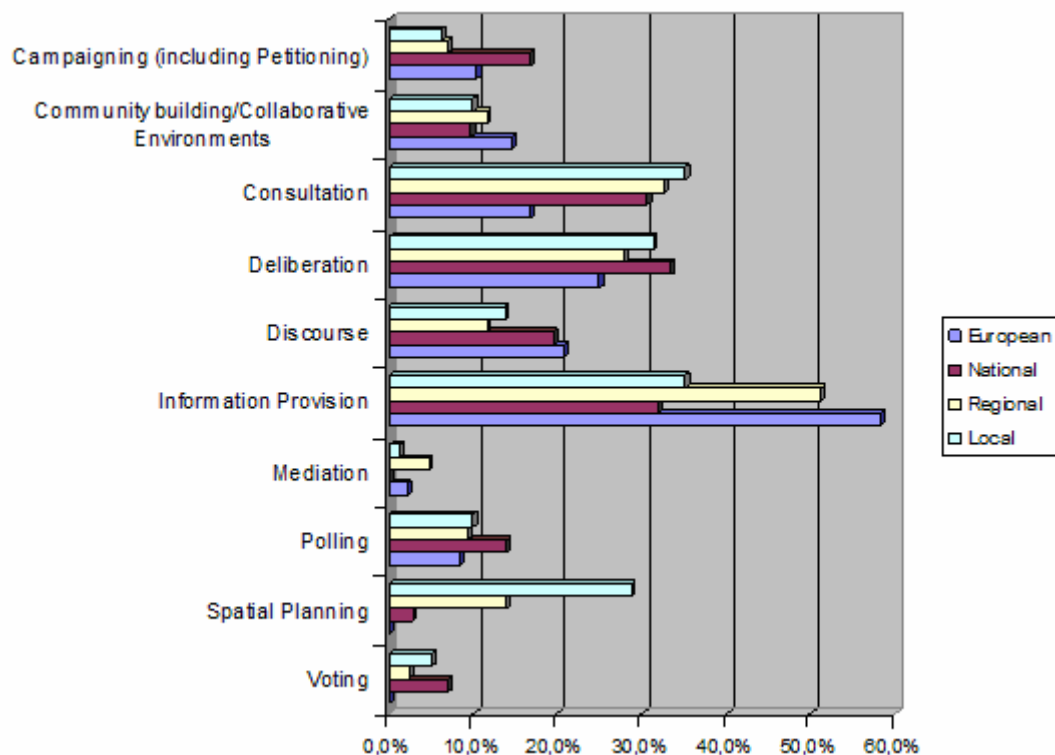


Figure 3 – Participation areas per level of participation

In terms of the languages in which eParticipation activities take place, the identified initiatives are offered in more than 30 languages (Figure 4). This can be attributed mainly to the fact that some initiatives are offered in more than one language (Figure 5). Such multilingual initiatives are usually active at the European and International levels and usually focus at information provision. National eParticipation activities are at a percentage of 99% offered in only one language, whilst a few initiatives at the regional and local level are offered in more than one language in order to involve local populations like immigrants and other minorities.

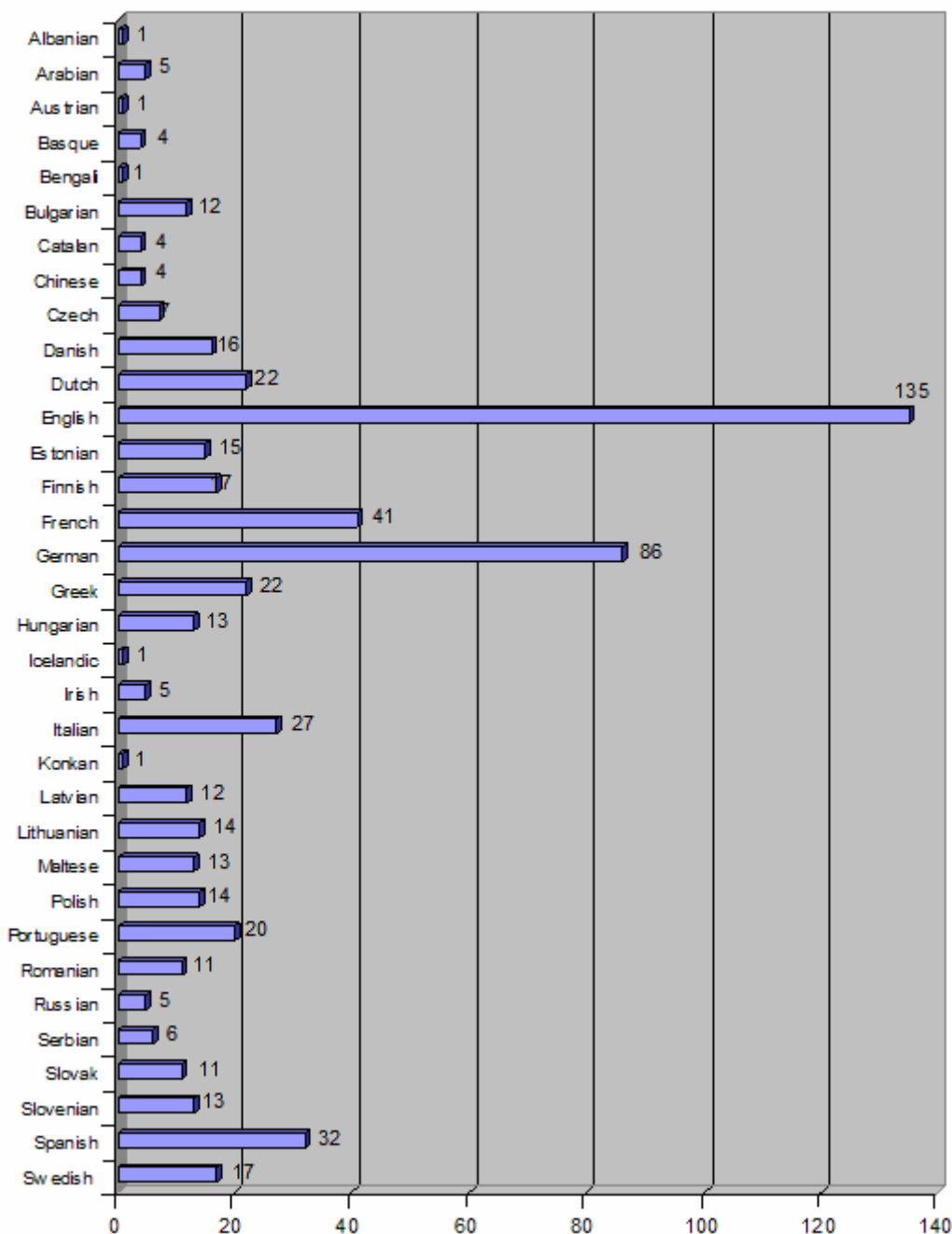


Figure 4 – Languages in which eParticipation initiatives are offered

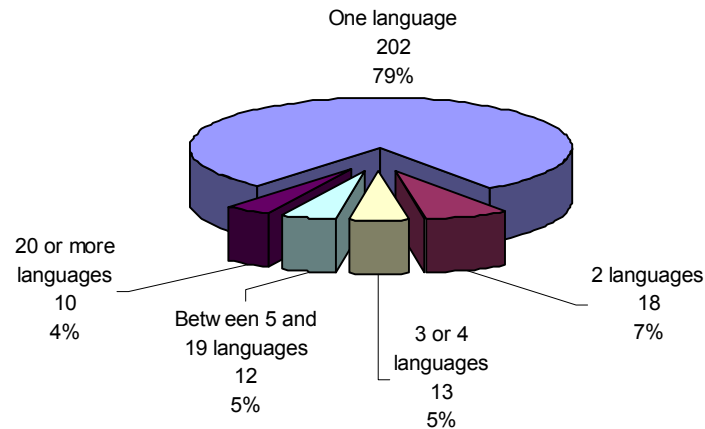


Figure 5 – Number of languages in which eParticipation initiatives are offered

As explained in the beginning of this section, initiatives of European and international scope originate mostly from European Institutions and Agencies and civil society organisations. Hence, the origin of European initiatives is usually Brussels whilst the origin of international activities may be determined by the headquarters' location of each organisation. As such information is irrelevant to the objectives of this survey, it would be appropriate to examine only initiatives with national, regional and local scope with regards to their origin; these initiatives originate from 18 different European countries (Figure 6), 16 EU member states, Switzerland and Iceland.

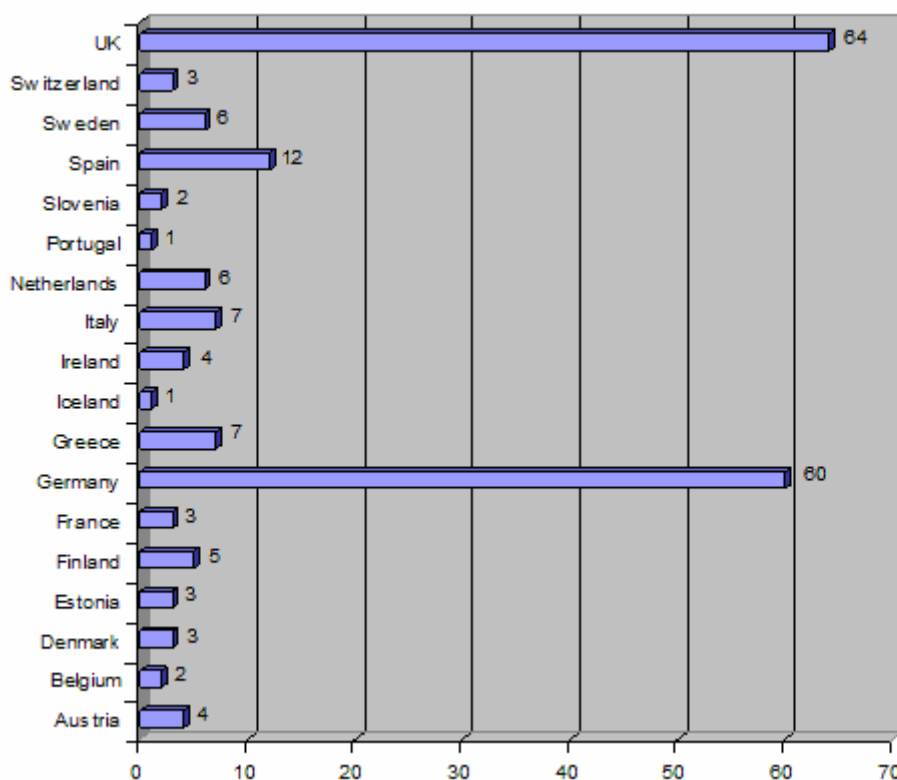


Figure 6 – Origin of initiatives with a national, regional and local scope

Most of the initiatives in all different participation levels are still in operation (Figure 7); in total only 24% of these are found to be completed.

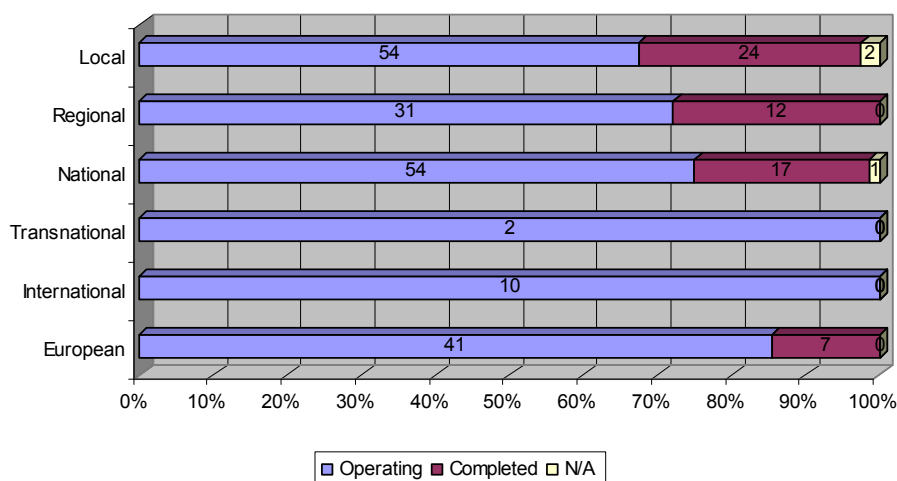


Figure 7 – Current operation status

It has not been possible to identify the type of funding for 60% of the initiatives. However, it seems that most of the remaining 40% are utilising EU funds, while national public funds and private funds are also frequently used (Figure 8).

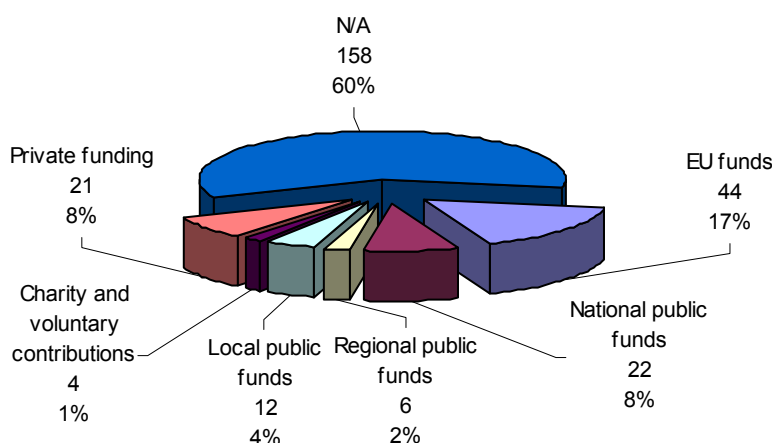


Figure 8 – Funding types utilised

4 Discussion and limitations

With regard to eParticipation initiatives by the EU, findings indicate that more and more interesting activities are being established and most importantly that these activities are addressing the whole of Europe. To this contributes the fact that EU eParticipation activities are offered in many official EU languages enabling in this way a large number of EU citizens to get involved. Furthermore, it is interesting to notice that at the transnational level only two eParticipation initiatives have been identified, whilst many different initiatives have been identified in each one of the rest participation levels. This is an indication that eParticipation has not yet evolved as a means of transnational or trans-regional cooperation and understanding within Europe.

With regard to participation areas, information provision, deliberation and consultation are overall the most frequently targeted areas. Nevertheless, the most interesting results of this survey are probably that the utilisation degree of participation areas may vary according to participation level. Specifically, results indicate that information provision activities are much more frequent at participation levels with a larger scale (such as the European and international level), while consultation and spatial planning activities display a clear trend of being more common as the participation level narrows. Considering that: (a) information provision is about one-way communication towards the public and therefore does not depend on the actual involvement of the public, and that (b) consultation and spatial planning activities are about two-way communication with the public and

therefore are dependent on actual involvement of the public in order to provide results and be considered a success, we may come up to the following empirical conclusion: *The greater the number of people targeted in an eParticipation initiative, the more general this initiative usually is, employing one-way communication. On the other hand, the fewer the people targeted in an eParticipation initiative, the more specific this initiative may be, allowing more active participation and more specific outcomes.* This finding makes us question the dynamics of the field and the potential impact that eParticipation initiatives may display under real circumstances. It suggests that eParticipation acts at the information level when it comes to large-scale initiatives and that it can become real influential only at a small scale. Hence, if eParticipation is visualised as a means for involving the millions of European citizens with the aim to jointly shape policies and influence decision-making, then current reality shows that Europe today is far away from this target. In fact, the EU may need to reconsider the actual potential of eParticipation and to revise priorities and expectations from the field, while at the same time try to learn from small-scale experience.

With regard to operation status of the identified initiatives, our survey shows that only 24% of these are found to be completed. This percentage is relatively low when considering that many initiatives were established for finding a specific solution over a specific time period (for example spatial planning solutions). At the same time, this low percentage may also act as an indication that the field of eParticipation in Europe is flourishing. Nonetheless, this survey identified some cases where important funding problems have forced remarkable initiatives to stop operating. This finding shows that it is imperative to set up the appropriate mechanisms both at European and at national levels for identifying good practice initiatives and for helping them to be sustained over a long period of time.

Finally, we should also discuss the survey finding that the majority of the identified initiatives originate from UK and Germany and are offered in the English and German languages. This is definitely evidence that increased eParticipation activity is taking place in these countries, but the authors do not necessarily consider it as evidence that these countries perform better than the rest in the field of eParticipation. Similarly, the lack of identified initiatives from some European countries is just an indication and not sufficient evidence for concluding that eParticipation is non-existent in these countries. Our experience from this survey shows that some initiatives perform really well at disseminating their efforts and results and thus they may be easily identified through multiple sources. On the other hand, poor promotion and the language barrier make it difficult for some other initiatives to become known to the wider public and get appreciated. This is an indication of the importance of a centralised European database of eParticipation programmes and initiatives and the role it can play for enhancing and promoting work in the eParticipation field. The gathering of all eParticipation initiatives in one widely used database and the identification of good practices from all over Europe and at any participation level will contribute to the exchange of experience and the realisation of good practice transfer if and when this is found to be feasible. ePractice.eu acts already as such a repository of eParticipation initiatives from all over Europe, however it is still not adequately populated in this field.

5 Conclusion

This paper provides an understanding of progress and current trends of eParticipation through a survey of current and past fully operational eParticipation initiatives across Europe. The survey included eParticipation initiatives originating from or targeting the geographical area of Europe, including both EU and non EU member states. In total, 255 eParticipation initiatives have been identified, originating from 18 different countries and being offered in 34 different languages. Most of the identified initiatives refer to the local and national level (31% and 28% respectively) and 76% of them are currently operational. It has not been possible to identify the type of funding for the majority of the initiatives, however the limited evidence gathered suggest that eParticipation initiatives seem to utilise mainly EU funds. Finally, most of the identified eParticipation activities may be categorised under the participation areas of information provision, deliberation and consultation.

Empirical evidence from the survey suggests that there is a connection between the initiatives' participation areas and their participation level. In fact, it may be concluded that as the scope of eParticipation initiatives narrows the more specific these initiatives become, allowing more active participation and more specific outcomes. This empirical finding should be the basis for further consideration of the potential impact and limitations of eParticipation. It should be further examined whether eParticipation is indeed in a position to meaningfully involve the public at a large scale and in what way this could be achieved.

Future work includes gathering detailed information for a number of selected eParticipation initiatives. The instrument for this deeper survey is a questionnaire specifically designed for this purpose; it aims not only at capturing the essential information for each initiative but also at identifying specific details that could lead to the potential labeling of an initiative as good practice. For instance, the questionnaire includes reporting of the

results and impact of the initiative, the problems encountered, the lessons learnt, potential transferability, etc. The intention here is to draw conclusions not on which initiatives are considered as good practices, but most importantly on what constitutes good practice in the eParticipation field. Authors anticipate that this survey will provide a solid base of eParticipation practices and accumulated experience that may be further utilised by experts and practitioners in the field for drawing conclusions with regard to what works, what doesn't, and how can one minimise threats and at the same identify and exploit opportunities during design, implementation and operation of an eParticipation initiative.

Overall it may be concluded that there is increasing activity in the field of eParticipation in Europe, and there are some remarkable initiatives already implemented and fully operational. However, it seems that there are still many opportunities ahead and a lot could still be achieved with the cooperation and transfer of good practice between countries and regions, but also among the different levels of participation. Hopefully, the survey presented in this paper along with the planned future work by the authors will contribute to diffusion and transfer of eParticipation good practice.

Acknowledgement

Authors would like to acknowledge that the work presented in this paper has been partially funded by the EU through the European eParticipation study (www.european-epractice.eu). The work reported here is still ongoing and the final results will be available around May 2009 when the study will be completed. For the purpose of this paper findings have been reported as of early December 2008 and constitute the second version of the results reported earlier by the study (Panopoulou et al, 2008).

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Evaluating eParticipation Projects: Practical Examples and Outline of an Evaluation Framework

As regards the need for sound evaluation, research on eParticipation has not kept pace with advances in eParticipation practice. This article acknowledges the importance of systematic analyses of processes and outcomes against predefined criteria and intends to contribute to closing the “evaluation gap”. The assumption is that benefits to be gained from evaluation are manifold: e.g., identifying conditions and extent of success as well as deficits; using insights as leverage for change, organisational learning and improved management; or determining how far an eParticipation project helps to enhance democracy.

The contribution focuses on government-driven eParticipation activities especially within the area of consultation and deliberation, and takes into account practical experience of the evaluation of a four-year transnational project including more than 30 eParticipation pilot cases. A common feature of these pilots is the combination of multiple communication channels and media which promote engagement. It is shown that the strength of the Internet mainly concerns its potential to provide transparency and to converge interests and information in a process through carefully elaborated websites.

A layered model of an evaluation framework is presented with distinctive criteria, indicators and methods which are seen as an important step to support “real” evaluation. We are aware of the principle problems of such a framework – e.g. that it is either too comprehensive or that many aspects are missing or require further specification from a practitioner’s view. This theory-practice tension is addressed while we describe the evaluation method and problems experienced in three specific eParticipation cases. They include two research designs – comparative and offline-online synthesising methods. Some principle challenges of the research designs are explained; i.e. in comparative design the difficulty to find comparable cases, cultural and technical differences, advantages and disadvantages of remote and mediated evaluation. For the design of combined offline and online tools, especially resource and data problems, and cooperation demands among government agencies are addressed. Independent from the design, the effort to take into account the users’ perspectives is highlighted. The outlined framework is introduced as a reference model with the intention to complement and extend the scope of evaluation perspectives and to stimulate ideas for individual evaluation projects on eParticipation.



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Keywords

eParticipation; evaluation,
practice, case studies,
multi-channel

“ Evaluation of eParticipation is indispensable if knowledge of greater precision and objectivity is wanted about the effectiveness, the value, the success of an eParticipation project, initiative or programme. ”

1 Introduction

While eParticipation practices more and more leave the status of exercises and pilots, there are few existing, rigorous evaluation approaches ready for application in this area. Some refer to participation in general and different participation methods (Rowe & Frewer, 2000; 2004; Warburton et al., 2007), while evaluations of eParticipation are rare (e.g., Henderson et al., 2005; Janssen & Kies, 2005; Kubicek et al., 2007; Winkler, 2007) and emerging frameworks are still embryonic (cf. Macintosh & Whyte, 2008; Aichholzer & Allhutter, 2008). Some contributions are concentrated on the information aspect of transparency and accountability of websites and tools (e.g. Pina et al., 2007), or – such as existing benchmarking approaches to eParticipation (e.g. UN, 2005 & 2008) – lack an in-depth analysis of quality and neglect impacts. Others addressing wider impacts such as on quality of democracy (e.g., Coppedge & Reinicke, 1990; Diamond & Morlino, 2005) or governance (e.g., Skelcher et al., 2005; Schmitter, 2005) offer relevant criteria but have not been adapted to eParticipation specifically. Existing deficits regarding evaluation are confirmed by scholars calling for more research into the effectiveness of electronic forms of public engagement (Rowe & Gammack 2004).

In this article, we introduce a framework of eParticipation that was developed by the authors within the DEMO-net project in cooperation with other European researchers (DEMO-net 2008). There we reviewed and analysed applied methods appropriate for the evaluation of eParticipation and offered core criteria and indicators relevant to different kinds of eParticipation activities such as consultation and deliberation. Given resource-limitations of stakeholders (conducting institutions and observing research institutions) in practice, we assume that it may only be possible to apply elements of the framework. To specifically address this theory-practice problem, we combine this analytic framework with the evaluation experience of the four-year project EVOICE that covered around 30 individual eParticipation projects of municipalities in five European countries. This project also reflects the fact that local municipalities normally apply a multi-channel approach of different means of participation including offline and online means (Westholm, 2008).

The objective is to present an evaluation framework relevant for eParticipation practice and to illustrate challenges and difficulties on the basis of three examples. The framework should be relevant for a broader set of application contexts and take into account differences in cultural and administrative approach to eParticipation in different European countries. A specific advantage is that the framework was developed recently and that it potentially provides a new approach for evaluating the EVOICE cases.

2 Brief description of the EVOICE project

The main aims of the EVOICE project were to increase and enhance political interest and engagement of European citizens in general political issues by using the potential of modern ICT tools to increase citizen participation and to access the administrative system. A premise was that the tools need to be employed in a well-considered manner in combination with traditional means of communication. Further on, the project plan said: “The most appropriate approach cannot be found in a single act, but only gradually in a learning process of experimentation, evaluation, improvement, second evaluation, second improvement, etc. And since there is no single solution for all kinds of topics, these learning processes have to be carried out for different subjects at different locations” (EVOICE 2004, pt. 3.4). Between 2004 and 2008, the resulting so-called *multi media dialogue approach* (MMDA) became the umbrella of more than 30 eParticipation projects conducted in the municipalities of Dantumadeel, Groningen (both in the Netherlands), Bremen (Germany), Uddevalla, Ale and Hårryda (Sweden) and in the regions of Kortrijk (Belgium) and Norfolk (UK).

More precisely, the multi-media-dialogue-approach is conceptualised on two levels:

- *Methods* (channels) of information, consultation and collaboration (from broadcasting council meetings to person-to-person „kitchen table talks“ and cooperative environments on the net), and
- *Meta-communication* to reach the attention of citizens for participation opportunities and to report (interim) results (e.g. via newspapers, broadcasting, Internet newsletters, SMS-notifications).

Addressees of the projects and the MMDA were three target groups: policy makers, civil servants, and citizens.

Differentiating basic categories of eParticipation activities (cf. DEMO-net 2007), most EVOICE-pilots matched the category “*information provision*” which was distinguished into the four subcategories “spreading content and results of council meetings by broadcasting them”, “document handling systems on the Internet to enhance freedom of information”, “games” and “services”. The second most applied category was “*consultation*” and covered diverse methods and tools such as discussion boards and chats on the Internet, kitchen table talks and physical meetings, SMS-requests and responses – normally combined and mainly based on information given

on a website. Some further offers matched the categories “community building/collaborative environments”, “deliberation and cooperation”, and “electioneering”.¹ This underlines the fact that interactive forms were less often used – which is not accidental but stresses existing situations not only in the six EVOICE pilot sites: Governments are focussing on better information provision via the Internet because here they see the biggest advantage in this technology. Interactive tools need back office integration in the sense that the incoming information and arguments of the users have to be transferred to the policy makers in charge and demand for official response which again binds resources.

