SUSTAINING E-PARTICIPATION FOR PUBLIC VALUE CREATION

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Abstract. *Technology helps public organizations to sustain democracy restoring public trust, promoting public interest and fostering citizenship and collaboration in order to uphold participation in front of citizens that feel to be unheard and disenchanted by traditional representative and democratic institutions. Public institutions are facing the challenge of dealing with a mixed polity embracing elements of representative and direct democracy in virtue of democratic and participatory potential of information and communication technologies (ICTs) that contribute to driving public institutions and citizens to act as active co-producers of social, democratic and public value. Sustainability of public organizations relies on embracing information technology as a source that enables to connect public administration with citizens opening up to civic contribution and participation of civil society and people in order to make effectively participatory and democratic government agencies and public administration that meet the needs of citizens.*

Keywords: *information and communication technology; democracy; participation; public value; sustainability of public organizations.*

Introduction

The advent of information and communication technologies (ICTs) helps public organizations to sustain public trust, promote the public interest and encourage an active citizenship and collaboration by enhancing the interaction citizens-government in order to foster democratic participation (Denhardt & Denhardt, 2003; Vigoda, 2002).

As institutions having to cope a growing disengagement of citizens, public organizations should pay attention to causes of the decline of public trust by embracing the Internet and introducing ICTs in order to connect public administration with people, to communicate with citizens and to support the structures of democracy by enhancing participation of citizens as a means for creating and maintaining public value. ICTs contribute to sustaining the dialogue and partnership between citizens, clients, public organizations and various stakeholders as active co-producers of social, democratic and public value (Moore, 1995).

The aim of this paper is to elucidate how ICTs help to drive public organizations to behave as responsive and collaborative institutions proceeding towards sustainability by strengthening forms of democracy and encouraging the participation of citizens engaging them in contribution to public policies choices ranging from information to active participation for upholding the values of democracy.

This study is based on archival and qualitative data by the analysis and review of literature on the public sector investigating how new technologies help promoting democracy and participation connecting citizens with public administration.

The paper is structured as follows. Following the introduction, the role of information technology within public organization seeking sustainability is elucidated. In the second section, revitalizing democracy by information technology is elucidated. In the third section, after defining e-participation and elucidating different stages of e-participation, ICTs help to rediscover democracy and support participation as support to wealth of communities and source to reinforce citizenship, to support digital empowerment. Finally, discussion and conclusions follow.

The information and communication technology helps sustainable public organizations

Public organizations contribute to sustaining democratic life by maintaining public trust underlying democracy (Goodsell, 2006) and facilitate sustainable solutions (Bourgon, 2007). Public organizations should have to serve the public interest as result of dialogue with citizens based on shared values, leadership and respect for people developing policies through a process of effective collaboration with citizens as partners opening to learning and change by interacting with citizens (Denhardt & Denhardt, 2003; Denhardt & Denhardt, 2001; Vigoda, 2002; Bryer, 2006).

While e-government refers to use of information technology to improve the efficiency of government services provision to citizens (West, 2004), e-governance refers to the use of ICTs to support democratic processes, to improve interaction and relationships between government and citizenry fostering transparency, participation accountability (Dawes, 2008; Bannister & Connolly, 2012). Technology has made possible greater access to the policy process as result of dialogue and shared values by enhancing quality of citizens' participation (Denhardt & Denhardt, 2000). Investigating the concept of sustainability and analyzing how the information technology can help sustainability in government is an emerging theme (Fiorino, 2010; Janowski & Estevez, 2013; Larsson & Grönlund, 2014; Larsson & Grönlund, 2016).

Technology enables public organizations as open, responsive institutions that enforce democratic public values as impartiality, equity, honesty and fairness of government (Cordella & Bonina, 2012), serve the interest of citizens (La Porte, Demchak & Jong, 2002) and involve citizens in policy-making to restore public trust (Moon, 2002; Tolbert & Mossberger, 2006).

