

SUSTAINING PARTICIPATION: CITIZENSHIP, TECHNOLOGY AND PUBLIC VALUE

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Abstract. *Technology is opening up to public organizations sustaining democracy, restoring public trust and promoting public interest as responsive institutions fostering citizenship and collaboration in order to uphold citizens' participation in front of citizens feeling unheard and disenchanted by traditional representative and democratic institutions. Technology is driving public institutions and citizens to act as active co-producers of social, democratic and public value. Rediscovering citizenship by e-participation can contribute to democratic development of society leading public organizations and citizens to proceed to build participatory, open and inclusive communities creating social and public value. Public organizations embracing new technologies tend to sustain and enhance the participation of citizens by making participatory and democratic government agencies and public administration.*

Keywords: *technology; democracy; public organizations; participation; citizenship.*

Introduction

Technology is leading public organizations to sustain public trust and promote public interest as responsive institutions encouraging active citizenship and collaboration enhancing the interaction between citizens and government, fostering democratic participation (Denhardt & Denhardt, 2003; Vigoda, 2002).

Public organizations and institutions coping with a growing disengagement of citizens pay attention to causes of the decline of public trust embracing Internet technologies in order to connect and communicate with citizens by enhancing participation of citizens for creating and maintaining public value. Technology is driving public organizations to build and sustain dialogue and partnership between public and governmental organizations, citizens and various stakeholders as active co-producers of social, democratic and public value (Moore, 1995).

The aim of this paper is to elucidate how technology opens up to new opportunities for increasing access to information and rediscovering the participation of citizens as an important attribute of citizenship. Rediscovering citizenship by e-participation can contribute to the democratic development of society leading public organizations and citizens in order to build participatory, open and inclusive communities creating social and public value. E-democracy as the use of ICTs to support the democratic decision-making processes relates to e-participation as knowledge, interactive and collaborative process (Sæbø, Rose & Flak, 2008). Technology is leading to enable and restyle democracy opening up to a renewal of public participation within a 'mixed polity' embracing elements of representative and direct democracy strengthened by

democratic and participatory potential of technology able to challenge representative institutions and democracy (Raab & Bellamy, 2004).

New technologies are leading public organizations to behave as responsive and collaborative institutions proceeding towards sustainability, strengthening forms of democracy and encouraging the participation of citizens by 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 analysis and review of the literature on the public sector investigating how new technologies are driving to promote democracy and participation connecting citizens with public administration.

Understanding the relationship between participation and citizenship

The concept of citizenship is normally related to a broad set of social and civic responsibilities that also refer to the right of participation in decision-making about social, economic and cultural life. Citizenship as participation tends to express the human agency in the political arena enabling people to act as agents (Lister, 1998). Gaventa and Valderrama (1999) elucidate a shift in quality and characteristics of participation moving towards citizen, policy, decision-making, and implementation. Citizenship as the right of participation implies that citizens tend to influence and exercise control in governance. Citizenship as an enabler of participation and inclusion requires designing new modes of building the relationship between civil society and the State (Gaventa & Valderrama, 1999).

Participation serves to support important democratic values: legitimacy, justice and the effectiveness of public action (Fung, 2006). Sustaining participation can contribute to contrast with a growing apathy of citizens feeling unheard or abandoned by politics. Five purposes justify participation (Innes & Booher, 2004): participation is legally and formally established by law; the decision makers consider the preferences of the public before and for making their decisions; the decision makers can improve their decisions by incorporating information, knowledge, and inputs emerging from voices and contributions of citizens. Participation permits to ensure fairness and justice and gets legitimacy for public decisions.

It is necessary to understand and define the concept of participation. It is no possible to understand the value and the meaning of participation considering the participation only as a stage in which citizens and government meet in a formal interaction (Innes & Booher, 2004). Participation should be fair, representative and transparent requiring that citizens are committed to making difference and administrators to behave as professionally responsible. «Participation should be seen as a multi-way interaction in which citizens and other players work and talk in formal and informal ways to influence action in the public arena before it is virtually a foregone conclusion» (Innes & Booher, 2004, p.429). It is necessary to move toward a collaborative participation as more representative practice leading administrators to connect with their communities and enabling citizens to understand public affairs and questions about debating and becoming more integrated into the polity, helping the building of civic capacity. Collaborative participation enables participants to discover how they benefit by improving resources (Innes & Booher, 2004).