3 Evaluation approach and methods applied in the EVOICE project

The methodological challenge of this project was to evaluate activities, results and impact of a quite new research area because, at its beginning, eParticipation evaluation frameworks were practically non-existent. Besides, comparative methods had to be applied to assess exercises at pilot sites in five different countries. The most important challenge was that the project comprised a very high number of eParticipation processes which are hardly comparable.

The main questions regarding evaluation were as follows:

- What can be learnt regarding the multi-media dialogue approach?
 - Which (combinations of) tools were sensible,
 - Which were relevant for specific target audiences,
 - Did the use of ICTs enable political equality and the inclusion of further groups (e.g. the youth)?
 - Which level of engagement (e.g. information, consultation, collaboration) can be reached with which instrument?
- What was undertaken to promote the eParticipation activities?
- What is the impact of the procedures regarding implementation of results and durable integration into traditional procedures?
- What is the impact of the whole project; does it support democratisation of politics in the municipalities?
- What are the advantages regarding integration of ICTs into traditional processes, e.g. regarding access to information, transparency, relevance and quality of information provided?

Project evaluation was mainly based on third-party exploration of partners’ oral activity reports at partner meetings and their discussions, as well as on documents such as half-yearly activity reports and scientific reports by scholars involved in specific projects on the partners’ sites. These measurements were combined with personal evaluation visits at all partner sites including expert interviews and focus groups with civil servants involved in the pilots. Major sources were interim reports about evaluation activities given at the partner meetings with partners’ feedback and participative observation of selected offline participation activities, plus inspection of Internet websites and tools.²

The partners were instructed to conduct so-called “eParticipation panels” and to provide reports about them. Once a year, these panels discussed a set of common questions and some pilot-specific questions. The common questions included:

- Which media/tools/channels were offered, which channels were preferred by citizens and by civil servants for responses?)
- Which target groups and which main themes/topics were addressed?
- What were successful combinations in specific situations? What are the (dis-)advantages of different media (combinations)?

To illustrate this evaluation approach within the given space, in the next paragraph we limit ourselves exclusively on the first question, focusing on socio-technical aspects.

¹ No projects were conducted in the categories “campaigning”, “discourse”, “mediation”, “spatial planning”, “polling”, and “voting”.

² Besides, for auditing purposes of the funding instrument, the InterregIIIB-programme of the EU, a range of indicators was set up e.g. to list (websites’) outreach and dissemination activities.

4 Case studies illustrating the socio-technical evaluation component

We choose three cases to illustrate and evaluate the multi media dialogue approach developed within EVOICE on the channel level and to self-critically reflect the evaluation methods used. The three cases were selected because they illustrate the complexity of multi-media combinations and stand for consultation and deliberation, two areas of eParticipation activities often discussed.

The “Stadionbad” case conducted in Bremen (Germany) reflects one of the rare deliberation-exercises. The second example, from the municipality of Ale (Sweden), labelled as “listening to citizens” – describes a procedure how government keeps in touch with the citizens to be consulted. The third case shows a consultation process aiming at a vision of the village of Zwaagwesteinde (Netherlands). The criteria and indicators relevant in this context are listed in Table 1.

Table 1. Criteria, indicators and measures used to evaluate embedding of eParticipation tools in the EVOICE multi-media-dialogue approach in the practice cases

Criteria	Indicators	Measures and methods
Relevance of ICT-tools among method-combination	Usage-rate	Process diagram, focus groups / panel
	Target groups reached (social inclusiveness)	Participative observation, focus group / panel
	Adequate content provision	Focus group / panel
	Number of users	Log file analysis
Support of responsiveness	The tool allows to answer the user's question quickly and effectively	Tool observation, surveys
	The site provides contact information, FAQs, search functions	Tool observation
Support of rich in content interaction between users and policy makers and among users	Quantity of postings	Logfile analysis
	Quality of comments	Thread counting and text analysis

Each case will be described in three steps. Starting with an overview of the context of the case, evaluation techniques to analyse the combinations of tools and other participation methods are applied and, finally, conclusions are drawn.

4.1 Deliberation paths with the Internet as guarantor of transparency: Case “Stadionbad” in Bremen (Germany)

This case study is about the renovation of a public swimming pool with one controversy being whether this could be done more ecologically on a chlorine-free basis or not. The target audience were mainly the inhabitants of the districts near the pool, around 30,000 residents.

As a new city and state parliament was elected at that time, the district council took the initiative to organise a broad consensus-oriented citizen participation process. The renovation was successfully included in the coalition agreement and a contract was concluded between government and the main stakeholders to involve the public and to implement the results of this participation project. Responsibilities and decision-making power were not overruled; a parliamentary committee still decided on the funding. But the involved parties decided to organise a consensus-oriented procedure in advance of the discussion. If a consensus was reached, it should have a great impact on the decision. Many types of events were conducted and ICT-tools were provided to involve the different users of the swimming pool (see Figure 1). After three months, a consensus was reached how to design the pool and later implemented by the political bodies.

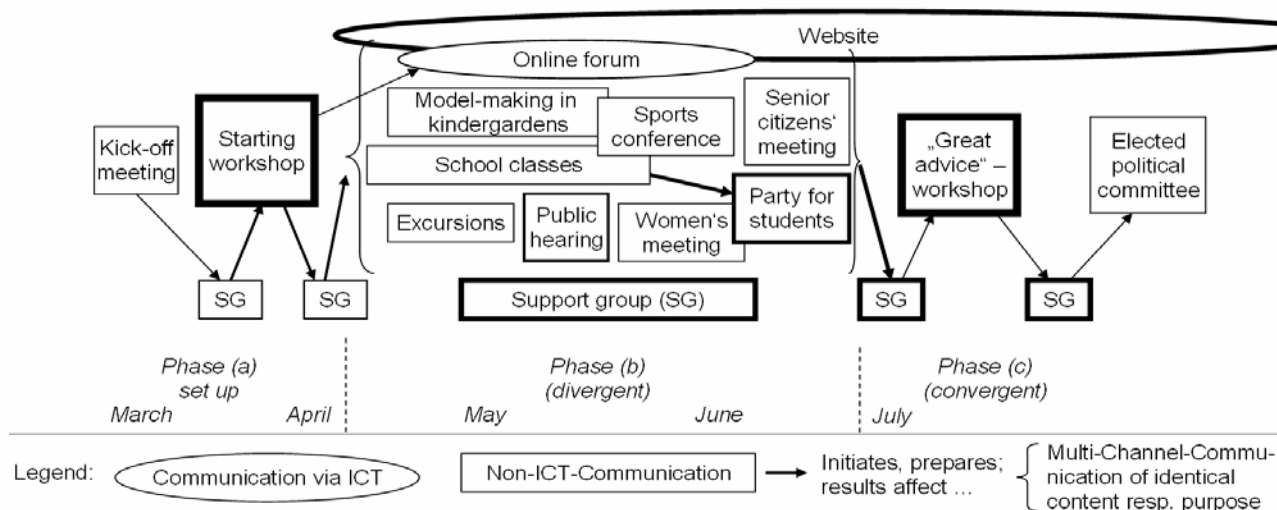


Figure 1. Process-diagram to illustrate the multi-media-dialogue-approach in the Bremen case

The procedure illustrated in Figure 1 in principle had three sequences. First, preparing sessions in the form of an organisational kick-off meeting and a whole-day “starting workshop” creating understanding among the different interest groups in a controversial design process with the clear statement that a solution would only be possible if the interests of the other swimming pool users were considered. Second, a “divergent” communication process,³ to collect and convey the ideas and opinions of different stakeholders, started with parallel means of participation, either targeted at specific audiences or focussing on specific aspects of the problem, illustrated within the large brackets in Figure 1. Third, the process concluded with a “great advisory workshop” converging the ideas of the second phase to a common result.

Parallel to these three phases, a “support group” of 25 persons representing the district council and other key actors (swimming clubs, the administration, school classes, etc.) combined stakeholder, coordination, planning and internal communication functions; it was the seismograph for all developments in the process. The group met physically but non-publicly every three to four weeks during the process, and some times afterwards, on demand to monitor the implementation of the results. It identified problems, prepared and finished other sub-processes, thought about which target groups could be reached by which measures, identified the issues not yet dealt with, collected ideas from other participation methods and presented the results to political bodies. The work of this group was characterised by the wish of most members to reach a common “district vote” in spite of several opposite opinions, by taking the position of the other interest groups into account.

From the point of view of the multi media dialogue approach evaluated here, according to the main actors representing the different interests interviewed before and after the process, the support group and the website played a key role for the communication of the process steps (see overview in Table 2). While the combined offers of phase 2 addressed different target groups, such as the youth, sport swimmers, senior citizens, handicapped or women, it was expected according to the evaluation interviews conducted at the beginning that the online discussion forum would provide a broad common base for the different groups listening to each other and to reach common proposals. Compared to the strong use of the website, the forum was not used as much. About 100 visitors per week followed the discussions. 50 mostly constructive and well-founded contributions were posted. Discussions with each other were rare.⁴

The website was the always accessible “idea pool” of the project according to the actors interviewed at the end: Suggestions and results from various sub-processes were documented on the Internet so that, not only those

³ Similar to Dennis & Valacich (1999) from communication studies, we distinguish between “convergent” and “divergent” communication and participation elements: While the latter open the process to receive and to disseminate ideas and results to the target audience (“conveyance”), “convergent” forms of participation synthesize interim-results (e.g. threads of a discussion forum) and focus the discussion.

⁴ In one case the arguments of the public hearing on water quality (chlorine or natural?) were exchanged on the forum so that also those interested people who could not take part in the panel discussion (or did not understand the arguments) could read them on the forum pages. In another case, the issue of violence of (migrant) youths, which was not discussed in public, was dealt with. The results of the Internet forum were evaluated separately. The contributions could be read on the website even after the discussion was finished.

directly concerned could look up the results of their meeting, but that other groups could also check up how the others proceeded. At the height of the participation process, there were about 100 visits per day to the website. Moreover, the website was like an archive for journalists and planners who could participate only sporadically and wanted to inform themselves on planning ideas presented a few weeks later.

According to the interviewed project promoters and officers, the expectations concerning the number of the participation activists were not fulfilled, even if 80 and 100 people visited two important events. Nevertheless, in these interviews, the stakeholders, politicians and the public assessed the process as fair, the results as reliable, acceptable for most people and suitable to be implemented.

It was difficult to integrate the interest of senior citizens, however. It was also not possible to involve the migrants in the district with their group-specific interests (e.g. family leisure behaviour with picnic on the meadow). Both could be assisted by the support group, which continuously cooperated and tried to consider the concerns of these groups by “empathic representation”. The support group succeeded to integrate the diverging interests and make their representatives talk with each other in a constructive atmosphere. Conflicts could be dealt with more easily because the counterpart could be seen in different roles, e.g. also private ones.

4.2 Listening to citizens at periodic neighbourhood meetings and through an Internet question tool in Ale (Sweden)

The municipality of Ale (27,000 inhabitants) emphasised that “listening to the citizen” was a special challenge for policy makers of the council as well as the administration, and that it was necessary to find durable modes of communication. Several exercises were conducted with two key elements: online question panels (Frågepanelen) and (physical) neighbourhood meetings.

Evening meetings are held twice a year in ten neighbourhoods. For each neighbourhood, the council appoints three politicians living there and a civil servant. After each meeting, this organising group reports to the municipal council about important topics. Minutes of the meetings are made available on the neighbourhood websites.⁵

At the beginning in 2005, the meetings were not as well prepared as they are today. They started very open especially with NIMBY issues brought up by the citizens. According to the panel, the quality of discussion heavily depended on the participants. Therefore, the meetings were better planned and became focussed on a small number of specific topics affecting the neighbourhood (e.g. noise, crime, spatial planning). Citizens had the opportunity to suggest topics for the next meeting either at the previous meeting or by using a special form on the website. Before each meeting, planning meetings with councillors and civil servants took place.

No decisions can be taken at these meetings, and there is also no specific budget available that the citizens could deal with. About 35 to 75 primarily middle-aged and older residents participated depending on the issues to be discussed. The relation of women to men has been quite equal, while the representation of immigrants is usually low. Politicians report that they get good insight and new ideas from these meetings.

Applying the set of evaluation dimensions listed in Table 1, enables us to conclude a first evaluation result:

Since 2008, the residents of Ale have the opportunity to use the Internet to ask questions to the councillors and to comment on their answers (http://ale.yourvoice.se/fragepanelen_3.asp). Every political party has one responsible person to whom the questions of the “councillors’ dialogue” are sent before they are published on the web. In their responses they are required to find a good balance between promoting democracy and promoting their separate political parties.⁶ Within seven months, 55 questions were answered by four councillors on average. Since the panel is open for everyone, the complexity of questions varies from those about the municipality of Ale in general, to issues like the museums, taxes or environmental questions, about investments in Ale and about political priorities. Evaluation of the use of rich content interaction between users and policy makers, and among users, cannot yet be made – only ten responses of the politicians have been discussed further on (two of them with three or more postings).

In this case, ICT tools clearly became more relevant for participation, especially to support the responsiveness of politicians. The low threshold of participation in the question panel (no registration required) invites more citizens to make statements, while the municipality’s evaluation showed that the neighbourhood meetings are

5 E.g. <http://www.ale.se/webb/Polopav.nsf/doc/729B7D6AD47F7EB5C1256FF70033C994>

6 The tool is commercially provided (by www.yourvoice.se) and according to the company’s website used in 25 Swedish municipalities until now.

typically attended by the elderly and domestic residents more than by younger residents and immigrants. But it is too early for a definitive assessment of the councillors' use of the tool.⁷ Surveys conducted every year of Ale councillors regarding the channels they use to receive ideas and appeals from the citizens show that physical meetings remained the most important channel of contact to citizens during the last four years, followed by telephone and email, while letters are hardly used. It is also remarkable that these figures did not change significantly during the years surveyed. (Figure 2).

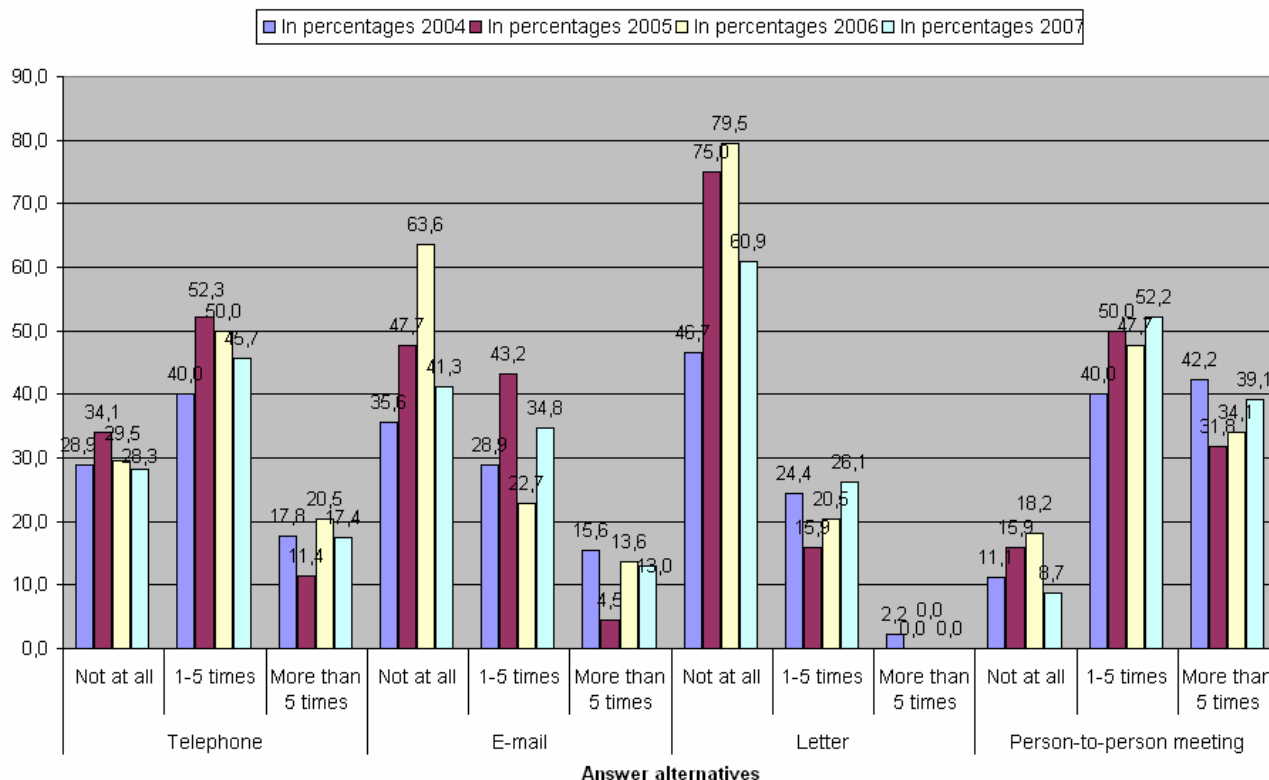


Figure 2. Contacts via different channels of Ale councillors to residents, 2004-2007 (Question to councillors: During the last month, have you been contacted by a citizen of Ale about political issues by telephone, e-mail, letter or person-to-person meeting? (n=44-47 councillors) (Source: Municipality of Ale)

Concluding, this case is characterised by durable integration of participation methods in the “agenda setting” and in the “policy formulation” stage of the decision making cycle and by a high degree of responsiveness by legal representatives. Unfortunately it is not yet possible to make final statements about how the Fragepanelen and the neighbourhood meetings as two means of participation fit together.

4.3 Accompanied and unaccompanied use of ICT in a consultation for village development planning in Dantumadeel (Netherlands)

Between 2005 and 2008, the Dutch Municipality of Dantumadeel conducted a comprehensive consultation in the village of Zwaagwesteinde (ZWE) with the aim to develop a 15-year-vision of the village in the future. ZWE has 5,100 inhabitants and shows problematic social indicators such as high (youth) unemployment, problems with alcohol and other drugs, vandalism as well as by a pronounced scepticism towards politics and administration.

As illustrated in Figure 3, the procedure included (although not intended) five phases:

- A survey based on a random sample of citizens, interviews with multipliers and a report converging the first statements in a status-quo summary.

⁷ According to municipality of Ale, there are no figures available about users of the tool.

- (b) Several diverging activities were started gathering opinions from different groups of residents using specific means of communication: focus groups with representatives of clubs, donating high-tech mobile phones with the service to youngsters in return that they had to reply to weekly SMS regarding questions from social workers.⁸ During this phase, the municipality faced some management and technical problems, which caused a considerable delay.⁹
- (c) Solving this, a new webmaster was appointed in 2006 and another employee was hired for the socio-cultural aspects of the project and the SMS surveys. Again, a divergent phase
- (d) started with further trials approaching the youth and other residents with a survey and an information meeting about its results. These converged in the last phase,
- (e) in so-called kitchen table talks (focus groups) and issue-related working groups and resulted in a final report "Zwaagwesteinde in de Steigers. Dorpsvisie 2008-2023".

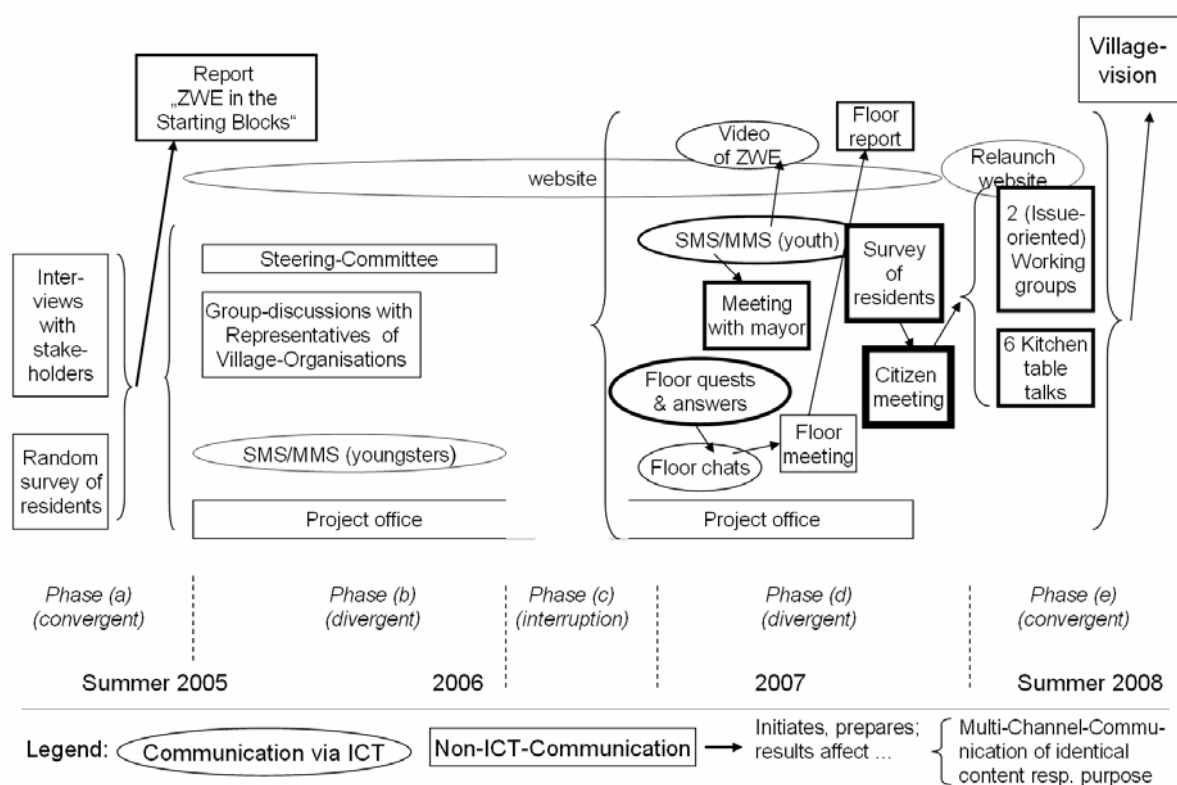


Figure 3. Communication mix in the participation procedure „Zwaagwesteinde“

In the final evaluation panel of Dantumadeel, the members concluded that the ICT-tools have been of relatively low relevance within the methods used in the process; the elements of most importance were the physical meetings resulting from the survey in phase (d). A crucial point was that the dispersed activities in the first two phases were not published and ideas were not exchanged. Compared to later measures, ICT potentials remained under-exploited in the first phases (see below). The mobile phone activities were only an indicator for this: In phase (b), the project staff continuously sent SMS with questions or little tasks to the 40 youths who had received mobile phones. Most questions tried to involve the youngsters in a discussion on themselves, their interests or the situation in the village. They answered via SMS, and via MMS, if the task was to take a photo of

8 This happened in cooperation with a mobile phone provider; the young people could also use them for private purposes. Additionally, they were refunded the prepaid fee of 5 EUR per month for sending MMS because the provider wanted to implement the technology. Sending of SMS was indirectly subsidized.

9 The young people had handling problems that could not be solved by the project team because it was not trained for such cases. Sending questions to the mobile phones by the project computer was often not possible. According to the webmaster, one reason for the low response rate could have been that the server of the mobile phone provider did not send the questions to all addressees depending on the server load, so that some youths did not receive any questions.

a certain object. The reply rate lay between 54% and 74% (relating to the "photo questions" (37% on average). In a study on behalf of the local government, Koerhuis & Schaafsma (2006) on the one hand maintain that young people liked the mobile phone project because it showed that the local government tried to increase their participation. On the other hand, however, it did not raise citizen participation as expected. The authors stated that half a year after the project began, the follow-up of the answers and suggestions was not optimal and needed improvement. They also made recommendations including for instance sending reminders, presenting the youngsters' answers on a website and by expanding the role young people play in the project (Koerhuis & Schaafsma 2006, own translation).

In phase (d), a new project officer strengthened the role of the website, by forwarding the answers the youth gave via SMS to the website and putting interviews and small movies about inhabitants of the village on the net. He also prepared a movie about the village together with the youngsters that was made available on the web. These activities significantly increased the number of visitors up to a peak of more than 3,000 unique page views in one month (this figure has to be seen in relation to the small population of ZWE). Responsiveness was improved and the youth participants were invited by the mayor and an alderman. Six youngsters used this opportunity and criticised the representatives for not drawing consequences from the answers of the youths for more than a year.

Supplementing the mobile phone project, for three months an innovative communication channel was incorporated for the youths using the commercial "Floor" method based on instant messaging. A member of the project team encouraged participants of the mobile project to register. Youths aged twelve to 21 received the "Floorquests" every two weeks – lists of questions on different subjects, e.g. their living conditions, leisure time activities, friendship or ideals for the future. These questions were answered by 39 to 48 out of 60 participants.¹⁰ In additional chats on these subjects – moderated by Floor facilitators – four to six youths took part. The provider made available the intermediate results in a report to the local authority. It showed that the youths liked to have more meeting points, more (sports) activities and a swimming pool. Also traffic problems such as a crossing or more planting in the residential area were mentioned (Floor 2007). At the end of the episode, the provider organised a two-hour meeting in the village, where participating youths could become acquainted with each other. Twelve of them used the opportunity and discussed the question of what they think of the future of Dantumadeel and what the community should look like in future.¹¹

4.4 Conclusions after comparison of the three cases

In all three projects described, traditional face-to-face activities built the core of the participation procedures; whilst the ICT components were supplements (cf. Table 2). This is a quite realistic reproduction of the current situation local governments are confronted with when starting to use ICT for political participation. Even in a country with a very high Internet penetration rate, such as Sweden, physical meetings remain the most important contact channel for local politicians to citizens, followed by telephone and email.