ICTs lead to new forms of governmental legitimacy and spaces of governance (Navarra & Cornford, 2012). ICTs contribute to providing citizen-centred services and access to information as public key resource of government (Brown, 2005) improving quality of services and fostering participation in democratic processes (Fang, 2002).

Revitalizing democracy by information technology

Technology helps democracy to evolve and involve people, organizations and public institutions to develop democratic mechanisms of governance and participation (Denhardt & Denhardt, 2003), leading to decentralized representative systems (Zittel,

2003), making accessible data and information about parliamentary institutions and legislative process, leading citizens to exert influence on policy making (Grönlund, 2001) to approach their parliamentarians before the vote (Milakovich, 2010).

Technology helps to enhance the quality of democratic governance by providing better information to citizens (Kakabadse, Kakabadse & Kouzmin, 2003). Technology opens access to information and enhances lateral communication among citizens leading to direct and strong democracy (Barber, 1999). The information technology is deployed to improve the effectiveness and efficiency of democracy that requires both a flow of information citizenry-government and effective citizen participation in the political process (Watson & Bundy, 2001).

Technology helps to develop democratic processes providing information for engaging in deliberation and participating in decision making (Tsagarousianou, 1999) enabling new forms of publicness within a public sphere (Tsagarousianou, 1998). Models of democracy in the information era tend to develop along a *continuum* in which the parliamentary chain of steering may play a critical part or new kinds of democratic practice are pointed (Bellamy, 1999).

E-democracy should contribute to sustaining dialogue and facilitating ongoing civic participation (Freeman & Quirke, 2013). E-democracy initiatives and projects may take different shapes confirming that technological and democratic linearity does not exist (Grönlund, 2003). ICTs serves as an easy way to reconcile the disconnection between people and governmental institutions and foster the public voice (Cavanaugh, 2000). ICTs help to improve the quality of information exchange government-citizens and strengthen participation by involving citizens in decision-making processes within deliberative and strong democracies in which citizens participate in the discussion about public affairs (Åstrom, 2001; Päivärinta & Sæbø, 2006).

Parliamentary institutions as symbols of political integration, representation and accountability (Raab & Bellamy, 2004) should embrace new technologies to reinvigorate representative democracy connecting to the public avoiding to become marginalized institutions that merely ratify what political executives or government parties decide (Bellamy, 2003).

The use of information technology can appear as illusionary in emphasizing the role of citizens as effective decision maker (Fuchs, 2009) and rhetorical to oppose civic engagement (Mahrer & Krimmer, 2005) coherently with a managerial model of interaction between government and citizens as customers (Chadwick & May, 2003) that helps to reinforce existing patterns of authority, influence (Rethemayer, 2006) and social structures (Parvez & Ahmed, 2006).

Sustaining e-participation: a definition

Political systems should contribute to sustaining democratization by improving participatory, deliberative and direct forms of democracy that help quality and equality of deliberation (Anttiroiko, 2003). The role of technology is to increase amounts of informal communication for sustaining the creation of social capital in communities as factor encouraging public participation (Komito, 2005).

E-democracy as the use of ICTs to support the democratic decision-making processes, relates to e-participation as knowledge, interactive and collaborative process. «Electronic participation, or eParticipation, is the use of ICT to facilitate political participation by enabling citizens to communicate with each other, civil society, their elected representatives and their government. Much more than government simply consulting citizens through surveys and petitions, eParticipation actively involves citizens in the policy process so that they can raise issues, modify agendas and change government initiatives» (Davies, 2015, p.19). According to Tambouris et al. (2015) e-participation can be defined as the participation using ICT as the only channel or alongside other non ICT channel, relating mainly to policy and decision-making for political or public policy purposes, as embedded in particular governance regimes, in the context of different political cultures, having direct impact and relations to policy goal and democracy.

It is important to consider different levels of e-participation and appreciate the value of e-participation as public policy and support for wealth of communities and means for sustaining citizenship and digital empowerment.