Table 2. Extract of evaluation results regarding the multi-media-dialogue approach in three cases

Criteria	Indicators	Results		
		Stadionbad	Ale	Zwaagwesteinde
<i>Relevance of ICT-tools among method-combination</i>	<i>Usage rate</i>	Medium: website among the five most important methods; discussion forum not important	Fragepanelen (FP) not to be judged now (one of two tools)	Low: SMS/MMS / Floor / website not important for the process
	<i>Number of users</i>	Website: 600 visits per week (target audience: approximately 30,000)	FP: 55 questions within seven months; no data available about visitors (target audience: 27,000 inhabitants)	Website visited well when a civil servant took care for (445 per week), before: less than 100 unique visits per week (target audience: 5,100 inhabitants)
	<i>Target groups</i>	Youth reached (not via	More elderly and	Youth reached well using

¹⁰ Depending on their participation in Floor, the young people got credits as a recompense that they could exchange for shopping vouchers.

¹¹ Every youth received a credit of 15 EUR for participating.

	<i>reached (social inclusiveness)</i>	ICT); difficult to integrate senior citizens and migrants (not via ICT)	domestic residents are attending neighbourhood (Nh) meetings than the youth and migrants / no data regarding ICT-tool	incentives via SMS/MMS-project and via Floor (Internet); other groups also via physical meetings, surveys and representatives
	<i>Content provided adequately</i>	Excellent via website: 129 (mostly self-written) articles and further 31 documents such as newspaper articles, protocols and plan drawings	Neighbourhood websites: invitations and minutes of neighbourhood meetings	Website not used as an instrument for pooling ideas of citizens or disseminating information (only at the end for a masterplan)
<i>Support of responsive-ness</i>	<i>The tool allows to answer the user's question quickly and effectively</i>	On the website, a q/a-tool was provided "Questions to Dr Wet": hardly used	FP enables direct link between users and politicians; for politicians, person-to-person meetings are most important, then telephone and email	SMS/MMS & Internet (Floor) not used responsively, only combined with mayor-meeting and final report; traditional methods were used responsively: survey results in well-visited meeting, focus-group work in final report
	<i>The site provides contact information, FAQs, search functions</i>	Only contact info	FP: Only contact info, Nh website: Form to suggest topics for next Nh-meeting	Website: Contact information, SMS/MMS with personally know contact persons
<i>Support of rich in content interaction between users and policy makers and among users</i>	<i>Quantity of postings</i>	Discussion forum: 50 contributions; 600 visits in six weeks	FP: 55 questions; approx. 220 replies	SMS-project: 640 answers; respondent-rates of 60%-35% (average) from 45 resp. 60 youth (declining); Floor: 70% of 60 participants responded;
	<i>Quality of comments</i>	Mostly constructive and well founded (10% threads with more than four comments)	FP: quality not to be judged now, one thread (out of 55) with more than three comments)	SMS/MMS: In random samples, 49 to 58% were (very) good answers (but no bi- or multilateral interaction possible)

As Table 3 exposes, the strength of the Internet mainly concerns its potential to provide transparency and to converge interests and information in a process through carefully elaborated websites. This is confirmed by feedback from actors involved in the process of Stadionbad and the example of the ZWE-website for the months it was accompanied professionally. Both for consultation and deliberation, in the cases presented face-to-face meetings were most important. But this does not mean that ICT played no role – not only because of the small size of this selected sample but also because of its important function in combined sets of tools and methods.

Table 3. Activities aimed at information, consultation and deliberation and online and offline methods used (*most important means of communication in the process are printed in bold*)

Pilot site	Online	Offline
Information		
<i>Stadionbad</i>	Website , newsletter, online map	Information meetings, inspection on site, excursion
<i>Ale</i>	(Neighbourhood) Website	Neighbourhood meetings twice a year
<i>ZWE</i>	Website (during six months)	Evening meeting

Consultation		
<i>Stadionbad</i>	Discussion forum	Excursions Hearing Future conferences; discussions with planners Meetings for target groups (evening meetings with senior citizens; women; persons with special needs; sports conference; workshops in classes and kindergardens)
<i>A/e</i>	Question panel	Neighbourhood meetings; reports to council
<i>ZWE</i>	Mobile phone questions to young people; answers on the Internet (phase d) Questionnaires through the Internet; moderated chats in small groups with 6-8 participants in closed domain	Survey of specific groups at the beginning Group interviews with associations and churches Project office with two employees Discussion of mayor and alderman with youngsters Survey of all households Evening meeting Issue-oriented working groups Kitchen-table talks (focus groups)
Deliberation		
<i>Stadionbad</i>	Discussion forum	Moderated concept group („support group“) Externally moderated one day workshop at the beginning and at the end
<i>ZWE</i>		Working group to summarize results of different participant events

In the Stadionbad case, the Internet discussion held in parallel with physical sessions with different target groups reflected quite closely the discussions in these offline activities; additionally it presented important different arguments regarding a crucial point of the conflict. The Zwaagwesteinde case illustrates how important it is to accompany the use of Internet and mobile phone postings in eParticipation-processes and to embed them in the whole process – in phase (b) of the project, when the answers of the youth were only collected but not compiled and forwarded or put on the website, they became upset. But when that happened in phase (d), when the mayor listened to their opinions in a (physical) meeting, their contributions became fruitful input for the final report. This illustrates that involving youths remains a complex task and cannot automatically be solved by using ICTs. In the Stadionbad case, teachers could be contacted, who in turn encouraged their students to participate. It was important that this was done during class. Therefore it was not a big surprise that this group did not get their information from the media (let alone the Internet) but from school as evaluated by survey.

5 Tentative evaluation framework

Evaluation is to generate information on results of an eParticipation project and its process organisation. Whether the focus is on outcomes (summative evaluation) or on process aspects (formative evaluation), both involve a systematic comparison with predefined criteria, performance standards or expectations. The scope of an evaluation activity can range from very small scale check, based on a few key evaluation questions, to a large scale evaluation study based on a detailed evaluation framework. Motivations for evaluating eParticipation projects can be quite varied. Organisational learning, management enhancement, audit and project control, assessment of tools, and enhancing democracy are among the most important interests.

Depending on which perspective is taken, determines evaluation questions, relevant criteria and evaluation designs. An integrative evaluation model which combines three different perspectives – a project perspective, a tool-oriented socio-technical perspective and a wider democracy perspective – has been suggested by Macintosh and Whyte (2008). This layered model has been further elaborated in the context of the European Network of Excellence DEMO-net by extending both the scope of the three basic perspectives and the set of criteria, indicators and measures needed for grasping the relevant information (DEMO-net 2008; Aichholzer & Allhutter 2008). The results of these efforts towards a more systematic evaluation framework offer a reference model both for the evaluation case studies presented above and practitioners interested in evaluating other projects. As explained above, our focus here is on the socio-technical perspective; therefore both the project

perspective and the democratic perspective shall only be outlined in basic dimensions very briefly (for details and further issues included in the framework please consult the DEMO-net sources referred to above).

5.1 Project perspective

The project perspective is usually seen as a centrepiece in evaluations. It looks at the specific aims, objectives and performance aspects of eParticipation projects as set by the project organisers or the management team. The set of relevant dimensions (criteria/sub-criteria) to be analysed may include the following:

Project management

- Goal clarity; resource planning; responsibilities
- Quality of tool selection and implementation; resource efficiency
- Coordination of online and offline processes

Engaging with a wider audience

- Promotion measures; outreach
- Incorporation of (multiple) target group perspectives in service design
- Accessibility; inclusiveness; barriers to participation

Community development

- Participation and networking patterns

Obtaining better-informed opinions

- Relevance and quality of information
- Learning effects over the participation process

Process quality

- Gap analysis against standards and good practice
- User and stakeholder identified areas for enhancement
- Integration of online and offline processes
- Harmonisation of work-practices of authority and eParticipation processes

Scope of deliberation

- Extent of interaction amongst participants; level of involvement
- Extent of rationality and use of arguments

Effectiveness

- Cost/time effectiveness of processes and structures (e.g. cost savings/time savings in providing, aggregating and evaluating input)

Feedback behaviour

- Response measures set by project organisers; rates and timeliness of response
- Feedback content and quality; participants' satisfaction with feedback

Sustainability

- Level of key stakeholder support; provision of resources and maintenance
- Stakeholder perception of continuity barriers
- Level of institutionalisation of education and training for government officials

5.2 Socio-technical perspective

The second core component of the suggested framework, the socio-technical perspective, is largely framed by the perspective of users and includes a specific focus on the employed electronic tools. It can be grouped under three key dimensions – *social acceptability*, *usefulness*, and *usability* and is exhibited in Table 4 in more detail, i.e. including operational measurement aspects.

Table 4: Criteria and operational measures for evaluating eParticipation from a socio-technical perspective

Criteria/Sub-criteria	Indicators	Measures and methods
Social acceptability		
Trust and security	Information is presented accurately, completely and reliably	Expert or stakeholder assessment, participant survey
	Information users have provided is handled in a secure manner	Specialist or stakeholder assessment
	Users are confident in the steps taken	Participant survey, interviews
	Data handling procedures are in compliance with relevant legislation or guidelines	Expert or stakeholder assessment
Relevance and legitimacy	Tool meets a purpose relevant to individual users' and community's needs	Participant survey, interviews
	Content and surrounding processes are relevant to that purpose	Expert or stakeholder assessment, participant survey, interviews
Usefulness		
Accessibility	Level of compliance with Web Accessibility Initiative (WAI) content guidelines is sufficient to serve users with special needs	Assessment against accessibility checklists (or if not available: specialist or stakeholder assessment)
	Alternative access over public access points, mobile devices or offline channels is possible	Expert or stakeholder assessment
	Identification of access barriers	Interviews
Appeal and usage	Public take-up relative to expectations	Interviews (beforehand), web metrics
	Target users are satisfied with the tool, show interest in using it and willingness to return to the site	Satisfaction ratings, user survey
	Identification of usage barriers	User survey, focus groups
	Number of users, extent/frequency of their use of the tool	Web metrics
Content clarity	Users understand what the content means in the context of the task or situation	User survey, interviews, usability testing
Responsiveness	Tool allows to answer the user's questions quickly and effectively	User survey, website analysis
	Site provides contact information, FAQs, search functions	Website analysis
Interaction	Tool supports the level of interaction required by the process	Website & content analysis, expert or stakeholder assessment
Good practice	Level of consistency with current developments, good practice guidelines, standards in the field (e.g. interoperability standards)	Evaluator assessment informed by document and literature review
Usability		
Navigation and	Sufficient and consistent information about users' current position on the site, path taken,	Usability testing

organisation	and available options	
Efficiency and flexibility	Time needed to perform a task	Usability testing
	Appropriate short-cuts for doing repetitive or familiar tasks	Usability testing
	Adequate fit with variations of individual circumstances	Usability testing, user survey
Error recovery	Users can undo previous actions	Usability testing, user assessment
	Users are guided effectively on the correct procedure and can continue the task without distraction or hesitation	Usability testing, user assessment
System security	Level of stability of operation without unintended interruption or periods of maintenance	Rates of service provision; user assessments

5.3 Democratic perspective

This third component concentrates on perhaps the most demanding task, i.e. assessing how far eParticipation contributes to improving the quality of democratic systems and processes. Difficulties arise especially for three reasons: a) democracy is itself a contested concept, b) some impacts on democracy tend to be effective only in the longer-term, depending on significance and scale of a project and c) multiple levels of impact need to be assessed and separated from other influence factors. Nevertheless an assessment from this perspective is essential for any interest in policy evaluation with regard to effects on democracy. Some basic evaluation dimensions may include the following:

Representation

- Fit with legal frameworks/legal stipulation for participation procedure
- Integration with 'offline' participation channels
- Fairness of interest representation

Support of engagement

- Availability of information on democratic processes and rules of (e-)participation
- Citizens' knowledge about participation opportunities/existing initiatives
- Knowledge increase about democratic processes and rules of (e-)participation
- Participation supply and demand (number of initiatives, access numbers, active membership in networks or interest groups)
- Level of citizen involvement of in identifying subjects of eParticipation

Transparency and accountability

- Publication of contributions to/results of participation process
- Public discussion on final results with involved actors
- Transparency on involved actors and responsibilities
- Transparency on how contributions are processed and decisions taken

Conflict and consensus

- Identification of "pros and cons"; handling/visibility of minority opinions
- Participation policies (e.g., moderation, etc.)

Political equality

- Pluralism, openness of participation process
- Contribution to reduce barriers to participation or barriers to active citizenship

Community control

- Participant satisfaction with participation effects

- Impact on decision-making process; level of integration into policy process

Each of these three evaluation perspectives is open for further relevant criteria to be included. For instance, the democratic perspective might also be interested in more long-term effects on participation in formal political institutions, the relationship between the electorate and the political system or in turnout at elections. It is not suggested, and in fact would be misleading, to view this framework as a toolbox from which any element could be taken according to individual evaluation needs ready for application. This could not be done without consideration of the project context, appropriate adaptation to it and further elaboration of the evaluation criteria. The purpose of the framework rather is to complement and extend the scope of evaluation perspectives and to stimulate and enrich ideas for individual evaluation intentions on eParticipation projects.

6 Challenges to apply the framework in eParticipation practice

Applying (preliminary) frameworks for the evaluation of (e)participation in practical contexts faces several challenges. These will first be illustrated with reference to the EVOICE project and then related to the general situation in evaluating eParticipation.

In the EVOICE project, two research designs as described in the evaluation framework were applied. First, a (trans-national) comparative approach, and second the evaluation of combined offline and online tools. The project's pretension to explore similar cases initiating "a learning process of experimentation, evaluation, improvement, second evaluation, second improvement, etc." is difficult to be realised in eParticipation practice. The pilot projects in this four years programme differed in so many respects, and it would not have been possible to harmonise variables such as objective, topic, target group, resources and methods. Even if some of these variables could not be harmonised, the others would make them like comparing apples and oranges. E.g. if the objective is to compare the usability or functionality of a specific tool in different contexts, results depend on the latter and cannot be taken as evidence for the performance of the tool for the following reasons:

- In *trans-national contexts*, evaluation has often been conducted as "*remote*" and "*mediated*" evaluation: The principal investigator is not or only partially the same researching on site. This is plausible because it reduces both the justifiable effort and potential interest bias: it solves the evaluator-involved actor-problem because it is even better for objectivity reasons not to have identical persons or institutions who conduct the eParticipation exercise and who observe it (cf. Macintosh & Coleman 2006). On the other hand, remote and mediated evaluation often has to rely on civil servants as mediators and their honesty to deliver valid and reliable data. This can also be critical because of their dependence on good results of the evaluation for further funding, or additional effort implied with data collection.
- Trans-national and specifically remote and mediated evaluation has to face cultural and technical challenges. In addition to language problems, cultural challenges include for instance apparently self-evident circumstances. While in the Nordic countries freedom of information is a long-standing practice, other countries have a more hierarchical relationship between civil servants and citizens; we can also observe different understandings of terms such as "consultation" which in Central Europe also includes discursive and deliberative portions but less in the UK. Different attention to privacy issues is also covered, e.g. when the German partner was not allowed to count "visits" because the IP-addresses had to be stored longer than allowed. Technical challenges can be different standards for units to analyse log files, or different support software for the different grammars necessary to make natural language processing tools operable.

Also the evaluation design of *combined offline and online channels* has to solve specific problems:

"Need of resources" is a basic challenge: Evaluations of combined offline and online participation forms tend to be resource intensive and require careful tailoring of evaluation designs according available means. External as compared to internal evaluations generally imply additional costs. From a scientific point of view, an external evaluation is necessary to guarantee independence and scientific standards. Against this there are two arguments: Institutional separation between organiser and evaluator is not a guarantee for independence because of the potential dependence of the evaluator on the client. Secondly, evaluation should become an internal mechanism to monitor a project's own processes, both to save resources and to build up institutional knowledge about evaluating eParticipation. A framework as presented above can be a first step.

Data availability is another basic issue. Sometimes suitable data for evaluation purposes are not available due to cost constraints or for privacy reasons. Organisers have to weigh between keeping participation thresholds as low as possible and the generation of data about participation activities. Doing without registration, allowing nicknames and the resulting anonymity reduce the potential data pool for later evaluation. On the other hand

separate surveys among (non)users are costly. Log file data can be inaccessible when a tool runs on the server of an external provider and detailed data delivery is not part of the contract.

In other cases different responsibilities within government have to be faced and the implicit competition among units. Civil servants from the IT-unit involved in the project might depend on the motivation of colleagues in other units that don't benefit from funding or the outcome of the project.

Transcending a supply side perspective is a general challenge of eParticipation research. Often the providers' view is taken but not the users' or even the non-users' perspective. The absence of information about the users is a crucial point in evaluating the contribution of ICT.

A specific challenge is the evaluation of the democratic implications of eParticipation. The implementation of its results can be seen as the short-term impact of a participation project, but as the criteria above show there is also a long-run perspective. One problem here is isolating the impact of the project per se from other factors influencing people's political attitudes.¹² A necessary task is identifying appropriate levels of expectable democracy effects – organisational, local, regional, societal or global – as well as grasping longer-term effects.

Another challenge is to adequately take account of the context in which a particular eParticipation project is embedded. As stressed by Rowe and Frewer (2004), participation projects "do not take place in a vacuum but within particular contexts." These contexts frame participation processes, and projects are designed to fit the political, cultural and socio-economic environment in which they take place. Thus, every evaluation should carefully examine the relevant context and evaluation designs, as well as take into account criteria such as level of government, level of citizens' engagement, political culture, rationale that gave rise to the project, etc. Especially when comparing evaluation results from different eParticipation initiatives the question of how and to what extent context matters becomes crucial (see DEMO-net 2008).

Finally, a related challenge concerns necessary adaptations to the specific type of eParticipation in question. For a project with primarily deliberative functions, quite different criteria are relevant and need to be specified than for e.g. an eConsultation or an ePolling project.

7 Conclusions

Evaluation of eParticipation is important for several reasons. Generally it is indispensable if knowledge of greater precision and objectivity is wanted about the effectiveness, the value, the success of an eParticipation project, initiative or programme. Evaluation helps ascertain to what extent certain objectives have been fulfilled or why they have not. Insights allow identifying deficits and shortcomings, as well as leverage for change and thus for organisational learning, improved management and utilisation of this knowledge in future eParticipation projects. Other important functions are audit and project control. With regard to electronic tools, the centrepiece of eParticipation, evaluation is necessary to optimise the socio-technical design and set-up both from the providers' and the users' point of view. Last but not least, evaluation is required to detect whether and to what extent an eParticipation project does contribute to enhancing democracy. Evaluation has been distinguished from assessment as a systematic analysis against preset criteria. It goes beyond mere descriptive documentation of eParticipation projects and requires specifying these criteria in advance as well as determining suitable indicators and their measurement.

This article focussed on government-driven eParticipation activities especially within the area of consultation and deliberation. The layered model of our evaluation framework with distinguished criteria, indicators and methods is an important step to support "real" evaluation compared to assessment – both done by external scientists and by internal staff to improve the public administrations' institutional knowledge. We are aware of the principle problems of such a framework – that it is either too comprehensive and therefore not coming to the point for practitioners, or that always some aspects are missing which are seen as relevant for the case in discussion – but we rely on the competence of the users of the framework to adapt it to their specific needs. We addressed this theory-practice tension when we described the evaluation method and the problems extracted from an extensive eParticipation project. Here two research designs were combined – comparative and offline-online synthesising methods. Some principle challenges of a comparative design are the difficulty in finding comparable cases, cultural and technical differences, advantages and disadvantages of remote and mediated evaluation. The design of combined offline and online tools, especially resource and data problems, and cooperation demands among government agencies, were addressed.

12 In EVOICE, „building capacities for eParticipation" within the institution was taken as a middle-term impact indicator.

Independent from the design, the effort to take into account the users' perspectives was highlighted. Further research is necessary, e.g. regarding the democratic layer of the framework and regarding the impact of eParticipation exercises.

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E-consultations: New tools for civic engagement or facades for political correctness?

Since the 1990s, public institutions have been increasingly reaching into democracy's toolbox for new tools with which to better engage citizens in politics. Applied uses of new information communication technologies (ICTs), namely the Internet, are expanding the range of instruments within the toolbox. E-consultations are emerging as a popular e-participation practice for advancing civic engagement in public policy making.

This paper critically evaluates how and to what effect political institutions employ e-consultations to bring about deliberative and participatory capital. Existing evidence suggests that though e-consultations provide new opportunities for the formation of new interactive spaces between citizens and political actors and promote cost effectiveness, their impact on the quality of deliberation and policies, however, has been less conclusive (Margolis and Resnick 2000; Coleman and Gøtze 2001). Observers note that outcomes of e-consultation initiatives have been poorly and arbitrarily integrated in the respective policies they intended to inform. Their inclusion has remained contingent on the political will and discretion of the political actors.

In this context we question what new participatory benefits e-consultations do in fact offer or whether they serve as facades for political correctness only in a new space?

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e-consultations, impact assessment, e-participation and policy making, institutional learning

“ The novelty of citizens being invited to the policy-making table does contribute to the creation of interactive spaces between political institutions and citizens unknown before. ”

1 Introduction

Since the 1990s, public institutions have been increasingly reaching into democracy's toolbox for new tools with which to better engage citizens in politics. Applied uses of new information communication technologies (ICT), namely the Internet, have expanded the range of instruments within the toolbox. Thematic listservs, e-consultation platforms, e-polls, political blogs, e-voting, e-petitions, and e-campaigning are a new arsenal of participation tools available to policy makers. Proponents argue that political uses of ICT remove some of the practical limitations of political participation (Budge, 1996:7). They are seen to enable more diversified, deliberative, customised and cost-effective forms of civic participation (Dahlberg, 2001a; Sunstein, 2001; Tolbert and Mossberger, 2006). Unlike traditional print and television media which act as one-directional intermediaries in mass communication, ICT facilitates more direct interactivity and enhanced mutuality between its users (Bentivegna, 2002).

The following paper focuses on the role of e-consultations. It critically evaluates how and to what effect political institutions employ e-consultations in policy making processes. It argues that there is a partial mismatch between normative aspirations under which e-consultations are launched and their actual outcomes. Existing evidence suggests that though e-consultations do form new interactive spaces between citizens and political actors, promote cost effectiveness and contribute to citizens' inclusion in policy making, their substantive impact on policy outputs has been less conclusive (Margolis and Resnick, 2000; Coleman and Gøtze, 2001). Citizens' inputs and policy recommendations emerging from e-consultation initiatives are arbitrarily integrated in the respective policies they intend to inform. Their inclusion remains contingent on the discretionary will of political actors and complexities of the policy making process. This opens the floor for the central question guiding this paper: are e-consultations *new* tools for meaningful civic engagement and substantive inputs for better policies, or are they mere facades for political correctness?

The first part of the paper introduces different types of e-consultation. The second part looks at what is 'special' about conducting public consultations on-line, including some of the underlying normative assumptions that drive e-consultation policies. The third part puts into perspective and critically discusses the extent to which the outcomes of public consultation practice(s) converge with the participatory and democratic value added they envisioned to pursue.

2 Defining e-consultations

E-consultations constitute interactive "tell-us-what-you-think" on-line platforms where ordinary citizens, civic actors, experts, and politicians purposively assemble to provide input, deliberate, inform, and influence policy and decision making. Initiated by political institutions, non-state actors (or jointly), e-consultations vary in approach, goals, selection of target groups, breadth of themes or issue areas, in the use of technical tools and administrative level at which they are launched (Gøtze 2001). They often simultaneously incorporate vertical citizen-to-government as well as horizontal spaces for citizen-to-citizen interactions. The fact that citizens are provided the opportunity to influence policy making processes makes e-consultations distinct from other spaces in the informal virtual public sphere. In informal discursive e-spaces such as virtual communities, topical forums, chat rooms or newsgroups, participants interact as equals and may but do not explicitly seek to wield political influence. The *raison d'être* of e-consultations is to affect formal (institutional) political and decision making processes.

E-consultations are also more formal and structured than discussions in the informal virtual public sphere. They tend to have a set duration, agenda, employ the use of moderators, with topics for discussion pre-defined by the host. Given that it is government agencies that in most cases initiate e-consultations, relationships among participants are seen to be asymmetric where the actors involved - politicians, policy experts, citizens - differ in their level of authority, expertise and access to decision-making processes. Arguably, as it will be later discussed, these implicit structural dynamics distinctly influence the e-consultation process.

2.1 Types of e-consultations

There are five common types of e-consultations. The simplest involves *question and answer discussion forums* integrated within an existing government website. Here citizens are invited (by initiators) to post their views, questions and concerns, and receive feedback from respective authorities. Q & A forums can take place synchronously (in real time) or asynchronously with pre-moderation and lag time between responses where views posted are pre-read by a designated moderator. A good example of the synchronous kind are the

'diskussionforen' hosted by the German Bundestag¹ or the 'webchats series' in the UK² where a selected MP (or a group of) is pre-scheduled to interact with and directly answer questions posted by the public on-line.

On-line polls are the second type of e-consultations offering quick snapshots or measurements of civic temperature on a specific public issue. Examples of more elaborate e-polls or e-surveys include those utilized by the EU Commission as part of the Your Voice e-initiative³ while the more simpler one-shot polls commonly appear as a standing sub-feature on government websites.

E-petitions or on-line testimonies are another form of e-consultations which enable citizens, individually or in a group, to table issues, complaints or requests directly to the government. Though intended to serve as a bottom-up participatory tool spontaneously initiated by citizens, e-petitions sites have also been hosted by governments. UK government's popular 10 Downing Street and the European Parliament's petitions initiative, for example, offer such online spaces⁴.

E-panels are more sophisticated versions of on-line consultations. They invite a (self-selected or recruited) sample group of citizens – a panel – to provide and exchange their views via on-line discussion forums, online surveys, live chats, single polls or votes centered around a common topic or policy initiative. Unlike traditional citizen forums or polls, e-panels facilitate both horizontal (citizen-to-citizen) interactions as well as vertical (citizen–decision maker) consultations, offer expert opinion on targeted issues and simultaneously solicit citizens' input into decision making processes.

The last but perhaps the most commonly associated with e-consultations are *editorial* consultations where citizens and representatives of civil society are invited to comment, usually in the form of moderated on-line discussions followed by formulated, consensus based or also single entry recommendations on targeted policy documents. Most of the time editorial e-consultations are called upon in agenda setting or policy formulation stages of the policy process⁵.

Another growing trend points to e-consultation initiatives combining two or more, or all of the above elements in the form of a comprehensive website portal – a one stop shop – devoted to a specific or multiple policy campaign(s) with multi-level interactive features targeting various audiences at once. These can be stand alone or form a part of a longer-term series of on-going consultations, such as the already mentioned EU Commission's consultation portal *Your Voice*, the UK government's *Tellparliament*, or the City of Bristol's *Ask Bristol* e-initiatives⁶. E-consultations are also increasingly being held in pre-, post-, or in combination with off-line participatory events and combine diverse technologies. Madrid City Council's *Madrid Participa* project⁷ and European Parliament's Citizens' Agora are good examples of multi-pronged participatory initiatives.

2.2 Practical Benefits of E-Consultations

Being given the opportunity to provide feedback and to influence the political process outside the electoral cycle is a distinct feature of public consultations. But what is the value added of doing so on-line? Or in Bimber's (1999) words, does the medium matter? The following section discusses some of the practical benefits as well as normative pretexts under which e-consultations are launched.

Convenience, expediency and flexibility

For government institutions, Internet promotes efficiency and effectiveness through the reduction of transactional costs (Tolbert and Mossberger, 2006). For ordinary citizens who have their own lives with

1 www.bundestag.de/forum/index.htm

2 www.number10.gov.uk/news/webchats

3 http://ec.europa.eu/yourvoice/consultations/index_en.htm

4 petitions.number10.gov.uk; www.europarl.europa.eu. Between 1985 and 2004, the EP received a total of 17,823 citizen petitions, about 1500 annually; most were claimed in the areas of social affairs and the environment (www.ena.lu).

5 European Parliament's *Citizens' Agoras* combine both on and off-line platforms and seek to institutionalize a structured dialogue with 'Europe's many voices', and for MEPs to receive inputs for their reports drafted in parliamentary committees. Held in Brussels, Citizen Agoras invite up to 500 participants from civil society organizations. The preparatory phase (i.e. drafting of base documents) is conducted on-line followed by two-days of in-person meetings. (www.europarl.europa.eu).

6 www.ec.europa.eu/yourvoice; www.tellparliament.net; www.askbristol.com

7 Since 2004, Madrid City Council has provided inclusive and cost effective e-voting options for Internet and mobile phone users, but also to non (technology) users during its local citizen consultations; to date 22 consultations on diverse local issues involving more than 3.5 million citizens have been implemented, www.madridparticipa.es.

multiple activities and responsibilities, the incentives for e-participation lie in the practical convenience of on-line communication. The immediacy of communication, 24/7 access (if household Internet access available) and location flexibility is assumed to enable citizens to engage, reflect, edit and respond on issues in their 'own time'. This is not possible in conventional town hall meetings which require travel, physical presence at a specific location and the communication immediacy of talking, listening, reflecting, responding fast and being on the spot. Even a simple act such as sending a letter to one's MP requires add-on tasks like buying a stamp and going to the post office or a mailbox. In this sense, online communication is seen to eliminate some of the practical steps inhibiting political participation.

Enhanced interactivity

Unlike traditional print and television media which act as one-way intermediaries of public catchallism, Internet applications enable multi-level (one-to-one, one-to-many, many-to-one) and more direct modes of communication. Online, users become simultaneously authors, dispatchers, receivers, and controllers of communication. By reducing the storyteller or the middleman, on-line communication contributes to the disintermediation of the communicative process (Bentivegna, 2002) and thereby enhancing interactivity and mutuality (ibid.; Margolis and Resnick, 2000). In the case of e-consultations, the Internet platform allows a level of reciprocity and engagement that would be difficult and costly for government institutions to initiate off-line. Moreover, customization and diversification of communication applications to the specific needs of both the sender and target audience(s) is useful in the political arena (Sunstein, 2001). On-line, innovative forms of public outreach can be designed targeting large or special audiences such as the physically disabled, youth, rural populations or other minorities with special needs who would be otherwise excluded from such interactions.

Face-less interface

Proponents argue that on-line consultative spaces provide advantages for deliberation. The on-line environment allows for the elimination of visual social cues which tend to constrain ideal speech situations in face-to-face deliberative settings (Gastil, 2000). In real life, our reading of racial, gender, physical and socio-economic background cues forms our perceptions about others. These influence our formed judgment, stereotypes and prejudices which can in turn negatively affect with whom and the way we interact (Wallace, 1999). The on-line environment offers a face-less interface seen to reduce participants' reliance on social context clues and inter-personal discrimination based on status (Gastil, 2000).

Virtual interactions are equally seen to accommodate different communication skills. By requiring face-less interface, written inputs rather than physical presence, on-line communication removes the 'inhibiting effect' of awkwardness and shyness that prevents some people from speaking in larger group contexts (Wallace, 1999; Dutton, 1996). Thus by eliminating certain communicative barriers, the on-line environment is seen to offer favorable incentives for deliberative discourse as well as for the participation of those who would otherwise be excluded.

Normative pretexts

In addition to their capacities to remove practical barriers to participation, e-consultations are guided by normative pursuits aimed at remedying some of the democratic deficits in status quo political processes. Among such first pursuits is the promotion of citizens' right to free and equal access to information about the political agenda whereby citizens can oversee the actions and inactions of public authorities and thereby hold them accountable. By allowing citizens the convenience of 24/7 on-line access to government documents and by opening up the policy making process to public scrutiny, democratic principles of *transparency* and *accountability* are seen to be actively upheld.

Feedback and mutual learning

Closely linked to the first premise, e-consultations' facilitation of public input and reciprocal feedback between the government and the governed is also assumed to enhance *democratic legitimacy* and *better policies*. The feedback mechanism is theoretically an important component in the mechanics of legitimate democratic processes. It facilitates the reciprocity of raising and responding to validity claims (Habermas, 2005: 384) and thereby enabling behavioural (input-response dynamics) modifications and cumulative improvements to the system as a whole. If maintained, feedback mechanisms prompt corrective behaviour and a series of "diminishing mistakes". Conversely, if feedback mechanisms function poorly, cumulative mistakes within a system may become greater (Deutsch, 1966: 88-90). Following this logic, with politicians and citizens being a part of the same (political) system, enabling reciprocation of feedback via such instruments as e-consultations

should in principle yield more informed policies, thus foster mutual learning and cumulative improvements within the policy-making system as such.

Deliberation

The third normative pursuit associates public consultations with *deliberative democracy*. Deliberation unlike other forms of discourse, proponents argue, catalyses the articulation of conflictual preferences within society motivated by discursive exchanges and genuine consensus formation based on moral, rational, practical judgement, mutual respect and social learning (Dryzek, 1990; Habermas 1984, 1991; Fishkin, 1991; Gutmann and Thomson, 2004). Able to transcend geographic barriers and to accommodate large or specifically targeted groups more efficiently, e-consultations are envisaged to be a step closer to the concept of a virtual agora where ordinary citizens, politicians and experts, who are normally aligned within rigid power-structures, can engage in public debates under one (virtual) roof.

Civic Education

In addition to offering conducive conditions for convenient and inclusive communication practices, e-consultations are also seen as opportunities for civic education. During the e-consultation experience, participants are commonly encouraged to tap into additional resources via customized links and prepared on-line materials to access information about policy issues or topics being discussed. Acknowledging that participants may come from different educational and knowledge backgrounds, enabling the same access to information allows citizens to fill in their informational gaps, to participate on an equal footing and eliminate voter ignorance (Fishkin, 1993). Moreover, informed citizens have been observed to be better equipped to enrich public opinion, increase political attentiveness, make better choices (Dahl, 1989) and contribute to the formation of social capital necessary for a healthy democracy (Dewey, 2004; Putnam, 2000; Callan, 1997). In this sense, e-consultations offer a comparative advantage to their off-line versions where the provision of documents in paper format is costly, organizationally consuming and possibly omitted altogether if budgetary concerns arise.

3 Putting e-consultations into perspective: A meaningful participatory tool?

In summary, proponents above have argued that e-consultations are expected to provide functional and deliberative communication benefits, enhance civic inclusion and citizen-government interactivity, contribute to civic education, inform policies and thereby make public policy making processes more transparent, accountable and legitimate. However, the e-democracy rationale is based on three gross assumptions. First, it assumes that placing the above constellation of actors (citizens, representatives, experts) in consultative settings will by default result in both representatives and the represented listening and learning from each other. It further assumes that effectual deliberative exchanges between politicians and citizens occur and that asymmetry of power and expertise vested in these interactions will not surface and stand in the way. Lastly, it presupposes that through civic inclusion, policies will actually be better. Using evidence from literature as well as e-consultation practice, the following section critically evaluates these underlying assumptions and discusses the realities facing e-consultations vis-à-vis their normative aspirations.

Cost effectiveness and functional benefits

Existing literature and research (though still in its inchoate stages) is cautious when evaluating the value-added(s) of e-consultations. On the one hand, it confirms that on-line consultations do offer functional benefits such as process facilitation, cost-effectiveness and expediency to both governments and citizens (Tolbert and Mossberger, 2006). When compared to e-mail or mail-in replies for example, e-consultations have enabled policy makers to analyze responses faster and allow more efficient sharing of information among participants (Defra, UK: 2004). Commitment to the usage of e-consultations at policy level is also gaining ground as authorities at all levels of government are resorting to their use. In response to the increasing pressure since the 1990s to adopt new approaches to emphasise citizen involvement both upstream and downstream in decision making (OECD, 2001), the opening of policy making processes to the scrutiny of civic inclusion is a fairly new phenomenon. In this sense, it can be argued that the use of e-consultations by governments has contributed to the emergence of a new practice in citizen-government relations and public policy making. However, the question still remains, to what effect?

Deliberation

When the performance of e-consultations is evaluated in view of its deliberation, mutual learning and policy impact effects, the results (so far) are more precarious. As noted earlier, proponents envisioned that e-consultations will not only improve the frequency of government-citizen interactions but also their quality. According to a UK study (Coleman and Ross, 2002), which evaluated ten completed e-consultations, effective deliberative discourse among participants failed to materialize. Instead of forming more rational, informed and factually based arguments, most participants' contributions and exchanges involved opinion-based statements. The e-consultation environment thus failed to provide a more conducive environment for deliberation than its off-line counterparts (Ibid.).

In contrast to these findings, Jensen's (2003) research found that in structured political e-forums participants are more prone to better justify their claims and are more serious about their participation. Structural aspects such as the use of moderators (Hurrell, 2005), requirements for self-identification as opposed to anonymity (Janssen and Kies, 2005: 321), the provision of relevant, user friendly orientation materials before e-consultations and a code of (discursive) conduct, have additionally shown to improve conditions conducive to deliberation. Janssen and Kies (Ibid.) further observed that in e-settings where participants thought they would have an impact on the discussions and where issues were linked to participants' everyday lives, participants were "more ready and willing" to spend time in elaborating and justifying their claims and engage more actively. In view of these observations it can be argued that the mere holding of public consultations on-line without the relevant structural adaptations will not guarantee better conditions for deliberation as initially assumed.

Raising false expectations

In addition to the mixed findings on deliberation effects, others have observed that though political institutions' use of e-consultations has become more widespread and sophisticated over time, the quality of meaningful interactions between the government and citizens via these new instruments has not (Löfgren et al. 1999; Coleman and Götze 2001). Officials' failure to actively participate in the e-consultations they launch (Coleman and Ross, 2002) and this undermines the expected dynamics of mutual learning and reciprocity. Arbitrary (if any) practice of reporting back to citizens on how their inputs were incorporated as policy advice is an issue most countries are still grappling with (Götze, 2001; Hurrell, 2005). The speed and convenience of on-line consultations equally serves as a double edge sword as it generates expectations of quicker feedback from the government and continued participation in respective initiatives. While most e-consultation websites acknowledge peoples' inputs through automated responses, what happens to peoples' policy recommendations once inside the "belly of the beast" is less transparent (BBC, Coleman, 2007).

Insufficient post-consultation structural readiness

The UK government for example has been very successful in launching the *10 Downing St. e-petitions* initiative and stimulating civic participation by receiving signatures from over three million UK citizens (approximately 7% of the British population). By e-participation standards this rate of participation is commendable. However, due to the fact that petitions do not currently have a constitutional grounding, the expectation raised by the initiative – that petitions filed will influence debates in the House of Commons – is misleading. In effect, this well-intended initiative merely provides an online alternative through which citizens can express their complaints and preferences more expeditiously. It also opens a dialogue and a sense of accountability, however limited, between the government and the citizens. At the same time, the current structure leaves little room for guaranteeing "a direct line of causation from a petition to a policy change" (BBC News, 2007).

Similarly, the EU Commission – a proactive user of e-consultations – is equally struggling to identify a process through which inputs generated during e-consultations could be effectively integrated into its policy proposals. Though the heads of EC directorates receive regular reports with citizens' recommendations, a systematic mechanism for processing and reporting back on what is done with the information is still lacking (Boucher, 2008). The European Parliament, however, is more prepared in this regard. Recommendations arising from the *Citizens' Agoras*, "serve not only MEPs in their own reflection but are also brought to the attention of Parliament's committees and/or the other European Union institutions concerned" (www.europarl.europa.eu). For processing petitions, the EP has a standing committee and formally specified set of procedures under Rule 192 in the *Rules and Procedures of the European Parliament*. The effectiveness of this process, however, would require more thorough verification and research.

In view of the above observations (though in dire need of stronger, future empirical backup), if institutions and their representatives a) fail to fully participate and b) do not have the relevant structures in place to effectively report on the way civic inputs (they invite) are channelled as policy advice into the policy-making process then justifications for e-consultations being a meaningful participatory tool tread on thin ground. In other words, if

citizens' preferences are not taken into account in *actual terms* toward policy outcomes then the very exercise of providing such opportunities for interest articulation are futile (Dahl, 1989).

These considerations lead some skeptics to question the extent to which governments' on-line initiatives serve more as political "presentations" (Margolis and Resnick, 2000: 17) or marketing "showcases" (Bentivegna, 2002: 58) rather than genuine attempts to improve the quality of their engagement with citizens. Others warn against political tokenism "where politicians *tokenistically* adopt all kinds of e-initiatives, such as online consultations and discussion fora, but retain existing structures of policy formation, so that the public's input is 'worked around' by powerfully entrenched institutions. Engaging the public in policy-making, they explain, is a transformative process comprising a model of two-way governance which is incompatible with a political culture of bureaucratic elitism" (Coleman and Götze, 2001). Margolis and Resnick (2000) further diffuse e-enthusiasts' optimism by arguing that e-participation initiatives have so far failed to be the locus of new politics in revitalizing citizenship and democracy. Instead, ordinary politics in all their complexity and vitality have colonized virtual reality by making it "resemble the real world". E-participation initiatives have therefore attributed nothing 'new', but rather preserve the top-down *politics as usual*.

Offering a more measured approach, Bimber (1999) points to a transitional, incremental and soft rather than revolutionary effect of e-initiatives in the political arena. He argues that as availability, skills and familiarity with new technologies increase, so will the positive distribution of their impact. Following Bimber's explanation, the current missing links in the way e-consultations are handled could then be attributed also to their novelty. Rather than pursuing symbolic tokenism, political hosts may in fact have genuine intentions in hosting e-consultations but are as yet inexperienced in setting up proper institutional structures and mechanisms to manage the full process.

Inclusion vs. better policies and decision-making

The third assumption presumed by e-consultation enthusiasts is that institutionalising civic inclusion in policy making will by default make the respective policies better. But what is exactly meant by 'better' policies and how can the 'better' be effectively measured? Habermas contends that the growing need to open up the policy and decision making processes to citizens' participation is a countermeasure to the emergence of pluralism and a solution to the 'problem of legitimization'. However, legitimacy, he argues, can only spring from a democratic process that grounds a reasonable presumption for the rational acceptability of outcomes (2005: 386). In other words, *better* here can be taken to mean more procedurally legitimate processes via the inclusion of civic voices and facilitation of transparency in public policy making. However, in Habermas' view, the legitimacy of a democratic process can only be boosted if the outputs (i.e. civic inputs) of the leading process are accepted. Not rhetorically or symbolically, but *rationally*. This further raises the question, does citizens' engagement in e-consultations in the form of discussions and formulation of recommendations, but with the ambiguity of what is done with such inputs, contribute to policy legitimization? Or alternatively, can e-consultations without policy impact satisfy conditions for meaningful on-line participation?

In addition to the question of impact, and without going too much into rhetorical polemics, the normative pretexts for e-consultations, whether effectiveness is desired and how tokenism is to be prevented, requires further unpacking and specification. How much participation is enough, by whom and for what measurable effect in order to satisfy the conditions of procedural legitimacy? When can we conclude that meaningful civic participation has taken place?

4 Evaluating the impact of E-consultations

The last set of questions raises another question we have still not asked - what determines whether an e-consultation is successful? This question can be also rephrased -- what impact do e-consultations have on the political processes they intend to affect?

The conceptualization and measurement of e-consultations' success or impact on political participation and policy making, however, has been unfortunately limited (Coleman and Götze, 2001). Assessments of e-democracy initiatives, not to mention of e-consultations, have not developed as quickly as public and academic debates about their potential benefits (Whyte and MacIntosh, 2002). In practice, the focus has been more on evaluating the procedural 'how tos' than on e-consultation 'thereafters'. Though more conceptual work validated by empirical research is still needed, the following section offers four possible considerations when evaluating e-consultations: the classical cost-benefit assessment, soft vs. hard impacts, participation from within or outside the system, and, lastly, realistic expectations due to complexity of the policy making process.

Cost-benefit assessment involving objectives versus outcomes analysis is one classical tool for various evaluations. While for simpler and smaller scale e-consultations conducted at the local level this may be an effective tool, for large-scale consultations which involve multiple activities simultaneously targeting multi-level outcomes and objectives such analysis may prove to be more challenging to execute. Because consultations concern social processes, involve human beings and occur on-line, a more comprehensive set of considerations need to be taken into account. Smith (2008) for example proposes a benefit-stakeholder approach where, in addition to instrumental cost-benefit analysis, who benefits, short-term/long-term benefits, and political culture (do e-consultations travel well across cultures?) elements are considered. Meanwhile Janssen and Kies (2005) identified more diffusion oriented indicators such as the visibility of consultations in greater public space by allowing media coverage of the consultation.

Tracing the extent to which civic inputs have altered initial policy intentions is another way of evaluating the impact of e-consultations. However, some would argue – namely proponents of deliberation and civic (democratic) education – that impact on policy is not entirely necessary. There are valuable benefits other than impact on policies to be gained in the process. Attitudinal changes and shifts in participants' preferences as a result of becoming better informed are valuable outcomes of well designed deliberations (Fishkin, 1991). Taking part in deliberation where interactive social learning and exposure to new perspectives which citizens may not have obtained otherwise, in this sense, constitute an end in itself. These *soft* (rather than *hard* policy) impacts are seen to contribute to civic mindedness, better understanding of public issues, and to citizens making better choices (Habermas, 1984; Gutmann and Thomson, 2004; Dryzek, 2000).

Deliberation and direct democracy purists, however, disagree with the above contentions. According to them, deliberation in political settings is in principle impossible. For citizens to wield impact through institutional channels linked to state or economic interests is futile. In *formal* spaces where public representatives, experts and citizens interact, relations are inherently asymmetric in authority, expertise, access and leverage to effectively influence decision-making. This associational asymmetry arises in discursive exchanges where conflicting power interests collide and distort communication dynamics in favour of those with power. Deliberation comprised of free exchanges of moral-practical arguments among equals, in formal environments, tends to turn into power vested negotiation and bargaining (Habermas, 2005: 388). Citizens, being on the lower end of the pecking order of power and expertise, not only tend to assume more passive and submissive participatory role in such settings (Button and Mattson, 1999: 625-626) but also come out on the losing side in their capacity to wield influence.

Proponents of institutionalised forms of participation, on the other hand, contend that citizens can be empowered to wield influence and bring about public accountability from within the system. Deliberative interactions are important inside the system as they “can encourage citizens and their representatives to invoke substantive standards to understand, revise, resolve moral conflicts in politics” (Gutmann and Thompson, 2000: 161) and thereby make improvements to the political system. Though participation from within or outside the political system is a perennial question in democratic theory, it is nonetheless an important question to ask when designing e-consultations. What is the optimal way through which public voices can be heard, effective participation attained and how can it exert the relevant amount of pressure on policy and decision making processes?

The *complexity of the policy making process* is another important factor worth considering when casting expectations about what e-consultations *should* and *can* deliver. The lack of feedback on what happens to the policy inputs is one thing and can be fixed. Better reporting after the consultations, and/or the setting of clear and realistic expectations at their beginning for all involved, are two possible solutions. However, the substantive effects of civic inputs on policies are more difficult if not impossible to isolate, even when inputs would be genuinely taken into account by policy makers. A policy making chain involves many steps, stakeholders, budgetary considerations, conceptual complexity, moral conflict, and an inescapable uncertainty about the wisdom of final judgments (Gastil, 2000). All of these intervene in different stages of the policy making process and influence the final policy text. Due to the fact that most e-consultations feature in the beginning stages of agenda setting or proposal formulation stage means that they may undergo a series of modifications. This needs to be explained to participants to prevent unrealistic expectations.

5 Conclusion

Though e-consultations are being increasingly experimented with in political institutional arenas, existing evidence is too nebulous, mostly qualitative and inconclusive about our understanding of e-consultations' effects on the policy process and the extent to which they generate 'meaningful' civic engagement. The field's research novelty is one of the reasons for this. At the same time, the novelty of citizens being invited to the

policy-making table does contribute to the creation of interactive spaces between political institutions and citizens unknown before.

There is less evidence, however, that e-consultations impact reciprocal (government-citizen) learning and policy outputs. Citizens' policy recommendations emerging from e-consultative processes tend to be poorly recognised and are ambiguously integrated in decision making. Feedback on what happens to civic inputs is seldom given. In this sense, the transparency and accountability to be gained from such experiences is undermined. Instead, a politically correct trend of procedurally including citizens in policy processes is proliferated in which citizens are invited to the policy-making table and are consulted, but the extent to which institutions 'learn' and take citizens' inputs seriously in the process is uncertain. Arguably then, e-consultations resemble more facades for political correctness than new meaningful opportunities for civic engagement. However, to fully validate these observations, more empirical, qualitative and comparative research of different e-participatory initiatives over time needs to be undertaken.

Some lessons can also be drawn. By simply hosting e-consultations, it cannot be assumed that legitimacy, transparency and accountability will be automatically achieved. Setting clear, realistic objectives and expectations, and communicating them to all parties concerned is necessary in the planning stages of e-consultation initiatives. Political willingness, political listening, clearly formulated purpose and objectives, effective institutional preparedness and designated lines of authority for processing and responding to inputs, are all essential for effectively implementing e-consultations initiatives (Clift, 2004).

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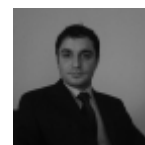
Beyond Theory: e-Participatory Budgeting and its Promises for eParticipation

This paper concerns the use of Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) as a strategy for reinforcing democratic processes - broadly defined as "electronic democracy" practices - and focuses on the use of ICTs in participatory democracy initiatives. By considering the experience of the e-Participatory Budgeting (ePB) in the city of Belo Horizonte (Brazil), the aim is to understand some of the possible prospects and limitations offered by ICTs in participatory processes at the local level. Given that citizen participation in the process of allocation of budgetary resources is becoming increasingly common in Europe and elsewhere, the Belo Horizonte case should be of particular interest to practitioners and academics working in the domain of eParticipation.

Considering the fact that the e-Participatory Budgeting took place in a city with 1.7 million electors and attained a level of participation of nearly 10%, the e-Participatory Budgeting of Belo Horizonte is, by any standards, one of the most significant initiatives in the world in the domain of eDemocracy and eParticipation to have been implemented so far.

Among other findings, this paper argues that even though the use of ICTs was essential to the success of the initiative, other factors were also crucial in accomplishing such a level of participation, notably: i) the scope of the public works at stake; ii) the salience of the initiative and iii) citizens' perception of their actual impact in the decision-making process.

It is expected that the outcomes of this incipient research will contribute to the literature on electronic and participatory democracy, as well as provide a policy evaluation of the use of ICTs at the local level in a large-scale participatory initiative.



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So what are challenges practitioners are facing when trying to improve the user experience by lowering administrative burden and increasing user satisfaction?



1 eDemocracy and Participatory Budgeting¹

Since the 1990s, the use of Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) in democratic processes has been broadly defined as “electronic democracy”, or “eDemocracy”. Historically, the idea of communication technologies as a means to enhance political processes is a phenomenon that has always succeeded technical innovation: the “saintsimoniens” of the 19th century saw the telegraph as a way of establishing a universal communion between the Occident and the Orient (Vedel, 2003). In a context of perceived crisis of representative democracy (Trechsel, 2004), as the Internet became popular and accessible in the 1990s, new expectations were raised. Since ICTs are beginning to offer a reliable means of communication, decentralized warehousing capacities and lowered costs, the most optimistic scholars will argue that democratic processes and government efficacy can be altered in a revolutionary way. (Levy, 1997; Castells, 2003).