Understanding the levels of e-participation

Citizens can be better informed and included in decision making processes using technology that enable public participation to policy debates and consultation. Different levels of participation are elucidated in the literature about the use of ICTs for participation.

According to Macintosh (2004) three levels of participation are identified: e-enabling to support the access to the internet taking advantage of the large amount of information available; e-engaging as concerned with consulting a wide audience to enable contributions and support debate on policy issues; e-empowering to support active participation of citizens as producers of policy and facilitate bottom-up ideas emerging and exert influence on the political agenda and policy formulation. according to a growing scale over time in relation to OECD framework (2003) to take part in the decision-making and influence the policy agenda: *information* as a one-way relationship in which government make available information for citizens; in the *consultation* level citizens are encouraged to contribute their views on a particular issue; in the *active participation* citizens are empowered by actively participating in the policy making process (partnership).

Tambouris et al. (2015) identify five levels of participation between one-way or two-way channels: e-informing as prerequisite for citizens willing to contribute and e-involving as the one-way channel for providing information on policies ensuring that public concerns are considered; e-consulting and e-collaborating as a two-way channel for collecting public feedback, for a partnership with citizens actively participating in the developing alternatives and preferred solutions; e-empowering for implementing what citizens decide

ICT tools (ranging from web portals to consultation platforms, e-petitioning systems as examples) can be implemented to change or reinforce parliamentary institutions governed by path depth processes, support more participatory forms of citizenship and facilitate a two-way dialogue reinforcing participatory forms of citizenship and public

involvement based on a two way dialogue. Web portals help to bridge representation and communication functions. E-petitioning system are citizenship oriented and focus on interaction between citizens and public institutions like e-consultations (representation oriented) (Pratchett, 2007).

Towards e-participation as public policy and support for wealth of communities

E-participation initiatives should empower citizens for stimulating contribution to greater cohesiveness and inclusion within communities (Ahmed, 2007). ICTs support e-democracy and contribute to encouraging participation of citizens in policy making (Sæbø, Rose & Flak, 2008) facilitating a way of communication between citizens and politicians (Trechsel, Kies, Mendez & Schmitter, 2003).

Online citizen participation can enrich democratic processes and build public trust by enabling public agencies to receive broader and more diverse opinions from citizens than those available through traditional means of off-line participation. During the last decade within developed countries governments have developed policies to support e-participation initiatives to engage the citizen in decision-making processes in order to fight political apathy by increasing transparency and accountability.

New forms of electronic communication help to support democratic commitment of people that tend to rediscover public values and believe that participation of community will be related to government policies that encounter the will of people (King, 2006). The Internet provides a means of seeking the views of constituents on public policy and for improving the policy process. Internet-based petitions can be interpreted as a response to declining trust of citizen in political system (Lindner & Riehm, 2008).

Information technology offers citizens greater opportunities for to participate in decision-making processes at all levels because participation of citizens in political decision-making is considered a core aspect of modern democracy. Social sustainability relying on the widespread contribution of citizens in every area implies to develop models of democratic engagement and embed participation in the organizational and cultural infrastructures of modern governance systems. Thereby, public institutions should develop models of democratic engagement and embed in participation within organizational infrastructures of governance systems (Molinari, 2010), search the feedback of citizens about legislation or policies (Östling, 2011).

Sustaining citizenship and digital empowerment

E-democracy relies on the capacity of new communication environment to enhance degree and quality of public participation in government (Kakabadse, Kakabadse & Kouzmin, 2003). Participation serves important democratic values: legitimacy, justice and the effectiveness of public action (Fung, 2006).