From this perspective, the local level is considered as a privileged arena. As a political *locus* where citizens are more affected by decisions - and by consequence, more inclined to participate in the decision-making processes (Pailliarth, 2000) - the use of ICTs at the local level in order to foster democracy is envisioned as remarkably promising (Borja & Castels, 1999; Wolton, 2000). In this sense, the Internet and other ICTs systems potentially allow entities, institutions, city administrations and individuals to share the same virtual location as in a revived *agora*, consequently optimizing a city's capacity to face challenges (Levy, 1995), with innovation becoming a vital means for a renewed participation in the urban domain, the *urbes*. In a more pragmatic approach, it is also expected that eDemocracy pioneering practices will tend to take place at the local level due to matters of general costs, since it presents a more controllable political and social environment, where achieving innovations requires fewer resources and where the costs of failure tend to be lower (Pratchett, 2006).

In its turn, participatory budgeting (PB) - where citizens participate in the decision-making process of budget allocation - has been considered as one of the main innovations that aim to reinforce accountability at the local and regional levels. In this respect, it is clear that the two concepts - PB and eDemocracy - have converging expectations for, if not a renewal of democracy, a reinforcement of democratic practices, with the local level as a privileged arena.

In this sense, it is not a coincidence that the use of ICTs is increasingly incorporated into PB practices, and Europe is no exception to this. In the UK, where the government expects to have PBs implemented at all administrations at the local level by 2012, for instance, local authorities from Barnet, Northamptonshire and Maidstone have used an online budget simulator to consult citizens on their preferences with regards to the allocation of the budget. In Germany, after a successful pilot that took place in Berlin-Lichtenberg in 2005 where the local council received budget proposals from citizens online, the city has ever since repeated the operation². Since then innovative initiatives have been conducted in the cities of Bergheim, Cologne, Hamburg, Freiburg and Leipzig³. To illustrate the richness of these initiatives both in terms of technological solutions and participatory design, in 2008 the city of Freiburg combined the use of a budget planner with an online moderated deliberation where the results were aggregated in wikis and edited by the participants. Also, following the latest trends in gender mainstreaming on PB initiatives, gender-specific issues related to the city's budget were addressed in the initiative. In a creative combination of online and offline methods, in 2006 the city of Modena in Italy set an experimental exercise in which during PB face-to-face assemblies, citizens who were not present at the assembly could send suggestions by e-mail to be discussed by the assembly as they watched live video streaming of the meeting. In addition, citizens could follow up the process of PB via SMS sent by the municipality. The use of SMS as a means to reach a broader and younger audience has also been deployed in other Italian PB processes, such as those of Rome, Bergamo and Reggio Emilia. Finally, online voting in Italian PB exercises can be illustrated by the cases of Vimercate and Parma. In the Parmesan website dedicated to the PB, citizens have access to the information about the PB process and to all of the proposals for the allocation of budget. An online map spatializes the information allowing citizens to visualize the location of the proposed projects and to access further information about them (e.g. purpose, scope). Votes can be cast online by providing ID number and date of birth, which allows the system to identify the eligible voters, i.e. Parma residents. In Spain, a more intensive use of ICTs - other than simple information provision - concerning

1 To embrace a wide variety of initiatives that are of interest in this research, we define participatory budgeting as *the participation of citizens in the decision-making process of budget allocation and monitoring public spending. Participation may take various forms, from effective decision-making power in the allocation of resources to more modest initiatives that confer voice during the development and / or allocation of the budget.*

2 See Caddy, Peixoto & McNeal, 2008.

3 The author thanks Rolf Luehrs (TuTech GmbH) for providing an updated list of German cases.

citizens' participation in the process of budget allocation have been identified in the cities of Albacete, Cordoba, Getafe, Jun, Petrer and Jerez⁴. For instance, in the city of Getafe in 2008, in one of the districts of the city, citizens were allowed to watch live video streaming of the PB meeting and to cast their vote online. In the municipal council of Jun, the sessions dedicated to voting on the budget are streamed online while citizens are consulted on their priorities with regards to the allocation of the budget.

Even though the different cases cited above vary enormously among themselves in terms of objectives, impacts, prospects and limits, they are illustrative of the richness of initiatives that are currently taking place in Europe where ICTs are used to support citizens' participation in the process of budget allocation. Investigating the possible effects of the use of ICTs in PB does not imply a normative agenda where ICTs are considered a panacea to participatory practices. Rather, it consists of observing and analyzing practices that are beginning to take place, albeit in embryonic stages of development.

This paper, part of a broader research agenda, looking at the paradigmatic case of Belo Horizonte, Brazil, is an initial effort to understand the possible prospects and limitations of the use of ICTs in participatory processes at the local level, bridging the gap in the literature between eParticipation and PB, as well as providing eParticipation policy-makers with empirically grounded policy lessons in the domain.

2 The e-Participatory Budgeting (ePB) of Belo Horizonte

The city of Belo Horizonte (Brazil) is the capital of the state of Minas Gerais, with a population of 2,350,564 inhabitants and 1,732,606 electors. Since 1993 the city has implemented its PB, which can be roughly described as a process that consists of a series of assemblies that are held enabling citizens to allocate budgetary resources and scrutinize public expenditures. For didactical purposes, the traditional (offline) PB of Belo Horizonte can be synthesized in three main phases:

- 41 district assemblies opened to every citizen of 16 years and over pre-select a maximum of 25 public works for each district. In these assemblies citizens are also elected as district delegates (neighbourhood representatives).
- Tours are organized during which the district delegates visit together the sites of the 25 pre-selected works. These visits aim to give the delegates a better understanding of the demands that are made across the whole district.
- District delegates deliberate and choose a maximum of 14 works per district to be executed by the city administration. A smaller number of delegates are then elected to ensure the follow up and oversight of the execution of the budget and the public works.

In 2006, along with the beginning of the regular PB as explained above, the city administration of Belo Horizonte launched the *Digital Participatory Budgeting* (e-PB). Independent of the budget of US\$43 million allocated for the traditional PB, a fund of US\$11 million was allocated to the new initiative. The e-PB consists of a scheme where citizens registered as electors in Belo Horizonte, independent of their place of residency in the city, vote exclusively online for 1 out of 4 public works for each of the nine districts of the city. According to the administration, the launching of the initiative had three main drivers: i) to modernize its PB through the use of ICTs; ii) to increase citizens' participation in the PB process and iii) to broaden the scope of public works that are submitted to voting.

Traditionally, the level of public participation in PB processes is very low, composed in general of citizens of an advanced age and of lower socio-economic background. According to data provided by the city of Belo Horizonte, in years precedent to the launch of the e-PB, an average of 1.5% of the city's electors have participated in the PB assemblies. Hence, one of the objectives of the e-PB was to increase participation in general and to simultaneously integrate a new profile of participants, particularly those from middle class backgrounds and younger citizens. In this sense, the Internet was seen as a means to increase participation by reducing the costs incurred by citizens (e.g. time, transport) as a result of participating in the PB. In other words, if in the traditional PB citizens must attend meetings at a certain time and place, with the ePB citizens were free to vote online within a period of 42 days.

As it is known, the desire to innovate may be in itself a driver for the use of ICTs in public governance (Caddy, Peixoto & McNeil, 2007). This aspiration for novelty and originality, which became clear in interviews with

4 The author thanks Jesus Rios (Universidad Rey Juan Carlos) for the provision of complementary information on the Spanish cases.

members of the administration, was also reflected in the communication campaign and in official discourses concerning the e-PB, where mentions of the pioneering character of the initiative were commonplace.

Another driver behind the e-PB was the creation of a participatory process where citizens could vote for public works considered to be of interest to a wider public. For this reason, in the e-PB a citizen could vote not only for his/her district but also for the other districts. Furthermore, in the traditional PB, the larger number of public works that can be selected per districts (14 max.) leads to further fragmentation of the available budget. Such a fact renders difficult the election of public works of greater scope and cost.

Nevertheless, citizens frequently demand such works on occasions outside of the process of the PB. In the e-PB citizens could select only one public work per district with a budget of US\$1.2 million allocated to each district¹⁵, in order to address demands of greater scope. As an example, in the district of Barreiro, the following four choices were offered to voters: to build a new public sports complex; to build a new library; to renew one of the area's main streets; or to regenerate the district's commercial centre.

3 The e-Participatory Budgeting Platform

Following an intensive promotion of the initiative in the city, citizens over 16 years old registered on the Belo Horizonte electoral roll could vote on the Internet by accessing the e-voting platform through the city's official website and by providing the number of their voters' ID used in Brazilian elections. The rich provision of information on the different works proposed and the descriptive effort employed by the city administration - where the website would present text, pictures and videos - was intended to provide a proper representation of the works, by presenting citizens with images and concepts consistent with the reality of the proposals. Also, for citizens wanting to make further enquiries about the process of the PB, a contact email address for the administration was provided. In order to ensure that citizens would get a timely response to the e-mails sent to the e-PB staff, one person was specifically designated to respond to such messages. This initiative guaranteed an optimal level of responsiveness, where the majority of e-mails received a timely and personalized response.

Furthermore, an online forum was available. Participation in the forum was open to all citizens, where 9 different threads referred to each of the districts. Users could post anonymously simply by clicking on their chosen topic. However, moderation was considered necessary by the administration in order to avoid misuse and to keep the focus of the discussions on subjects related to the e-PB. In this next section, we shall analyze the use of the online forum, before passing to a more in-depth presentation and analysis of the results of the PB.

4 Online deliberation

Even though active participation in the forum was low (a total of 1210 posts), all posts could be seen without logging in by all of those who accessed the link to the forums, where the number of readers was significantly higher than the number of posts. In this respect, active participants in the forums were aware that their comments were likely to be read by many other potential voters that were not actively participating in the forums. Thus, links posted by supporters would lead readers to other web addresses (e.g. websites, blogs, youtube videos) voluntarily created by supporters, where arguments were presented in a more structured format and supported by different resources, such as pictures and videos. In addition, apart from overcoming technical constraints inherent to the forums, such a strategy allowed supporters to redirect potential voters to a sphere where their arguments were less likely to be publicly disputed and where the information provided was not controlled by a moderator considered to be impartial.

Another strategy employed by active users of the forum - those who write a post - consisted of bypassing the moderation in order to make other comments that did not directly concern the e-PB. Consequently, these users, after having a few comments refused, developed the strategy of making combined comments - that is, sending a post where they would make a comment directly related to the process of the e-PB and in the same post make other demands that, if were made separately, would have been refused by the moderator. These 'combined comments' however, did not have any substantial effect on biasing the main focus of the forums, as the majority of the discussions concerned the public works of the e-PB. Strategic practices such as the "combined comments" and using the forum to redirect users to other links cannot be seen as jeopardizing the online debate provided by the e-voting platform: it simply illustrates the unexpected dynamics that such a process may engender, and they are rather proof of the vitality of the process.

These practices also demonstrate the active users' awareness that - despite the relatively low number of active users - the forum was read by a much broader audience and that such a space could be an important resource to win votes and gain support. As to the recurrent argument that forums that allow anonymous participation are

not bound by the normal conventions of reciprocity, blocking offensive posts was rarely necessary and was a minor part of the moderator's work. Needless to say, potential offenders that could jeopardize the debate might have been discouraged either by knowing beforehand that the forums were moderated or by having their posts blocked at their first attempt.

In the light of the arguments above, evidence suggests that the online forum was, overall, an environment of rational, argumentative and reflective debates where active participants would persuade and be persuaded of the importance of one public work over another and where readers - in larger numbers - could be informed on concurrent perspectives.

5 Unprecedented levels of participation

The total number of votes was 503,266 with a total number of 172,938 voters. Such a difference between the number of voters and number of votes is understood by the fact that voters were allowed to vote up to nine times (9 districts) as long as they voted for only one work per district. These numbers therefore correspond to a participation level of 9.98% of electors from the city and 7 times more participants than in the traditional (offline) PB of the same year (1.46%) in Belo Horizonte.

Total of registered voters	172,938
Total of e-votes	503,266

However, what else can be inferred from the available data regarding the votes? Considering that electors were allowed to cast nine votes each (one for each of the 9 districts), there was a clear variance concerning the amount of votes cast by each voter. More than half of the voters (52.1%) chose to vote for only one district, 15.26% chose to vote for two districts and 6.57% for three districts, with a total of nearly two thirds of voters (73.61%) choosing to vote for between one and three districts only.

Also, between those who chose to vote for one district and those who chose to vote for eight districts, there is a decreasing trend, with this pattern being altered only by those who voted for all nine districts. Despite the fact that the available data does not permit an in-depth explanation of these numbers with regard to voters' motivations, the fact that most voters chose to vote for a few districts suggests that citizens were not sufficiently concerned with voting for public works that were not related to their immediate reality.

Number of votes cast	Number of voters	%
1	92590	52.1 %
2	27123	15.26 %
3	11678	6.57 %
4	6459	3.63 %
5	3251	1.83 %
6	1790	1.01 %
7	687	0.39 %
8	484	0.27 %
9	28876	16.25 %

In other words, despite the fact that one of the criteria for choosing public works was that they were considered to be of interest to a wider public, *the majority of voters decided to vote "locally"*. In this respect, to a great extent, the number of districts voted for per voter was inversely proportional to the costs of informing the votes. It was also inversely proportional to the time spent on voting, although to a lesser extent. Qualitative data seem to confirm this hypothesis, where citizens interviewed claim that they did not vote for works in other districts because they were not concerned about them and/or did not have "time to form an opinion on distant" district matters, or simply because they were "in a hurry".

As to the socio-economic factors, if one considers the average number of votes per capita received by each district and its average income per capita, no correlation is found⁵. In other words, at the aggregate level there

5 $R^2=0.036$

is no relationship concerning the average district income level and the amount of votes received. Thus, considering the available data, there is no evidence, for instance, that districts of higher economic status were overrepresented in the e-PB, given that Internet access is strongly determined by, among other factors, income. Two hypotheses may be drawn for results such as these: 1) those with access to the Internet in the districts of lower income are the main voters; 2) the efforts of the administration and of engaged citizens to provide Internet access alleviated possible effects of the digital divide in the voting process.

Regretfully, the lack of data at the individual level does not permit the confirmation or refutation of either of these hypotheses. According to data provided by the city administration, there was a total of 192,229 visits to the e-PB website. If compared to the number of votes (172,938) one can state that no more than 19,291 voters may have accessed the website more than once. Hence, the highest possible percentage of voters who may have accessed the website more than once - to access information, to finish casting their votes¹⁹, or to use the other tools offered (e.g. forum) - is no more than 11.6%.

Concerning the geographical location of those who accessed the website, 119,903 hits were made from the city of Belo Horizonte, with the remaining hits originating from other cities, states and countries. In this respect, it can be stated that a minimum of 30.7% of votes were cast from outside the city. In other words, nearly one third of votes – at least - were cast by people who would not have been able to vote if it had not been for the possibility of remote voting provided by the use of ICTs.

6 Leveraging Salience: the Communication Campaign and Social Mobilization

One element that was considered important for the success of the e-PB was the city's communication campaign, which focused on the initiative and its novelty factor. In this sense, as mentioned before, the pioneering character of the initiative was underlined in most communications made by the city. Local radio, TV and newspapers extensively publicized the initiative, before and during the period of voting. Furthermore, flyers describing the initiative were distributed in the city and to community leaders, and posters were displayed on buses, public service buildings and areas of generally greater public circulation. This communication tended to explain the initiative, the public works to be voted on and the places where citizens could vote in case they had no access to the Internet.

In addition to this institutional campaign led by the city administration, an independent and vigorous movement of social mobilization took place. In this respect, several initiatives can be identified which represent independent campaigns led by neighbourhood associations, religious organizations, small local businesses, and civil society in general.

Stakeholders affirm that, in Belo Horizonte, this mobilization of civil society was impressive by any standards, with interviewees unanimously judging this canvassing campaign as a determining factor in voter turnout. In this respect, despite the difficulty of making any accurate statement about the effects of such mobilization on the e-PB, evidence offers some promising paths for identifying factors that increase public participation in initiatives similar to the e-PB.

7 The traditional PB and the ePB: comparing apples and pears?

As mentioned above, the level of participation in the e-PB was seven times higher if compared to the traditional PB. Such a level of participation becomes particularly striking if one considers the amount of resources allocated to each of the initiatives, where a much smaller budget leads to a level of participation almost 7 times higher.

	Budget	Participation
Traditional PB	US\$ 43 MILLION	1.46%
ePB	US\$ 11 MILLION	9.98%

There is no doubt that the Internet dramatically reduced the costs of participation, considering that citizens could vote from virtually anywhere and during a 42 day period, and this should be considered as one of the decisive factors in the differing levels of participation between the e-PB and the traditional PB. But, is this comparison properly addressed? Are the new technologies the only factors responsible for such an outstanding increase in participation? The similarity of the two terms employed must not mislead observers, where the e-PB may be considered as the traditional PB with the addition of an "e": differences go far beyond the deployment of Internet voting. Worthwhile comparison can only be made if we consider both initiatives in terms of channels of citizen participation in the decision-making process of budget allocation.

In terms of participatory design, the differences between the two processes are numerous. To begin with, let us consider the scope of the public works involved in each process. One of the criteria for the selection of public works in the e-PB was that they were of larger scope and value than those in the traditional PB. In this sense, even if it is not possible to assess the relevance of the public works proposed by the e-PB compared to the works of the traditional PB, there is no doubt that the e-PB public works enjoyed much more visibility.

Secondly, let us consider the differences in the processes of agenda-setting - that is, the process of choosing public works that are to be submitted to a final vote. Whereas in the traditional PB a bottom-up movement characterizes the process, where citizens directly preselect the works during assemblies, in the e-PB the choice of works was made in a top-down manner, with the participation of the administration and the district delegates aiming to identify more general demands. Conversely, it is in the e-PB that the final and definitive vote is made directly by citizens, whereas in the traditional PB the delegates make the final and binding vote. As a result, in the e-PB there was a decrease in the costs of participation alongside an increase in decision-making power at the individual level.

As to the existence of structured instances of deliberation, in the traditional PB, a deliberative process always takes place before a vote, with the entitled voters participating – either actively or passively – in the deliberative sessions (e.g. assembly, visits to the sites), whereas in the e-PB participation in the online forum – the only deliberative instance – was not a requisite for voting. Last, but not least, if in the traditional PB citizens have autonomy in the allocation of budget according to their own criteria (i.e. allocating different values to different public works) in the e-PB the budgets gave a fixed and equal value to every public work. In this respect, unlike the traditional PB, the e-PB did not function as an exercise resulting in an initial budget demystification/literacy.

Considering all of the above, it is clear that the differences between the two processes go well beyond the simple use of ICTs, where structural changes seem to have had an impact on the turnout level. As one citizen suggested, the e-PB - if compared to the traditional model – is “more participation and less participatory”. What are the implications of this, and how should this lack of a participatory dimension be addressed?

In this respect, the e-PB in the city of Belo Horizonte must not be considered as an initiative that competes with the traditional PB, and the existence of its own independent budget is proof of this. Rather, it is part of a global conception of citizen participation in the city, along with other initiatives such as the traditional PB. Thus, the e-PB should be seen as a complementary channel for citizen participation and not as a replacement of the existing practices. In fact, the e-PB and the PB are complementary initiatives where the relative flaws of the e-PB (e.g. less deliberative) could be easily addressed through the adoption of existing structures from the traditional PB. For instance, if the pre-selection of public works in the e-PB was made using a top-down approach, a stage such as the assemblies of the traditional PB could be included in future e-PBs in order to ensure a more deliberative, bottom-up selection process. Finally, the use of participative web tools⁶ along with traditional forms of interaction could reduce the transactional costs of making the selection process more collaborative. Thus, citizens, civil society organizations and city administrations could work collectively on the pre-selection of public works to be voted for and on the dynamics of the e-PB itself.

8 Final considerations

Despite the lack of individual level data concerning voters and the motivation of those who participated in the e-PB, some preliminary analyses may be carried out in order to understand the reasons behind such an elevated level of participation. In this way, one can suggest possible explanations for the increase in public participation in the e-PB, which simultaneously offer some leads to those interested in implementing successful eParticipation initiatives:

Increasing the “window of time” for voting reduces the cost of participation for citizens. By extending the voting time frame, citizens are able to vote at their convenience. In the case of Belo Horizonte, citizens had the opportunity to vote over a period of 42 days, where some were even able to vote at any time of the day or night.

Widespread access to voting points also reduces participation costs, provoking an increase in the number of voters. In addition to the traditional points of Internet access (e.g. home, work), the 187 voting points strategically placed in the town, a mobile voting unit targeting relevant regions, and the computers made available by supporters may be considered as factors that helped to alleviate the effects of the digital divide and, at the same time, prompted citizens to cast their vote.

6 See *Participative Web and User-Created Content*. OECD, 2007

The scope and relevance of the benefits: The budget of US\$1.2 million for a single work was unprecedented and the scope of the proposed works much larger than before, where many of the works proposed corresponded to recurrent demands from citizens. In this sense, one might hypothesize that such relevance had an effect on citizens' participation, where the assessment of the relative importance and benefit of the proposed public works would influence the decision to participate or not, and, if so, to what extent: either by simply casting a vote or actively supporting a particular public work by engaging in canvassing campaigns.

The salience of the initiative: The intense communication deployed by the city administration before and during the voting period, and the canvassing campaign organized by supporters, is considered by the unanimity of the stakeholders as one of the main explanations of the high turnout of voters. The novelty and curiosity that voting through the Internet may have provoked amongst citizens are also suggested as possible factors that influenced the number of identified voters. However, despite the effects of the novelty of voting through the Internet, it is important to underline that Brazilian elections have been fully electronic (though not through the Internet) since 2000, which could attenuate this novelty effect.

The binding vote: experience shows that citizens are quite sensitive to the measure of their impact on decision-making processes (Caddy, Peixoto & McNeil, 2007). In this respect, citizens are concerned by the extent to which their participation is significant: in other words, whether they are simply being consulted or if their participation will be really be taken into account. Thus, considering that the e-PB was to generate binding effects, with the results of the voting being the only and decisive factor, citizens may have perceived it as a unique opportunity to participate directly in a budgetary decision of large scope, considering that, even in the traditional PB, the final vote is made indirectly by the sub-district delegates.

Despite having explored above the factors that one could pertinently hypothesize as contributing to the high turnout level, due to the absence of specific data, it is not possible to evaluate the extent of the influence of each factor, or to identify which are more important. The absence of a specific evaluation during the e-PB of the profile of voters rules out a specification of the determinants behind the decision to participate or how these determinants operate.

However, one can safely hypothesize that the ease with which participants could vote – with the Internet as an enabler – and the salience of the initiative along with the citizens' view of their own participation as decisive in the process, were definitive factors in the attainment of such a high level of participation. Despite its novelty and relative flaws, the e-PB is a unique experience and an initiative that cannot be ignored by academics and practitioners in Europe and elsewhere interested in the use of ICTs as a means to enhance participation. Its future developments should be followed closely.

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Family Policies – A Promising Field of eParticipation

Three cities in Germany – Hamburg, Berlin and Munich – have opened up a new field for eParticipation. They initiated a dialogue on the Internet to ask their citizens what family-friendly living in each of the cities should look like. All three discourses – conducted between November 2005 and November 2008 – provide comparable and interesting results on four aspects: context, course, clients and results.

One of the most promising results of all three debates is that the issue attracts a user group which is not a majority in political discussions. The discussions in Hamburg, Munich and in Berlin were able to motivate female participants in particular to have their say and to dominate the discourse. This is an encouraging result for politics and eParticipation in general. Politicians are able to get into contact with a group which is more difficult to reach and involve in the political process. By addressing this topic, Hamburg, Munich and Berlin have taken a big step forward in the field of eParticipation.

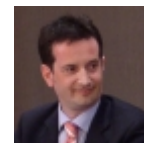
As a result, it is to be expected that other European cities and municipalities will take up this topic, not only to promote eParticipation but also to help politicians harness expert local knowledge in the interests of successful and sustainable family policy.



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e-participation, demos, e-democracy, moderated online discourses, family discourses, family friendly living

“ Politicians are able to get into contact with a group which is more difficult to reach and involve in the traditional political process. ”

1 Introduction

The ageing population in Europe is one of the biggest challenges European societies will have to face in the forthcoming decades. Higher life expectancy coupled with a decrease in birth rates will change life in Europe tremendously and challenge the economic, political and social basis of municipalities and cities alike. Cities and municipalities will have to compete for inhabitants – and are indeed already doing so. For cities, young families are a target group of special interest. By establishing a family-friendly policy, cities could dissuade young families from moving out of town and encourage them to settle down in the city itself.

But what does family friendliness mean? What is important for families? How do they want to live and how do their ideas match the current situation in their city? Where is there room for improvement and which problems have to be solved?

Answers to questions like these by members of the public yield interesting information for a city's future policy and are an important part of active public participation. Converting this kind of participation into eParticipation adds value to the process. Hurdles are much lower, since families are free to participate whenever and wherever they choose without the effort of integrating participation into their family's schedule. However, this topic seems untypical of eParticipation approaches, which usually address urban planning or political issues and attract more men than women.

Three big cities in Germany decided to meet this challenge: Berlin, Hamburg and Munich opened a dialogue on the Internet to ask their citizens what family-friendly living in each of the cities should look like. Conducted between November 2005 and November 2008 and using the same technical basis and discourse methodology in each city, these three examples of eParticipation provide comparable and interesting results. In the following article we will provide a description of the three online discourses by comparing four aspects: (2) context, (3) course, (4) participants and (5) results in each of the discussions.

2 Context

Berlin, Hamburg and Munich are the three biggest cities in Germany, located in the north (Hamburg), south (Munich) and central eastern region (Berlin).

The first to attempt this Internet-based family involvement was Hamburg, where in 2003 the public administration was looking for a new topic to link with its first online consultation on its guiding principle for the future: "Metropolitan Hamburg – Growing City" (see Lührs, R., et al., 2003). During this time the government's family policy was criticised in public and in the media. The senate – led by the Christian Democratic Party – claimed in its political guiding principle for Hamburg to want to make the city more attractive to families. At the same time as this aim was stated, the senate agreed several reforms which led to an increased financial burden, especially on families. Such contradictory policy provoked negative criticism and probably explains why the senate actively chose the topic of family friendliness to initiate a new city-wide online discussion. In long and intense discussions with selected administrative bodies, the relationship between family and living was chosen as a topic suitable for an Internet discussion with the public, experts and politicians. The online discussion in Hamburg (available under <http://www.familienleben-hamburg.de/>) started on 17 October 2005 and ended four weeks later on 12 November following almost a year of conceptualisation and preparation.

In preparation for the discussion, representatives of all seven districts and the authorities involved came together with members of TuTech Innovation GmbH who were in charge of the project's realisation and facilitation. Scientific advice was given by the IES (Institut für Entwicklungsplanung und Strukturforschung), a private institute of the University of Hannover. The key task of these round table talks was the development of a common understanding about procedures and goals. The district representatives were especially interested in how families' needs related to certain residential areas. Thus families were seen as experts on their home districts and the local context of the discussion was interpreted as one of the most interesting and promising aspects. Finally, the discussion led to guidelines for a family-friendly city of Hamburg being drawn up by citizens and published and presented to the interested public, authorities and the senate.

In the end, Hamburg's family discourse inspired Munich and Berlin to follow this example of actively involving their citizens in the development of family policies.

In Munich, the Bavarian capital, the city council set about developing a new guideline for family and child policy in 2004 to improve quality of life. The guideline was passed by the city's council after an intensive phase of public hearings and interaction with different social participants such as companies, churches, associations and the families themselves between March and October 2006. During this period, a number of information days for

experts in this area were announced, followed by a phase for the general public. The online discourse was part of this public phase (together with additional information days) and the results of the debate as well as of the other offline events were integrated into the “1. Münchner Kinder- und Familienforum” (First children’s and family forum of Munich) in October 2006, which led to a revised version of the guideline for family and child policy.

In 2008 the “Berliner Beirat für Familienfragen” (Berlin’s Advisory Board on Family Issues) announced a tender to run an online discussion about family friendliness in Berlin based on the model of the Hamburg discourse. The “Berliner Beirat” has 23 members from the fields of politics, science, economy, churches and associations. The counsellors’ tasks include the following:

- providing consultation to the senate regarding issues of family policy
- providing new impulses to the senate for family policy measures
- public relations
- providing consultation for regional initiatives and
- compiling the next family report for Berlin

Family reports are an established tool in the Federal Republic of Germany available for each of the three administrative tiers (state, Land, municipality). In general, they should fulfil three purposes: 1) to inform the public about the families’ situation, 2) to inform politics and administration about needs for action and 3) to evaluate socio-political measures. The current report has to be finalised by 2010 and data is collected during the whole parliamentary term. The report will focus on the parties concerned, based on dialogue with families themselves and representatives of family-related associations and organisations. The DEMOS discourse “Living Together in Berlin” (available under <http://www.zusammen-leben-in-berlin.de>) is an integral part of the forthcoming family report and its results will be presented in the final political document.

It is remarkable that in each of the three cases – and especially in Berlin and Munich – the results of the online debate were part of a larger political initiative. In all three cities a strong political will supported the conduct of the discourses, and the administrations’ interest in the public’s local knowledge was clearly communicated and not questioned by the participants.

3 Course

The discourses in Berlin and Munich were inspired by the first debate in Hamburg. All of them were conducted by TuTech Innovation GmbH using the DEMOS concept and technology for facilitation (see Lührs, R., et al. 2003). But of course the five years between the first and the latest online debate led to important improvements to the technical platform, especially with regard to so-called Web 2.0 features such as wikis. Nevertheless, all three discussions were structured according to the three-phase model (broadening, deepening, consolidation) of the underlying DEMOS participation methodology, but each was adapted to take account of individual frameworks and conditions.

In the first phase in Hamburg, the public were invited to explain how they thought a family-friendly city and family-friendly living should look. A web form was integrated on the platform enabling participants to collect indicators for family friendliness. These indicators were aggregated into a checklist for the second phase. During the second phase, the list was used to discuss exemplary districts differing in terms of location and type of housing. These were pre-selected and presented with illustrative data and pictures and edited extensively. The discussion was further enriched by the online diary of two mothers with small children. Both writers had moved recently and described their daily life with children either in a central, urban district of Hamburg or at the rural periphery. Their reports specified advantages and disadvantages of both ways of life in an entertaining and attractive way, inspiring the forum’s discussions. Additionally, two well-known television presenters from Hamburg – both mothers – took part in live discussions on the platform. The third phase within the DEMOS process was used to pool the results of the second phase into a final discussion for consolidation. Results of this discussion have been compiled into the “Bürgerleitfaden für den familienfreundlichen Wohnort Hamburg” – “A Citizens’ Guideline for Family-friendly Living in Hamburg”. This manual includes a check-list for residential areas, illustrates family-friendly living using examples of different residential districts and provides information and advice for tenants, landlords, planners, politicians and administrations.

The discourse in Munich was structured in a similar way. In the first and broadening phase, members of the public were asked to identify and discuss the most important aspects of a child-friendly and family-friendly city and explain their priorities. The whole area of family policy was discussed and suggestions made. Based on these contributions, several thematic sub-forums were opened in the second phase. In contrast to the Hamburg

debate, the sub-forums were not pre-selected by the facilitators but rather chosen from the most important issues in phase 1, namely “Child Care and Education”, “Recreation and Play”, “Housing” and “Traffic”. The goal at this stage of the discourse was the development of concrete ideas for improvement, documented in wiki-like editable documents. Also nine theme days were offered on the platform where different experts from the municipality of Munich held consultation sessions. Each consultation lasted three hours and was related to a specific topic such as family and health, educational counselling, child care or housing. These discussions were perceived by the users as pleasant and helpful and the most suitable way of conducting a fruitful dialogue between citizens and government.

Also during the second phase, members of the public started to develop 36 concrete suggestions on family-related issues, covering a range of topics from pets to health. With these collaboratively developed proposals, participants helped to generate a condensed and usable overview of the discussion results. The third phase was used – again as in the Hamburg approach – to finalise the existing proposals and concept while at the same time finally evaluating and ranking them. With the help of the evaluation, the suggestions were placed in a hierarchy, mirroring the rating and the level of elaboration within the list. Heading this list was the suggestion for improved child care in Munich. Here some of the aspects mentioned show an in-depth knowledge of the local situation. For example, one or two districts with a very low level of kindergarten places were named together with cleared building plots owned by the municipality in suggestions to improve the situation.

The debate in Berlin combined elements of the two preceding discourses. The general topic still concentrated on family-friendly living, but was extended to include all kinds of cohabitation and social life. Thus information about the socio-demographic characteristics of Berlin was presented, including information on age clusters, families and on people from Berlin with an immigrant background. The first phase was used to collect topics to structure the second phase and to detect what were the important issues for family-friendly living in Berlin. Apart from the discussion forum, people were able to use a web form for proposals and describe briefly what in their opinion would help to improve family-friendliness in Berlin. Every participant with an account was able to vote for each of the suggestions in order to establish a ranking of the submitted proposals. The second phase was once again used to discuss certain issues more intensively in specified sub-forums. The topics for those thematic forums deduced from phase 1 were “Child Care and Education”, “Residential Areas and Traffic” “Recreation and Pleasure”. In addition to the sub-forums, the list of proposals was kept open and running, pending evaluation and augmentation. The facilitators of the discourse sought to synchronise the proposal list with the forum discussion by introducing the suggestions into the appropriate sub-forum. Discussion in every forum was continuously summarised and edited by topic in a total of 23 wikis.

As in Hamburg and in Munich, live discussions were also conducted in Berlin. The first of this kind reflected the special stance of the discourse in Berlin, with the migration psychologist Prof. Dr. Haci-Halil Uslucan addressing the users first, followed by Prof. Dr. Zöllner, senator for education, science and research, who discussed the future development of schools with the participants. Representatives of four different parties in Berlin’s parliament (and experts in the field of education and/or family issues) completed the live discussions in Berlin. The discussion with the senator attracted the biggest attention, followed by a lively discussion with invited members of the local parliament. Though the discussions lasted only one and a half hours, their effect continued to spread: one participant reported in the forum that she had made contact with Prof. Uslucan to continue work on certain issues.

4 Participants

In Hamburg 479 participants registered for the discourse, in Munich 321 and in Berlin 318. While in Hamburg and Munich each registered participant published nearly the same amount of contributions on average (4.6 and 4.8) the involvement of the public in Berlin was less than half (2.0 contributions on average per user).

	Registered users	Contributions
Hamburg	479	2192
Munich	321	1533
Berlin	318	635

Table 1: Participation rates in Hamburg, Munich and Berlin

If one looks at the number of registered users, the impression is ambivalent. The number of registered users might be comparably high for local participation projects, on the other hand it does not fulfil the early promise of eDemocracy when one takes into account that these online discussions were conducted in the three biggest cities in Germany.

Of interest is the question of the socio-demographical structure of the participating groups and whether they show similar characteristics or vary between the different cities.

First of all, the analysis of the data revealed that most of the participants in each of the discourses were female (Hamburg 62%:38%, Berlin 65%:35%, Munich 77%:23%). This result corresponds on the one hand with the underlying discussion topic, family-friendliness, which is still associated much more strongly with women than with men, but on the other it confirms the assumption that the proportion of women and men in Internet discourses depends much more on the issue under discussion than the medium itself. And nevertheless, male participants were not completely marginalised.

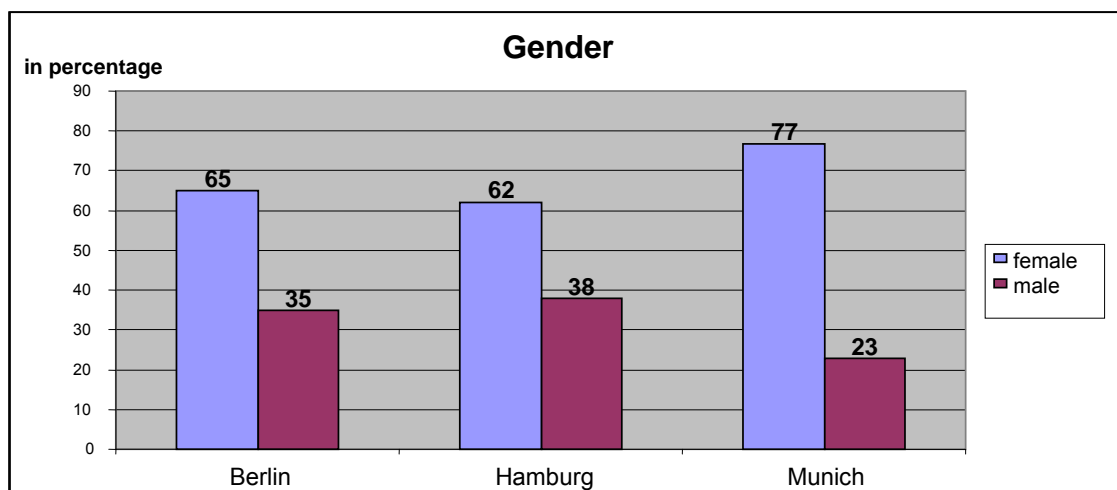


Figure 1: Distribution of sexes

Looking at the different age groups taking part in these discourses, we find another obvious similarity: the largest group in each of the cities is the one aged between 30 and 44, followed by those between 45 and 64, whereas all the other age groups (< 18, 18-24 and > 64) are underrepresented compared to the population as a whole. Correspondingly, most of the participants in Hamburg, Berlin and Munich said they had one (35 – 42%) or two children (31 – 39%). Bearing in mind that German women are on average 31 years old when their first children are born, all discourses attracted the central target group.

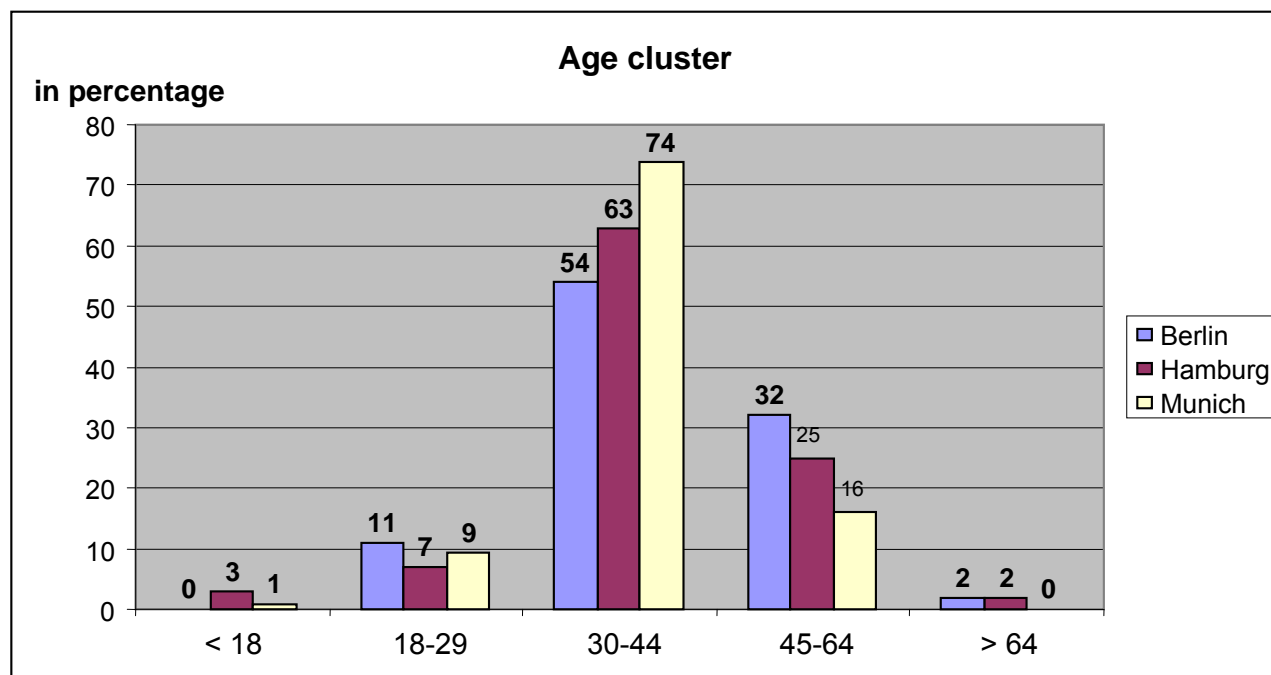


Figure 2: Distribution of age

As the level of education is usually very high in such online discourses, it is not surprising that the majority of participants in each of the cities had obtained at least a high school diploma or even completed higher education (between 74 and 85%), whereas only a few left school after gaining a secondary school leaving certificate (13 – 22%) or after completing secondary modern school (2 – 4%). As the German and British school systems differ significantly from one another, there is no comparable English term for the German “Hauptschule” (comprising nine school years in total). Hence we have called it secondary modern school, although the term generally encompasses many more potential school types and levels.

5 Results

Although the online debates enabled the participants to criticise local family policy, the tone and atmosphere of the discussions in Hamburg, Munich and Berlin were mainly friendly and constructive. However, the discussions differed in several points, ranging from the extent and type of participation to the problems mentioned.

In Hamburg, in the first phase of the discussion was used intensively by the participants to express their individual criticisms, for instance about the lack of affordable family housing and child care options, on the one hand, and more general political issues such as the senate’s plan to build huge projects like the philharmonic concert hall on the other. However, participants’ behaviour changed in the course of the second phase towards a collaborative development of ideas for improvements in different family-relevant areas. After having their critical say, the participants started to use all participation elements offered by the system and worked out improvement concepts and built up networks among themselves or with the moderators in order to find relevant solutions for the problems mentioned. Compared to Hamburg, the basic position in Munich was more affirmative towards urban family policy. This can be illustrated by comparing the number of contributions questioning the senate’s credibility regarding family policy in general, which was much higher in Hamburg than in Munich, where on the other hand the participation rate was lower than in Hamburg. Unlike in Hamburg and Berlin, the facilitators of Munich’s online discourse had initiated several online consultation hours with relevant experts from the administration to discuss the participants’ questions directly. This element in particular was appreciated by the users and might have caused this constant friendly atmosphere.

However, in Berlin the perception of the situation by families seemed to be even more favourable, judging by the low rate of critical contributions and the general discussion atmosphere. Nevertheless the facilitators did not succeed in attracting as many participants in the capital as in Hamburg. Even with a comprehensive promotion effort, it was not possible to convince a comparable mass of inhabitants to use this participation instrument.

With regard to the different discussion elements, it is worth mentioning that the participants in Munich used the possibility of augmenting and further developing the concepts in wikis, whereas the users in Berlin mostly ignored this opportunity. On the other hand, the inhabitants of the capital were much more attracted by the ranking mechanism (enabling them to rank different suggestions) than those of Munich, who mostly did not use this option to rate the different wikis.

In all three debates, the discussion on family policy and measurements was illustrated and enriched by using examples based on personal experience. Thus stereotyped and populist contributions were of no consequence for the discussions’ atmosphere in any of the three dialogues. The following paragraphs present a summary of the most important topics.

5.1 Affordable Living Space for Families

As one can imagine, living space that meets families’ needs is relatively expensive in big cities. Thus the issue was discussed in Hamburg as well as in Munich and showed that affordability means different things to different groups of citizens. Especially for single parents and families with several children and a below-average income, this issue is a big challenge. The pricing situation is most difficult in Munich, the city with the highest rents in Germany, whereas this issue was of nearly no interest in Berlin, one of the cheapest cities in Europe with a big public housing stock and an average rent half that of Munich’s. But in the end – also fostered by the underlying concept and title of the discussion – this aspect was discussed most extensively in Hamburg. Many participants demanded more affordable family-friendly flats or houses in the heart of the city while thinking aloud about possibly moving out of town instead. They also made a plea for more support for joint building ventures – a benchmark that has become very important in Hamburg today. Another group of people not normally heard also entered the online dialogue to have their say: single (female) parents built up a network on the platform expressing very clearly their specific needs and problems in getting suitable flats at affordable rents and with the kind of comprehensive infrastructure and sustainable, helpful neighbourhoods which are mostly to be found in the expensive areas close to the city centre. Moreover, single mothers’ ability to live in lively, mixed

residential districts rather than in “ghettos” proved far more dependent on their job situations than was the case for conventional families.

Asked directly about the advantages and disadvantages of their own residential areas, most of the participants rated their home districts surprisingly positively, irrespective of whether they lived in the city centre or on the outskirts. Furthermore, they developed their individual ideas on how to improve them (for instance to open up collective family gardens between 1950s apartment blocks in former workers' housing areas such as Hamburg-Horn, which might not appear at first glance to most people to be attractive residential districts) and to improve the image of their local areas (for example by stressing the parks and gardens in the former working class area of Hamm). Unlike in the other discourses, the participants in Hamburg even developed improvement ideas for the architecture and family-friendly interior design of new buildings, ranging from suitable extensions to rooms and variable ground plans for flats, to adequate storage space for child buggies and a more individual design for buildings.

5.2 Child Care & Education

The compatibility of family and working life is one of the most important criteria for a family-friendly city. It depends, on the one hand, on child care facilities and, on the other, on suitable jobs. As a participant in the Hamburg discussion stressed, both the establishment of high-quality and reliable all-day child care and concessions by employers are high priorities in solving the problem. This topic was also one of the most important issues addressed in Munich where provision seems to be much lower than in Hamburg and Berlin. In the corresponding sub-forum, by far the majority of messages related to this topic. And in a user survey, child care provision was rated as the most important aspect for Munich as a child-friendly and family-friendly city. In Munich, participants emphasised the high quality of all-day child care services, but complained about their general unavailability and high costs. It was said that the plight of parents, and of single parents in particular, was significant, and they felt impelled to look for private solutions to this problem. Berlin has slightly different problems. Although child care was also an important issue, the families' suggestions and the critique in a city equipped with relatively high availability focussed on a better ratio of teacher per child, longer opening hours and an improved process for allocating the available kindergarten places. Notably, in Berlin a group of fathers stressed very clearly a lack of father-related expert advice while there were perceived to be too many advice services focussed on the mothers' needs. With the growth of different family models, this issue might become generally more important in future.

In addition to child care, the situation of the local schools was an important discussion issue in all three cities – ranging from necessary renovation of school buildings to diverse ideas on how to reform the whole educational system. Especially in Berlin, many participants expressed the urgent need for regular lunch offers for all pupils in all school types, which might refer to increasing child poverty in Berlin and Germany in total. In Hamburg, by comparison, participants complained much more about the increasing distance children had to travel to school as a result of the closure of several schools.

5.3 Traffic

Improvements in public transport were mainly and comprehensively discussed in Hamburg only. Rapid transit and underground stations should be adapted to provide accessibility through escalators and lifts. Participants were also in favour of providing stronger support for cyclists, for example by running an image campaign and expanding the network of cycle tracks but also through traffic lectures for old and young. In general, motor-driven transport should be avoided by establishing car-sharing concepts, extending traffic calming zones and stronger traffic checks. The last point was also central for the citizens of Munich. They were highly critical of speeding in traffic calming zones and of parked cars blocking pavements and cycle tracks. But overall they agreed that road users – whether cyclists or car drivers – should show consideration for children and become examples for better social interaction. The discourse on traffic in Berlin played a lesser role and combined the issues addressed in Hamburg and Munich. Supporting Munich's and Hamburg's demand for stronger traffic checks, they also stressed the particular importance of this for traffic calming zones. They additionally emphasised the need for more accessibility public transportation, but surprisingly little was said about the needs of cyclists.

5.4 Recreation and Play

The recreational value of all three cities seems to be quite good, but with different focal points. In Hamburg as well as in Munich, the quality of public parks and playgrounds was perceived as high. In Hamburg – according to the goals of the discourse – participants discussed intensively the characteristics of a “good” playground and developed a list of criteria for different user groups. In Munich, dog dirt – and dirt in general – was seen as the

biggest nuisance. But all in all, situations in both cities seem to be satisfactory. In contrast, people from Berlin warned against sacrificing the existing parks and green spaces for new building projects. Without a doubt, the capital of Germany has plenty to offer in terms of leisure attractions, but the majority seems to be expensive and commercial. Thus participants made a plea for more affordable holiday offers and criticised the closure of public swimming pools. The situation seems to become worse as children grow older. Several users suggested opening up school yards and suitable youth rooms for teenagers to make up for the lack of opportunities and space for older children. Moreover, as Berlin's users said, financial support decreases as children grow up and are excluded from various reductions regarding, for example, schools, medicines or leisure time. This means a high financial and cultural risk for those families with low incomes or many children and for single parents.

5.5 Family-friendly Atmosphere

Whether a city is perceived as family-friendly depends also on a child-friendly atmosphere, which most participants miss in Hamburg, Munich and Berlin. In particular, intolerance of children's noise and their need to get exercise was seen as a constant problem in the relationship between families and childless adults or the elderly. That this problem was based not upon isolated cases only but represented a trend had been confirmed by recent court decisions, especially in Hamburg, which have led to the closure of some child care facilities in residential areas as a result of "noise pollution" claims by neighbours. The increasing number of similar cases indicated an urgent and general need for action.

The most critical self-awareness on this issue was shown by participants in Munich who stressed that society itself has to ensure that it stays friendly to children and families by maintaining its tolerance and sense of community. However, despite all criticism, most families who participated actively in the discussions liked their city and the urban way of life, whether in Hamburg, Munich or Berlin.

6 Conclusion

eParticipation possibilities offer a variety of advantages. One of the most important is that politicians are gaining valuable insights into needs and wishes of the general public by using local expert knowledge. The results of the discussions in Hamburg, Munich and Berlin show what is important in general for families and where the special problems of each city can be found. As the previous chapter shows, Munich suffers the most from its high rents and its lack of child care facilities, whereas in Hamburg a general scepticism about the senate's credibility on family policy was much stronger than in the other two cities. In Berlin the central point was the quality of child care – and not its affordability as in Hamburg and Munich – combined with a concern about the protection of green spaces and parks.

All three online discourses succeeded within a short time in exploring and discussing the topic of family-friendliness from a multitude of relevant points of view. In the course of the different projects, participants identified specific family-related problems and constructively worked out different concepts on how to improve the situation and to increase family-friendliness from their perspectives as local experts. Moreover, the comparison of the three discussions revealed specific needs and separate solutions for the different cities with their individual family-related infrastructures and conditions.

The projects were successful in attracting the target group affected most by this issue – families with children – and enabling them to clarify their opinions and needs vividly. Even if the participants in Hamburg, Berlin and Munich are not representative of the cities' inhabitants as a whole, they still mentioned and discussed topics that did not affect them personally, namely the specific problems and needs of single parents, disabled persons, elderly people, underprivileged families or families with a very low income.

Worthy of mention is the fact that none of the discourses was able to involve a notable number of people with an immigrant background, which makes it clear that an Internet-based process is just one of several possible participation instruments to be selected according to the suitability and requirements of the individual field of application.

Yet it should be stressed that, despite the seriousness of the issues debated, the discussion within the forums was also fun for both participants and moderators, as the following quotation from a participant in Hamburg's online discussion indicates:

"The pressure families have to deal with is high. Therefore, to describe their distress is the first step in turning the situation around positively. Once you start, you develop new ideas and concepts on how to solve these problems. But it is rather inspiring when you recognise that the city council is listening and your suggestions might become reality in future. In this way democracy means fun and joy!"

Nevertheless, one of the most promising results of all three debates is that the issue attracts a user group which is not a majority in political discussions, whether online or offline. Differences between male and female political engagement are usually mirrored online. In contrast, the discussions in Hamburg, Munich and in Berlin were able to motivate female participants in particular to have their say and to dominate the discourse. This is an encouraging result for politics and eParticipation in general. Politicians are able to get into contact with a group which is more difficult to reach and involve in the traditional political process. By using such a topic, eParticipation has increased its scope and attracted a new user group.