Sustaining participation as pillar of representative democracy helps to contrast with some democratic deficits emerging in the last few decades: a growing apathy of citizens in front of the politics and democratic institutions; an increasing number of people turning away from politics and feeling unheard or abandoned by representative democracy and traditional intermediaries; declining voter turnouts; decreasing membership in political parties. In the Council Regulation (EU) No. 390, 14 April 2014

Establishing the 'Europe for Citizens' programme for the period 2014-2020 the European institutions should contribute to sustaining the European citizenship by improving conditions to ensure and strengthen civic and democratic participation and engagement by developing citizens' understanding of the EU policy making-process. Introducing ICTs can help to reinforce the European Union citizenship and enhance forms and tools for increasing civic engagement and citizens' participation in the democratic life and public affairs.

ICTs contribute to mobilising people from passive to active attitude, moving services from being 'user-centric' toward 'user-driven', and contribute to transform societal and political approach from 'government for people' into 'government by people'. Digital empowerment of citizens as paradigm of good governance relies on e-participation tools that lead the citizen to acquire digital skills to participate in public life.

ICTs do not ensure effective deliberative participation without engaging and including citizens in the political decision making (Rose & Sanford, 2007). There are no clear guidelines that direct and effectively contribute to implement a sustainable participatory process (Islam, 2008) even if ICTs contribute to increasing the effectiveness of e-participation initiatives (Phang & Kankanhalli, 2008).

Democratic institutions should provide sources for digital literacy and an equalized access to technology in order to include and drive people into political and democratic decision-making processes (Krueger, 2002; O'Donnell & Henriksen, 2002) searching for and effective and valuable citizen involvement and engagement an listened about their preferences on policymaking (Cardoso, Cunha & Nascimento, 2006).

Conclusions

Reinventing public administration for driving change relies on managing strategically the potential of new information and communication technology as a source that supports public organizations and people to rediscover democratic values and democracy as efficient and effective form of organizing public life that enables the creation of public value within communities. As institutions embracing and using information technology to make more transparent administrative processes, public organizations tend to search for effective involvement and participation of citizens and people to constructing the *res publica* as a driver of change and value creation within society.

ICTs offer public administration opportunities for connecting and reconciling with citizens by structuring new forms of democracy and enhancing the active participation of citizens as means and source to create public value within communities. New technologies drive public organizations to engage an aware and active citizenship for policy contribution.

The main contribution of this study is to provide an interpretive framework in order to identify the trajectories leading public organizations and citizens to move towards forms of participation that enable public value creation. Public institutions should use ICTs in order to revitalize democracy and enhance democratic values that emerge in effective and sustainable participation of citizens in policy making and in public life. Public institutions should support free access to data and information as public source

for enabling public value creation within communities. Public institutions should promote initiatives to remove the obstacles and barriers that impede to citizens to access the information as source that enables involvement and participation. Revitalizing democracy by use of ICTs relies on sustaining participation of citizens in policy choices and decision-making processes. Thereby, citizens should have access to information, have opinions, interact with institutional representative and government organizations within constitutional system. Citizens should be educated and trained to be involved in debate and discussion about public policies and problems that interest the community.

Building sustainable public organizations relies on involving and engaging people by embracing technology for rediscovering the values of democracy fostering the participation of citizens in public affairs and policy. Thereby, the design and implementation of e-participation initiatives seems to be still in its infancy. Public organizations strengthening the channels of two-way communication for active participation by embracing an approach based on citizen-centred collaboration have the opportunity to encourage and foster a participatory democracy technology-driven by linking forms of representative and direct democracy as to serve the legitimation function as necessary intermediaries opening up to contribution of citizens through co-production of social and democratic values.

Creating public value implies that public organizations are able to involve and engage citizens to access information, discuss and participate to policy processes and choices. Participation is emerging as a source and public value that enables communities to rediscover the meaning of people living together to have wealth and create public health. Technology helps participation as enabler of value creation processes. Sustaining participation by information technology helps public institutions, businesses and citizens to co-create public value. Participation tends to emerge as a source and driver of value creation within society. Future research perspectives imply to investigate how information technology helps participation within local governments and autonomies.

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