Finally, the topic itself is of growing importance. "Family-friendliness pays off" – this is confirmed by the Institut der Deutschen Wirtschaft (IW – German Economics Institute) estimating that sustainable family policy could increase economic growth by 0.5 percentage points (Press and Information Office of the Federal Government, 2007). By picking up this topic, Hamburg, Munich and Berlin have taken a big step forward in the field of eParticipation. Not only did they show courage in coming up with a topic unusual in the area of eDemocracy, they also succeeded in demonstrating the potential of such issues for politics, the public and the promotion of eParticipation in general. And the need for such a debate is obvious: for the first time, the EU is spending more on generating employment than on agricultural subsidies, explains Vice-President and EU Commissioner for Enterprise and Industry, Günter Verheugen, while Germany passed several new laws and regulations in 2008 to improve the situation of families (Press and Information Office of the German Federal Ministry of Family, Seniors, Women and Youth, 2008). As a result, it is to be expected that other European cities and municipalities will take up this topic not only to promote eParticipation but also to help politicians harness expert local knowledge in the interests of successful and sustainable family policy.

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The e-participation project of Neuchâtel

With the objective of facilitating citizen's participation in the several electoral and consultative processes carried out periodically in the country, the Swiss government commissioned the Federal Chancellery in August 2000 with the task of examining the feasibility of e-voting.

The initial assessment generated in January 2002 a first report on the options, risks and feasibility of e-voting. This report also suggested testing e-voting in live elections and public referenda. To carry on this testing, three cantons joined the project, and since then, a variety of legally binding tests of remote e-voting has been carried out in the Cantons of Geneva, Neuchâtel and Zurich.

At present Neuchâtel continues using its e-participation platform integrated into its Guichet Sécurisé. This platform was the second in the world that was permanently used to carry out binding elections and consultations through Internet. In this paper the Neuchâtel's case will be exposed, describing their objectives of e-voting, the measures and procedures followed, the technology used and the results obtained from their experiences.



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Scytl Secure Electronic
Voting

Keywords

Citizen's participation, e-voting, e-participation

“ Citizens highlighted that the tally speed, easy of use, reduction of costs and increase on participation are the main advantages for Neuchâtel using e-voting. ”

1 Introduction

With the objective of facilitating citizen's participation in the several electoral and consultative processes carried out periodically in the country, the Swiss government commissioned the Federal Chancellery in August 2000 with the task of examining the feasibility of e-voting. The initial assessment generated in January 2002 a first report on the options, risks and feasibility of e-voting. This report also suggested testing e-voting in live elections and public referenda. To carry on this testing, three cantons joined the project, and since then, a variety of legally binding tests of remote e-voting has been carried out in the Cantons of Geneva, Neuchâtel and Zurich.

Neuchâtel has been the second Canton, after Geneva, to carry out binding e-voting processes. Their approach consisted of benchmarking the different technologies available in the market before committing to one that would be integrated in their e-government portal, called Guichet Sécurisé (GS). In this paper the Neuchâtel's case will be exposed, describing their objectives for e-voting, the measures and procedures followed, the technology used and the results obtained to date from this project.

2 Objectives

Following the traditional Swiss trend for excellence, the Swiss Government wanted to evaluate e-voting in-depth in order to be able to allow binding e-voting as a way to facilitate citizens participation in the short term, and reduce electoral costs and organization complexity in the long term, so that both citizens and governments could benefit from it. Other project objectives were to check systems to facilitate the participation of Swiss citizens living abroad (around 600,000 in 2003 [1]), and assess mechanisms to allow impaired people to vote anonymously without help. Currently, postal voting is used by more than 90% of voters in certain Cantons, and e-voting was seen as a convenient and cheaper voting channel.

The e-voting evaluation included a first report released in January 2002, real pilots in three Cantons till December 31st 2005, and a final report with the pilots' assessment. Based on these pilot results, the Federal Chancellery made a decision in June 2006 to allow e-voting country-wide as a binding fact [2]. In addition, Neuchâtel has its own objectives regarding e-voting:

- To test e-voting in Neuchâtel following the security and accessibility mandates of the Chancellery.
- To include e-voting as an element of the e-government portal GS [3], to show it as a 'usual' transaction. This means to execute both elections and public consultations.
- To own an e-voting system that can be offered to all cities in the Canton.

3 Methodology

The project for the Swiss Canton of Neuchâtel was lengthy. It began in 2002 in order to achieve the required results in 2005 (see point 5). To reach this point, it was necessary to complete several steps first:

1. **Set up the basic infrastructure** for the introduction of e-voting (in parallel with analysing the e-voting requirements as described in next point), which was achieved previously to the election of May 18th, 2003:
 - Creation of a central register for voters, interconnecting all the 62 communes that make up Neuchâtel
 - Definition of unified electoral card
 - Registering of all voters.
2. **Analyse Canton requirements** regarding a remote e-voting system, considering the requirements about elections and public consultations for the regional government, Canton's cities, the federal government, and its inclusion in the GS. These can be summarized in three key points:
 - A very secure system that can offer the same degree of trust and confidence found in the traditional paper-based process
 - A highly accessible system that can be used from different computer configurations (Windows, MAC, Linux...) without needing to install extra hardware or software
 - A very flexible and scalable system that can be adapted enough to be integrated as a new service in the GS e-government portal, and that can be used for any scale from just tens of voters up to a hundred thousand voters.

3. **Research the most suitable solution** in the market following the Federal Chancellery requirements and Neuchâtel's analysis. This part of the project took one year. Neuchâtel had to find a technology that not just offered the best security in encryption terms but it also had to be very accessible, flexible and easily integrated with their platform. This research included the comparison of several systems, including the one just released in the Canton of Geneva.
4. **Technological decision:** Neuchâtel's government decided at the beginning of 2004, after a deep audit process, that Scyt's Pnyx.core was the best solution in terms of security, accessibility, flexibility and ease of use for the Canton. They also considered positively Scyt's commitment to continue evolving and improving with new features the e-voting software, as it is a product, not a custom made solution.
On the other hand, Geneva [4] had contracted HP in 2002 to develop a custom-made solution, which was used in 2003 to carry out one of the first binding e-voting projects in the world, and Zurich [5] contracted Unisys in 2003 to develop a custom made solution too, which was used for the first time at the end of 2005. Both solutions include security measures to secure the e-voting process, but they do not achieve all the security features offered by Pnyx.core in Neuchâtel.
5. **Implementation:** Although Pnyx.core was demonstrated to be the best solution in the market, it had to be integrated in GS's portal, which was still under development, to become a permanent e-voting platform. The e-voting system was technologically ready by the end of 2004.
6. **Pilot execution:** once the system was ready, Neuchâtel waited for a suitable election, approved by the Federal Chancellery, to execute the first e-voting binding pilot. After the success of the first e-voting process, three more were executed, in addition to an e-participation process:
 - Execution of first the pilot [7] about "Free circulation of people" carried out on September 2005. Electoral roll limited to a maximum of 2,000 voters. Process open one month. Total of internet votes: 1,178.
 - Execution of the second pilot [8]: "Complementary Election of the State Council". It was carried out on October 2005. Electoral roll limited to a maximum of 4,000 voters. Process open one month. Total of internet votes: 2,209.
 - After the first two binding pilots, the Federal Chancellery accepted Neuchâtel to use the e-voting system in a Federal consultative process: "Modification of the labour law" [9]; carried out on November 2005. Electoral roll limited to a maximum of 4,000 voters. Process open one month. Total of internet votes: 1,345.

The execution of such pilots allowed Neuchâtel to obtain valuable feedback from the e-voting system employed and from citizenship participation.
7. **Continuous usage:** after the Federal Chancellery made a decision in June 2006 to allow e-voting country-wide as a binding fact [2]. Neuchâtel continued expanding the usage of its e-voting system by promoting the GS portal and the Internet voting in their forthcoming elections:
 - Execution of the first election [10] after Chancellery approval about the "Law on cooperation with Eastern Europe countries" and the "Law on family allowance", carried out on November 2006. Electoral roll limited to a maximum of 4,000 voters. Process open one month. Total of internet votes: 1,311.
 - For the first time, [11] the Canton of Neuchâtel has carried out an e-voting pilot to allow their citizens living abroad to cast their votes for the 2008 Federal election process. In this consultation, the Neuchâtel voters living in countries from the European Union or part of the Wassenaar Agreement participated in this pilot, reaching 33,86% of participation rate.

In order to vote through the Internet, Neuchâtel citizens must follow these steps:

- Register as a GS user, which means that every interested citizen has to go physically to a government office to sign a contract and receive a special PIN code (personal identification number: set of numbers that permit the identification of a person).
- This PIN code allows them access to the GS portal, including the e-voting system when an election or consultative process is open. The PIN code is the same for all the elections.
- When an election is open, any citizen with a GS PIN code could vote through the Internet using an Internet browser in his Java enabled computer. After casting his vote, the citizen is asked to fill a survey out for evaluation purposes.

4 Technology Description

As stated before, Neuchâtel chose Pnyx.core as the secure e-voting solution to be integrated in its e-government portal GS. Indeed, Pnyx.core is a software module that implements a cryptographic protocol especially developed to solve the problems of privacy and security in e-voting. Pnyx.core can be integrated into any e-voting platform, as did with GS, to guarantee the same level of trust, security and privacy which exists in conventional paper-based elections without having to trust either the administrators of the system or the complex technological systems used.

More concretely, Pnyx.core ensures:

1. Support of multiple remote authentication systems, so voters can access the electronic election using from a PIN code to a digital certificate.
2. Voter privacy by sealing the ballots in digital envelopes that cannot be opened by anyone – including system administrators – with the exception of the electoral board (after a mixing process that guarantees voter's privacy).
3. Election integrity so that nobody, even system administrators, can modify, add or erase cast votes.
4. Voter self-verification to ensure correct treatment of his/her vote (the vote has reached the electoral board and has been counted to get the final results)
5. The prevention of systematic coercion and mass vote-selling.
6. A simple, user-friendly and flexible voting interface.
7. Easily auditable electoral processes.
8. Multiple voting channels: web browsers, mobile phones, PDAs and even digital TV.

The following Figure 1 shows an overview of the voting system.

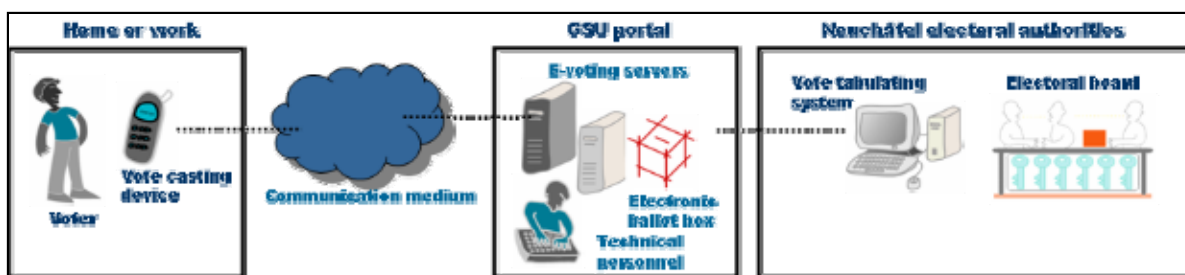


Figure 1. E-voting system overview

As stated before, Pnyx implements special cryptographic protocols to ensure a secure e-voting process. Its main steps are:

1. Before opening the election, the government constitutes the electronic electoral board using a computer disconnected from any network, previously audited.
2. The system generates the election master pair of keys, whose private part is distributed among the members of the electoral board according to a cryptographic protocol of secret sharing. After this the private key is destroyed.
3. The voting process begins. When a voter connects to the electronic voting system, a digitally signed applet is dynamically downloaded to the vote casting device creating a secure environment.
4. Voter identifies himself commonly by e-signature or other methods, and chooses the desired voting options.
5. Before the vote is cast, the voter is provided with a digitally signed voting receipt containing a random identifier validated by the e-voting servers. This receipt allows the voter to check whether his vote has reached the electoral board.
6. The receipt and the vote are sealed in a digital envelope using the public key of the electoral board.
7. The envelope is digitally signed with the voter's private key and stored in the electronic ballot box.
8. The digital ballot box is transported by physical means to the tallying server operated by the electoral board at the end of the election.
9. The private key is reconstructed in order to open the digital envelopes by gathering together all electoral board members.

10. A mixing protocol breaks the correlation between the voters ID (digital envelopes in the ballot box) and the votes (contained in the envelopes). All these operations are done in the computer under electoral board's control.
11. Votes and voting receipts are published in two different lists.
12. Tallying process is audited and voters' verification is allowed.

The final e-voting platform integrated in the GS allowed Neuchâtel citizens to cast votes remotely using a standard web browser with Java support. The integration was complete, and Neuchâtel's staff were trained so they can now manage the e-voting system and configure new elections without Scyt'l's assistance. The whole integration phase took six months of work, and was fine tuned and deeply tested for six extra months.

5 Results

From a technological stand point, the results of the pilot projects reached the standards of excellence required: Pnyx.core was fully integrated to the GS platform, the system was approved by the Swiss Federal government, it is compliant with Council of Europe e-voting standards [6], and during the pilots everything worked properly.

From a citizen participation point of view, the four pilots were also a success, as shown on the following Table 1. More details about the pilots can be found on the public GS's website [3], including detailed figures about daily vote and voter's age using each voting channel (poll-site, mail and Internet).

Election	Electoral roll	Electoral roll with GS PIN	Internet votes	Participation % Internet	Participation % traditional
09/25/05 [7]	112,640	1,732	1,178	68,01	60,31
10/30/05 [8]	127,849	2,209	1,194	54,05	34,04
11/27/05 [9]	106,097	2,442	1,345	55,07	50,53
11/26/06 [10]	106,892	3,554	1,311	36,89	47,83
06/01/08 [11]	107,000	4,705	1,593	33,86	48,27

Table 1. Participation in Neuchâtel elections

It is remarkable that each new pilot achieved more electronic votes than the previous one, as more citizens were registered in the GS portal, and that the Internet participation rate was always higher than the traditional participation rate, but in the case of the latest elections, where the number of Internet votes as well as the percentage of votes per Internet diminished. Neuchâtel responsables consider that this effect was mainly caused by the lack of communication promoting the election, although the significant increase of citizens with a GS PIN code shows that Neuchâtel's population is more and more confident in the advantages of e-government in general, and electronic voting in particular. Furthermore, concerning the evolution of the number of Internet voters, Neuchâtel's government is expecting a notable increase, as postal voting is not free any longer, new services are being implemented in the GS portal, and a consciousness raising campaign is being led among young people who will be 18 before each election/consultation. Neuchâtel's government considers that all these elements will positively affect the number of Internet voters for the next elections.

It is also meaningful that the Internet participation rate is more stable than the traditional participation rate. Also, from the figures that can be found in [3], it can be seen that electronic voting is more stable during a given election, as the cast votes are mainly distributed during the month each electoral process was open, and that although the majority of electronic voters are aged between 30 and 64 years old, there are several voters older, even one between 80 and 84 years old.

Regarding the voluntary survey that voters could fill out after casting their votes, which report is not reachable on the GS portal, the results show that the 87.1% of voters considered the system easy or very easy to use, the 88.3% found the system very or quite secure and that the 98.7% of e-voters in previous elections had voted by post. Also, citizens highlighted that the tally speed, easy of use, reduction of costs and increase on participation are the main advantages for Neuchâtel using e-voting.

6 Conclusions and next steps

The main objectives of the project were achieved in Neuchâtel, such as:

- promoting the GS portal
- increasing the participation of citizens in the electoral and consultation processes
- testing the capabilities and implications of an e-voting platform

- piloting several models of citizen participation
- validating the security and usability issues associated with the implemented technology
- obtaining Swiss Chancellery acceptance of the system to be use in Federal elections.

The success of the initiative led the Government of Neuchâtel to pass a bill on March 28th, 2006 to continue using e-voting at least till December 31st, 2008 (the original Federal mandate fixed the limit to December 31st, 2005).

The Swiss Federal Government has evaluated the e-voting projects carried out by the three participating cantons to assess their methodologies, technologies and approaches and also the obtained results. This study has led to a recommendation [2], sponsored by the Federal Government, to allow all the Swiss cantons that desire to do so to begin using e-voting for binding electoral and consultative processes under certain conditions, i.e.:

- ensuring the control of the voter's identity,
- ensuring that there will only be one vote per voter
- providing security during all the voting process in order to avoid any fraud or coercion
- ensuring the secrecy of the votes
- demonstrating that the Canton has sufficient technical infrastructure, personnel, and financial assets to be able to realize pilots in electronic voting
- that its population has been informed in an understandable way.

Neuchâtel experience will allow them to promote their approach and to continue using their permanent e-voting platform inside the Canton for the more than 6 processes carried out each year, with the possibility to increase the Internet voters up to 10% of electorate.

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Usability Engineering in eParticipation

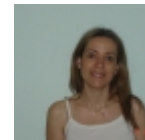
The task of eParticipation is to empower people to be able through Information and Communication Technology to act in bottom-up decision making processes, thus allowing politicians to make informed decisions, while developing social and political responsibility. In this matter, the project VoicE establishes an Internet platform with the objective to promote the dialogue between citizens from Baden Württemberg, Germany and Valencia, Spain and policy makers from the European Parliament, the Assembly of Regions as well as from other EU institutions and regional assemblies.

In order to efficiently support the citizens, the usability of the applications, tools, channels and devices through which eParticipation should take place need to be designed properly. But usability engineering is not one single step in the product development cycle. If anything, it is a set of activities that should take place throughout the lifecycle of the product. The overall objective of the paper is to introduce a usability engineering methodology for eParticipation online platforms and its application in the VoicE project. This methodology is a structured lifecycle, which is based on iterative design process with user involvement. Besides that, it will be shown that user engineering is key in designing eParticipation applications.

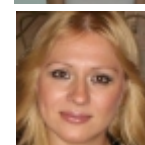
The usability engineering methodology has been applied in the design and implementation of two platforms in two different regions of Europe. It was usable to improve the system by detailed analysis of the overall system before the start of any implementation, iterative design of the systems' features, their interaction and the user interface, and involvement of users in the design process.



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“ In eParticipation design processes user involvement plays an important role not only to simplify the user interface and the processes, but also to test the application of certain tools for certain democratic processes. ”

1 Introduction

Citizen participation in democratic processes across Europe has been declining for years, due largely to a lack of trust in policymakers and policy. Citizens increasingly demand to provide them with the means to be informed, the mechanisms to take part in decision-making and the ability to contribute to and influence the policy agenda. Effective information provision is often seen as a corollary of effective engagement and empowerment as declining political interest presents an increasing erosion of legitimisation for traditional, representative politics.

The task of eParticipation is to empower people with Information and Communication Technology (ICT) so as to be able to act in bottom-up decision making processes, thus allowing politicians to make informed decisions, while developing social and political responsibility. Therefore, eParticipation is a means to empower the political, socio-technological, and cultural capabilities of individuals giving the possibility to individuals to involve and organize themselves in the information society. eParticipation offers citizens a greater share in political discourse and the ability to contribute their own ideas, suggestions, and requests; an as yet unrealised potential that – as far as it is supported and accepted – could modify the understanding of democratic participation. The usability of the applications, tools, channels and devices through which eParticipation will take place in virtual space, need to be designed properly to support the citizens in this regard (Fraser *et al.*, 2006).

In this matter, the project VoicE¹ establishes an Internet platform with the objective to promote the dialogue between citizens from Baden Württemberg (BW), Germany and Valencia, Spain and policy makers from the European Parliament, the Assembly of Regions as well as from other EU institutions and regional assemblies. In terms of contents, the project focuses on the policy field of consumer protection in the EU. It is targeted at both the legislation proposal formation stage and the debate on draft legislation.

The overall objective of the paper is to introduce a usability engineering methodology for eParticipation online platforms and its application in the VoicE project. This methodology is a structured lifecycle, which is based on iterative design with user involvement. Beyond that, it will be shown that user engineering is key in designing eParticipation applications.

The next section introduces the VoicE project in more detail. The third section argues the need for usability in eParticipation and shows some related work. Section 4 describes the usability engineering methodology applied. Section 5 describes the results of the investigation: the requirements for VoicE, the results from the stages of the lifecycle and the iterative design process. In section 6, concluding remarks and an outlook are provided.

2 The VoicE Platform

The European Union increasingly influences most fields of regulation, but legislative decision-making within the EU is often criticized as elitist, intransparent and insular. Despite massive efforts undertaken by the European institutions to promote their activities and gain acceptance for their issues, many citizens are simply unaware of legislative affairs in Brussels. At the same time, direct participation of citizens in EU legislative processes tends to be limited. Language barriers, a lack of knowledge about EU decision making and procedures, as well as little information about the impact of EU legislation on their own social, economic and cultural environment, are factors preventing people from actually using available opportunities for political participation, such as online consultations on the central European website.

VoicE provides a platform that serves as an interface between decision-makers in Parliament, Commission, the Committee of Regions and the citizens while using and testing new forms and methods of civic participation in the day-to-day legislative work in the EU. In terms of contents, the project focuses on the policy field of consumer protection in the EU. Citizens are able to share their opinions with political decision-makers on issues which are in the legislative pipeline at that very moment, just before relevant decisions are to be made. This way, citizens are able to really express their opinions on the legislation in the field of consumer protection by delivering real inputs during the legislation proposal formation stage or the debate on draft legislation in this field.²

¹ <http://www.give-your-voice.eu>

² See (Schneider *et al.*, 2008, Holzner & Schneider, 2008)

3 Usability and eParticipation

Usability has multiple components; it is not a one-dimensional property of a user interface. Traditionally it is associated with the following five usability attributes of the system: easy to learn, efficient to use, easy to remember, low error rate, and pleasant to use (Nielsen, 1993).

eParticipation services via electronic channels need to be simple, effective, easy-to-use and functional. Besides this, the look and feel as well as the fun-factor should not be underestimated. Especially in eParticipation contexts, where heterogeneous user groups should actively participate in policy discussions and participatory decision-making by electronic means, Fraser *et al.* state that further research is needed to develop proper interaction interfaces (Fraser *et al.*, 2006).

To fulfil these usability requirements, the design and implementation of eParticipation platforms should follow well designed processes. Systematic usability engineering is necessary at least to ferret out minor design details that influence usability (Nielsen, 1993). This is of high importance as the usability evaluation plays a crucial role in eParticipation evaluation methodologies (Macintosh & Whyte, 2008, Lippa *et al.*, 2008). Even more important is the fact that the usability and usefulness of the systems (the technical aspects) influence the other eParticipation evaluation perspectives, i.e. the project and democratic perspective. Small changes in the user interface of an eParticipation application could result in completely different evaluation results. Bad usability on local government web sites may even destroy the strategy of the whole website (Esteves, 2007). Therefore all decisions about an eParticipation system should be the result of a systematic process and should be documented.

Usability engineering for eParticipation should involve the real users of such systems. Generally, user involvement plays an important role in participatory design processes of computer systems. Obviously, the involvement of system users in the design process has a number of benefits, but also a number of "pitfalls". The most important factor is that the users should be able to trace the changes in the system influenced through their involvement³ (Damodaran, 1996). In eParticipation design processes user involvement plays an important role not only to simplify the user interface and the processes, but also to test the application of certain tools for certain democratic processes. Thereby different user groups have different agendas in eParticipation, e.g. citizens and politicians in a forum on legislative processes. All these completely different expectations from the system need to be taken into account during the design and implementation process.

4 Usability Engineering Methodology

4.1 Usability Engineering Lifecycle

Usability engineering is not one single step in the product development cycle. It is a set of activities that should take place throughout the lifecycle of the product (Nielsen, 1993). Nielsen proposes the following steps for the user engineering lifecycle (Nielsen, 1993, p. 72f):

1. Know the user: Study of intended users and use of the product, which includes individual user characteristics, task analysis, functional analysis, and evaluation of the user and the job.
2. Competitive analysis: Analysis of existing products as best prototypes that can include comparative analysis of competing products if they exist.
3. Goal setting: Setting levels of performance for usability attributes.
4. Parallel design: Different designers work out preliminary designs in a parallel process.
5. Participatory design: This means the involvement of users in the design process.
6. Coordinated design of the total interface: This step ensures the consistency of the entire user interface.
7. Guidelines and heuristic evaluation: There are general, category specific, and product specific guidelines that can be used as background for heuristic evaluation.
8. Prototyping: Fast produced versions of the system for early usability evaluations.
9. Empirical testing: Evaluation of the interface by user testing.
10. Iterative design: Production of new interfaces based on the usability problems identified in empirical testing.

³ One can say that this is in line with the eParticipation principle according to which users of eParticipation applications should be able to trace the results of their participation.

11. Feedback from field use: Gathering usability data after the release of the product.

It is not always possible to perform all these recommended steps in one product lifecycle (Nielsen, 1993). There are a number of other lifecycles specialised and adapted for different project types (see e.g. Mayhew, 1999). This means that there is not one usability engineering lifecycle. The approach used in the VoicE project is an adaptation of Nielsen's (Nielsen, 1993), and Mayhew's (Mayhew, 1999) lifecycle. Figure 1 shows the lifecycle as it has been applied. The white boxes show the stages of the usability engineering process in the order of application. The stages are described in more detail in the sections below.

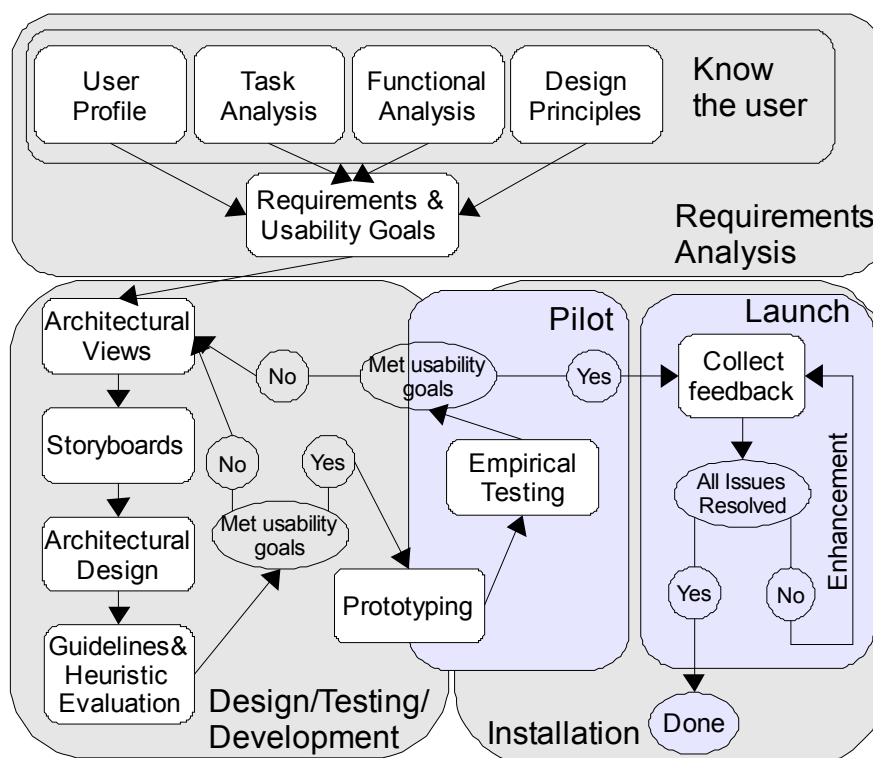


Figure 9. Stages of the Usability Engineering Process

4.2 Requirements Analysis

The requirements analysis consists of four usability engineering tasks. The first one is the analysis of the individual user characteristics, i.e. the identification of the target user groups. For an eParticipation platform, typical stakeholders are citizen groups, politicians, political parties, industry, elected representatives, government/executive, non-governmental organisations etc. (Aichholzer *et al.*, 2007). For VoicE the following user groups have been identified:

- Citizens from region BW and Valencia
- Members of the European Parliament/Committee of the Regions linked to BW and Valencia
- Representatives from regional administrative bodies
- Representatives from Brussels-based organizations with links to region
- Parliamentarians from the regional assembly with EU-policy focus

The next steps of the analysis consist of gathering the data for task and functional analysis and considering general and special design principles. Requirements gathering practices include interviews, questionnaires, user observation, workshops, and brain storming (Nielsen, 1993). As far as requirements are concerned, after consulting with the members of the VoicE consortium, it was decided to use questionnaires and organise regional meetings to discuss the questionnaire results and the opinion of the partner institutions regarding the VoicE platform design and functionality.

Thereby, the task analysis for the VoicE platform needs to address the different tasks of the various stakeholders in particular. Two questionnaires were created in order to collect and analyze the end-users' requirements for the VoicE platform. One questionnaire was addressed to the citizens and the other to the

politicians from BW and Valencia regions. The questionnaires were translated in German and Spanish and were available online in both regions.

The decision to use two different questionnaires for the collection of user requirements was based on the fact that the group of interviewees could be split up into two major groups:

- Group 1: the citizens that will give their input in the legislative process.
- Group 2: the politicians from the two regions, who are the decision-makers and will receive the input by the citizens during the legislative process

Specifically, the objective was to identify end users' requirements raised from existing procedures and applications, to define their involvement in the legislative process and their access to ICT. Moreover, the questionnaires aimed at finding interviewees' opinion on the dialogue between citizens of a region, EU decision-makers and other political stakeholders in a specific policy field.

The questions in both questionnaires are produced in such a way so as to sufficiently cover the entire system functionality. At the same time, they were presented in terms understandable by citizens and politicians. Simultaneously, each questionnaire included a glossary of terms related to eParticipation and ICT that were used in the questions. The questionnaires for the citizens/politicians contained 10/9 questions. The difference between the questionnaires was the formulation of the questions and the questioned data. The citizens have been mainly asked for the features and topics they want to participate, whereby the politicians have been asked for the features they want to exist or topics they are interested to get citizens' opinion. Table 1 shows the structure of the two questionnaires including differences:

Citizens' questionnaire	Politicians' questionnaire
a self categorization of the citizen/politician who answered the questionnaire	
opinions and expectations of the citizens regarding their participation in the legislation process for consumer protection	opinions of the politicians regarding the citizens participation in the legislative process for consumer protection
rating of the features that citizens want to find on the platform in order to facilitate their participation in consumer protection legislative process - description of the features that citizens want from online forums	rating of the features that politicians want on the platforms in order to gather the citizen's input on legislative issues
the limits that citizens have regarding their personal data and what they are ready to disclose, in order to register as members on this platform	opinions of the politicians about the data to be requested for member registration on this platform
	features that should be provided from the politicians' point of view
information that should exist on the VoicE platform in order to facilitate the citizens' participation in the legislation process for consumer protection	information that should exist on the VoicE platform, from the politician's point of view
issues related to consumer protection in which the citizens are interested	issues related to consumer protection in which the politicians are interested to see the citizen's opinion
personal ideas, suggestions, recommendations that the citizens/politicians have for this platform	

Table 1. Structure of the questionnaires

4.3 Design/Testing/Development

Architectural Views

A view defines the architectural context of the solution from the corresponding perspective: business, functional, technical or implementation. Thus, four architectural views provide a complete picture of a solution (The Open Group, 2007):

- Business View –Why

- Functional View – What
- Technical View – How
- Implementation View – With What

The views show the motivation of the VoicE solution and describe when and in what context VoicE is a success from a solution perspective. This is done by pointing out drivers and goals along with principles that underpin the functional, technical and implementation perspectives.

In general a principle describes guidelines for how an organization intends to satisfy the requirements of the drivers. The following terminology is used in the elaboration of principles:

- Statement – should succinctly and unambiguously communicate the fundamental rule
- Rationale – the motivation behind a given principle (that is, the benefits of achieving or the costs or consequences of not achieving the principle). The rationale is often defined simply by referring to the goals and initial requirements, or more-basic principles that motivate the given principle.
- Implications – statements of the consequences of a particular principle. They might reference a principle(s) in a later view.

Storyboards

Storyboards for the VoicE platform are displaying sequences of events, which the users of VoicE platform will experience while using the system. The pictorial visualization is presented through pragmatic use cases. These use cases are part of the Unified Modeling Language (UML) and describe how a user achieves her or his goal. A use case is a technique for capturing functional requirements of a system. The “use case method” helps to represent external system behaviour from the user’s point of view. (Fowler, 2004)

Use cases can refer to other use cases in two ways (Fowler, 2004):

- use case A “uses” (includes) use case B: this means that as part of executing A, use case B is also executed. In diagrams the connection between both use cases is stereotyped with the wording <<uses>>.
- use case B “extends” use case A: depending on conditions, the execution of use case A may require execution of use case B. In diagrams the connection between both use cases is stereotyped with the wording <<extends>>.

A use case describes just one feature of the system. Use cases treat the system as a black box, and the interactions with the system, including system responses, are perceived as from outside the system.

The following use case format used is adapted from Cockburn & Mckenzie (2001):

Name	Unique name for the use case
Purpose	One line description of the purpose, the goal, of the use case
Actors	A listing of all parties, human and machine, involved and interacting in this use case.
Stakeholders and interests:	Categories of people whose interests must be satisfied by the use case
Preconditions	List of conditions that must be met before this use case is allowed to start
Basic flow	Between 3 and 9 steps, each phrased as a goal that succeeds stating the intent of the actor
Success/failure criteria	Assertions that can be checked to see that the use case has succeeded
Scenarios	A scenario is a step-by-step description of the interaction between the user and the system to reach the use case goal.

Table 2. Use case format

The use case descriptions also include scenario descriptions. There may be different scenarios within a use case; some with different outcomes, depending on success or failure to achieve the goal. The scenarios indicate the main actors –both human and machine – that play a role in the scripted processes and form the basis for the definition of test cases. As Nielsen (1993, p. 99) states, a scenario is the “ultimate minimalist

prototype". It describes an interaction step without any flexibility for the user. If scenarios are developed in detail, they can be used for user testing (e.g. with mock up drawings) (Nielsen, 1993).

Architectural Design

The architectural design represents the design process for identifying the system components and how the components depend on each other in the overall system solution. The components are implementation mechanisms that support the exposed services (in the service model). There might also be components that do not directly implement a service; instead, they facilitate implementation of some common utility services (for example, logging, events subscription and broadcasting, and so on). Components that do not expose interfaces to be directly consumed externally are used to facilitate a standardized inter-component communication.

Iterative Design and Development Process with Heuristic Evaluation and Empirical Testing

The iterative design process means that the proposed solution will be tested at several levels against the requirements and usability goals considered in the requirements analysis phase of the lifecycle. If the proposed solution does not meet the usability goals, the design will be improved. The iterative design and development process starts with the design of the architectural views, then goes beyond the pilot implementation, and ends with the launch of the platform.

Guidelines contain conclusions of common user interface design principles that should be taken into consideration when developing a project. There are different types of principles – general guidelines, category-specific guidelines (e.g. depending on the interface), and product-specific guidelines. These guidelines can be used as background for heuristic evaluation (Nielsen, 1993).

Heuristic evaluation means a “systematic inspection of a user interface design for usability ... to find the usability problems in a user interface design so that they can be attended to as part of an iterative design process” (Nielsen, 1993, p. 155). It is accomplished by only a small number of usability experts, who judge the compliance of the user interface with recognised usability principles. Heuristic evaluation is a cost-saving method to identify usability problems before the real users see the system. In VoicE the experts from the project partners played the role of the evaluators.

Empirical testing helps to identify usability problems and opportunities in the system and the interface in order to improve them. Testing methods are thinking aloud, log files, etc. One problem with iterative design is that changes in the user interface to solve one usability problem can bring new usability problems. Therefore iterative design and evaluation should be combined. (Nielsen, 1993) In VoicE empirical testing was performed on the pilot versions of the both platforms. The users have been asked to work with the platform and answer a questionnaire afterwards. Additionally some interviews and thinking aloud sessions have been performed with the users. The questionnaire was rather short and aimed at the identification of usability problems before the official launch of the platform. It was structured as following:

1. Personal details
2. Interest in EU politics and consumer protection
3. Questions about the extent to which the user enjoyed using the site and what would make him or her return to this site.
4. Questions regarding the best and the worst platform feature as well as elements that caused confusion. Additionally, the visibility, usefulness and usability of each feature have been tested.
5. Questions about the navigation structure and the layout of the platform.
6. Awareness of the information contained in the portal.
7. Any other ideas, suggestions, and/or recommendations which could be provided.

4.4 Installation and Collecting Feedback

The installation phase includes partly the pilot implementation and empirical testing stages, because the tested pilot is available online.

Usability work after the release of a platform means to gather data for the next or a new version of the product (Nielsen, 1993). That means that the current VoicE platform is the prototype for the next generation of the platform. The installed platform will be further evaluated and improved. As during the iterative design process,

all implemented steps need to be well considered, documented, and evaluated. In order to gather the necessary usability data and collect feedback, usability statistics, user questionnaires and interviews with the users will be used.

5 Results of User Involvement in VoicE

5.1 User Requirements

The evaluation of the questionnaires (cf. section 4.2) resulted in a list of requirements and usability goals.

Functional Requirements

Understanding user requirements is an integral part of the VoicE solution design and is important to the success of the project. A characteristic of the user requirements process is that users' opinions of what they might want from a system will evolve. Potential users cannot express definite, current requirements. By demonstrating prototypes and simulations, and obtaining feedback, the system will become more real and requirements become more realistic in tandem. Once the real users understand the implications of a potential solution, their requirements may change.

The responses gathered showed small variations in the expectations of the end-users from each region. It would have been desirable to write different scenarios for each region, to illustrate how the VoicE solution matches their expectations. But it would have been difficult to retain a coherent view of what the VoicE solution needs to do, if the 'requirements' for two different solutions had been taken into account. For this reason, it was decided that a single scenario is needed at the beginning, which means a single solution adaptable to both pilot sites is needed at the same time. That is why, after the ranking of the features had been compared according to the answers of the end-users from both regions, it was decided that the VoicE system should have the following information and participation features:

- Online discussion forums where users can express their views on consumer protection issues and exchange views with other users.
- Blog to publish public journals of upcoming events on the site, keeping the citizens aware and involved. These blog posts will be published by the editorial management team. At the same time the blog authors could be VoicE registered users too. They can write about consumer protection issues that concern them.
- "Question of the week"/ opinion polls have also been provided: users have the possibility to give their vote on issues that are put for discussion by the administrators. Input for questions in this section will come from the Baden-Württemberg Ministry for Nutrition and Rural Areas, thus ensuring that recent political topics from the area of consumer protection are raised.
- Online petitions function: Citizens can contact the administrator if they have a certain point they would like to put as a petition. The administrator will open the petition and define a time period in which signatures can be collected. After a certain time, the petition will be closed and the result be sent to the Members of the European Parliament.
- "Letter to Brussels" which allows citizens to write a letter directly to the Members of the European Parliament from their region.
- Calendar of events to upload events related to the participative processes from the VoicE platform and to consumer protection events taking place on regional and EU level.

The debate on each key legislative issue represents a participative process, which will have associated documents, links, forums, questionnaires. The forum and survey sections of VoicE are the principal components relating to citizen participation in the debates on specific legislative issues, where site members are able to provide direct input to the discussion of featured topics, either through deliberation in the forums or by answering/voting in surveys/polls.

Non-Functional Requirements

Non-functional requirements are not really requirements, but also constraints on implementing the functional requirements defined above. In the VoicE case, non-functional requirements define the need for easy-to-use interfaces and are available for both regions. These requirements consider the look and feel of the application, usability and accessibility, performance, reliability and availability, and document capacity. Additionally, there are security, maintainability, help and operational requirements that need to be considered.

5.2 Storyboards

The VoicE storyboards differentiate administrative cases (user registration, login/logout, user profile self-maintenance and retrieve password), information gathering, and develop opinion/collaborating storyboards. These storyboards show the use cases for the special VoicE system features. Each use case describes at least one scenario where each use case potentially is a GUI screen. The story boards helped to identify the gaps in the task analysis and usability problems resulting from the process.

5.3 Architectural Design and Installation

At the beginning of the VoicE project, it was considered more useful/ important to define requirements in terms of what is needed, but no final decision was taken as to the look and feel of the user interface. Nevertheless, each region follows different look and feel styles (Figure 2 shows the Spanish platform and Figure 3 the German one) and it should be noted that the VoicE user interface will be finalized following the user comments after completion of the alpha and beta versions of the pilot phase.

VoicE is a system usable by users with limited experience of internet or ICT. With regard to accessibility issues, the websites follow the WAI (Web Accessibility Initiative⁴) compliance accessibility standard. The VoicE solution can be used by both fully capable and handicapped users. Because most of the VoicE components are readily available open source components, the solution's WAI compliancy for the most part depends on the WAI compliance of these components as well as the built-in WAI features available on the client platforms (Windows and Linux Accessibility Features). The architecture aims to comply with level AA. The use of VoicE from a user point of view has been detailed in the storyboards. Besides the functional views the whole architectural design also comprises the technical views and security provision of the VoicE solution.

The GUI interface of the installed platforms is web-based. The VoicE GUI is shown as a display composed of three frames (see Figure 2 and Figure 3): navigation frame and VoicE "side bar", VoicE functionality delivered through adopted tools, and VoicE additional information related to the main section.

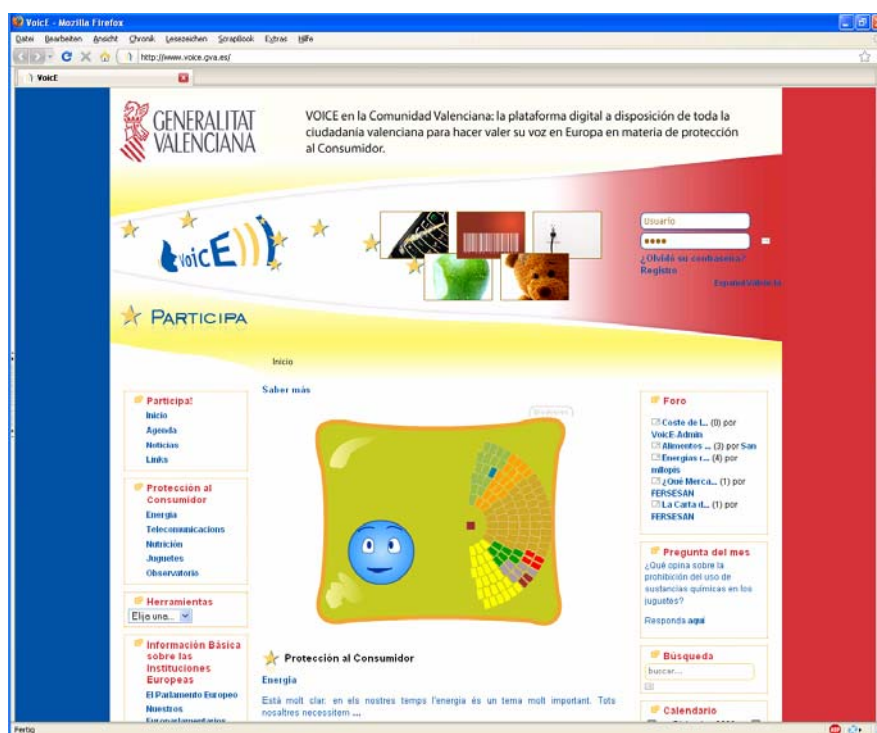


Figure 10. VoicE platform for Valencia (Spain)

⁴ <http://www.w3.org/WAI/>

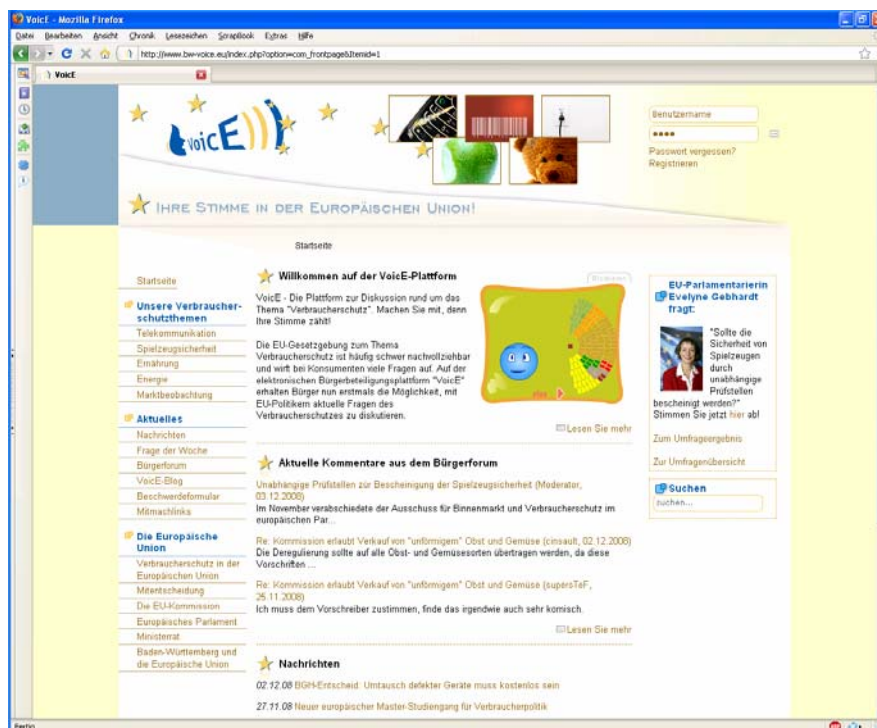


Figure 11. VoicE platform for Baden-Württemberg (Germany)

5.4 Iterative Design of the VoicE Portal with Empirical Testing

The design process of the VoicE portal was an iterative process. It was influenced by the heuristic analysis performed by project partners and the empirical testing with pilot users. While the heuristic analysis has been performed some stages earlier than the empirical testing, it mainly influenced the base system and the base user interface.

The empirical testing was performed on a pilot version of the system. After the empirical testing phase all user data have been removed from the platform. The empirical testing phase had a considerable influence on the installed system. The questionnaires for the pilot tests were answered by 37 pilot users; 17 for the German pilot and 20 for the Spanish pilot. Interviews have been conducted with two pilot users from Germany. The pilot users have been asked to first use the system and then fill out the questionnaires. The opinions about both VoicE platforms have been positive on the whole: about 67% of the users indicated a high enjoyment (65% from BW, and 70% from Valencia). Additionally the information contained on the platform were estimated as very useful. However, more detailed questions revealed usability problems on both websites, such as unclear navigation structure etc.

One of the main issues of both platforms was to make the participation features more prominent. The BW pilot website was structured as it is shown in Figure 4. The participation features were placed on the bottom of the navigation bars ("Participate", "Question of the week", and "From the forum"). The main section showed a general description of the project and the platform as well as the news.

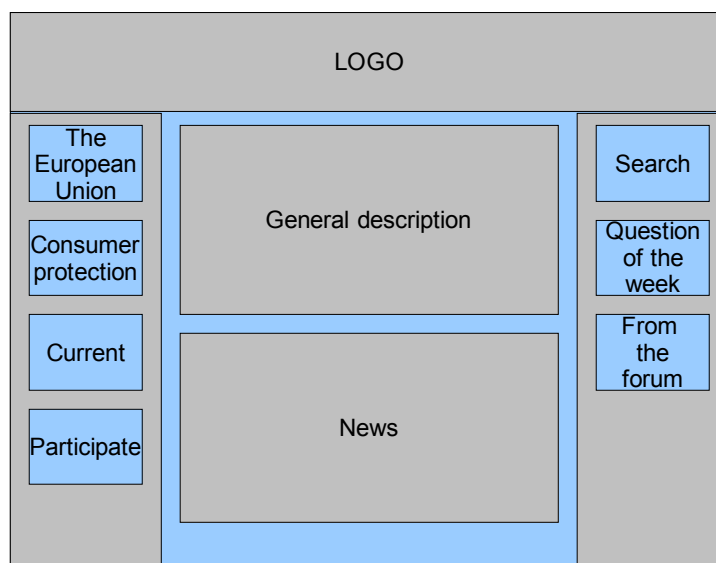


Figure 12: Pilot structure of the BW platform

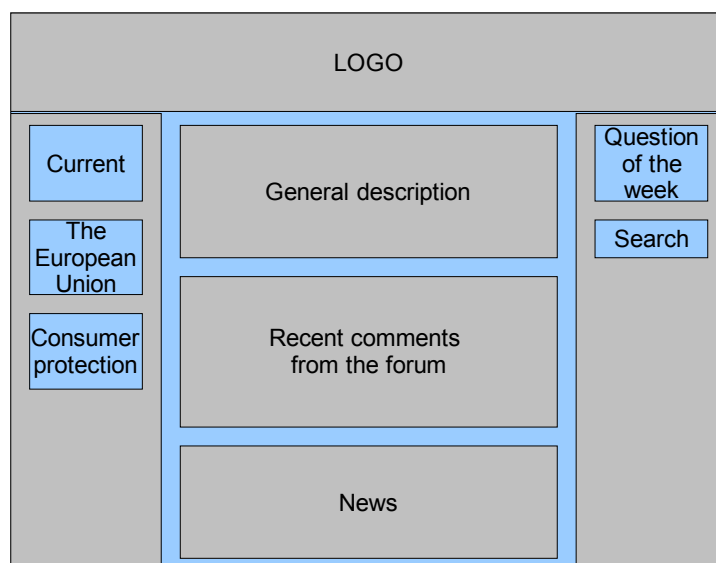


Figure 13: Current structure of the BW platform

After the revisions resulting from the testing phase, the structure as shown in Figure 5 has been implemented. The participation possibilities have been given a more prominent place in the centre of the website.

A further decision on both platforms was to reduce the provided participation features. The pilot version provided all available features (as they are described in section 5.1). The participation features have been reduced for two reasons. First, fewer features simplify the user interface. Second, participation features should only be provided if the voice of the participants will be really heard. This could not be ensured from the beginning onwards with regards to the official letter and petition feature. The current remaining features are online discussion forums, blogs, calendar of events, newsletter, comment form, frequently asked questions, user registration, and search engine.

Another decision was the personalisation of the question of the week and the linkage with specific related forum topics. If possible, the question of the week will be asked by an MEP in order to present MEPs and their fields of activities to the citizens. For example, in calendar week 49 the question of the week on the BW platform has been asked in the name of Evelyne Gebhardt⁵ (MEP) and she answered some citizens' questions in the forum.

The VoicE project is currently in the first phase of installation (the official launch took place on September 29th, 2008). The improvement of the platform will continue in the installation phase with the "collect feedback" stage, which will start in January 2009. By that time not only the usability of the features and information provided on the website will be evaluated, but also the impact of the participation on the users.

6 Conclusion and Outlook

The introduced usability engineering lifecycle helps to ensure the usability of eParticipation applications by providing a structured and comprehensive methodology to design and implement such system types. Special attention is paid to user involvement in the overall process.

The lifecycle consists of a number of stages that have been applied in the VoicE project to ensure the usability and usefulness of the platform. It is not a complete implementation of Nielsen's proposed solution, but it extends his "Discount Usability Engineering" approach to budget constraints or time pressures to optimise the lifecycle for the eParticipation context (Nielsen, 1993, p. 112).

The usability engineering methodology has been applied in the design and implementation of two platforms in two different regions of Europe. It turned out useful to improve the system by:

⁵ See http://www.bw-voice.eu/index.php?option=com_surveys&Itemid=50&act=view_survey&survey=EU-Parlamentarierin+Evelyne+Gebhardt+fragt

- detailed analysis of the overall system before the start of any implementation,
- iterative design of the systems' features, their interaction and the user interface, and
- involvement of users in the design process.

Next steps in the proposed usability engineering lifecycle involve the collect feed back stage. This also includes the evaluation of the eParticipation process in order to improve iteratively the platform till the end of the project.

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