Public participation is mainly about having a positive impact on final decisions (Lowndes, Pratchett & Stoker, 2001, p.213). Citizen's learning is a valid outcome of participation. It is necessary: to recruit citizens as active participants; to involve and engage different citizen groups and issues; to link the issues of participation to decision making by keeping citizens well informed about the outcome produced (Lowndes, Pratchett & Stoker, 2001, p.454).

Today, public organizations promote citizenship and shared responsibilities encouraging both public discussion with community and involving citizens in government activities (Bourgon, 2007). Improving public participation relies on changing administrative processes and rethinking about the redesign of roles and relationships between citizens and administrators. Decision making without public participation is ineffective. Authentic participation relies on citizens and administrators building trust, commitment, developing an open and honest discussion. It is necessary to overcome some barriers to participation: the nature of life in contemporary society characterized also by lack of education within families and communities, in the schools and by market and consumerist economies driving apathy and non-participatory attitudes; the administrative processes limit the capacity of citizens to participate because of flowing in one way from the administrator to citizen feeling that information is controlled by administrators; techniques of participation do not enable an authentic participation (King, Feltey & Susel, 1998).

Technology helps communication with citizens leading public organizations to rediscover citizenship

Public organizations as responsive institutions serve the public interest as issue emerging from the dialogue with citizens based on shared leadership and respect for people. Public organizations tend to develop sustainable policies making a meaningful contribution for community through a process of effective collaboration opening up to learning and change by interacting with citizens as proactive partners in the work of government, making possible greater access to the policy process and enhancing quality of citizens' participation towards a higher degree of collective action as a principle of governance (Bryer, 2006; Denhardt & Denhardt, 2003; Denhardt & Denhardt, 2000; Fiorino, 2010; Vigoda, 2002).

Technology is leading to open and responsive public organizations serving the interest of citizens (La Porte, Demchak & Jong, 2002), driving transformational changes in the public sector by enhancing democratic processes for learning and action in order to improve an interactive relationship between government and citizenry (e-governance) (Dawes, 2008).

Information and communication technologies (ICTs) lead public institutions to involve citizens in policy-making (Bingham, Nabatchi & O'Leary, 2005), to restore and improve interaction between government and citizens engendering public trust (Tolbert & Mossberger, 2006), developing e-government initiatives, enforcing democratic public values as impartiality, equity, honesty and fairness of government (Cordella & Bonina, 2012), opening up to new forms of governmental legitimacy and governance (Navarra & Cornford, 2012). Gov 2.0 strategies necessarily rely on citizens' participation (Ferro & Molinari, 2010).

In the following sections, it is elucidated the role technology can play in order to help democracy and reinforce e-participation. The characteristics of e-participation are presented. In the last section, the dark side of participation and some limits for employing technology for democracy and participation are elucidated.

Technology helps democracy and reinforces e-participation

ICTs should lead governments and public institutions to become more and more democratic and participatory organizations through new channels of democratic involvement and empowerment by developing policies through processes of information, consultation, and active participation. Technology helps increase the amounts of informal communication for sustaining the creation of social capital in communities for encouraging public participation (Komito, 2005), driving political systems towards new participatory, deliberative, associative and direct forms of democracy (Anttiroiko, 2003).

ICTs contribute to rediscover the role and the importance of democratic practices and values. Technology seems to be putting the democracy first (Denhardt & Denhardt, 2003), leading to decentralized, accessible and responsive representative systems (Zittel, 2003), making accessible data and information about parliamentary institutions and the legislative process, leading citizens to exert influence on policy making (Grönlund, 2001) and enhancing quality of democratic governance by providing better information to citizens (Kakabadse, Kakabadse & Kouzmin, 2003) approaching their parliamentarians before the vote (Milakovich, 2010).

Technology opens access to information and enhances lateral communication among citizens leading towards a direct and strong democracy (Barber, 1999). The information technology is deployed in order to improve the effectiveness and efficiency of democracy that requires both a flow of information between citizenry and government sustaining effective citizen participation in the political process (Watson & Bundy, 2001). Technology contributes to developing democratic processes enabling new forms of publicness within a public sphere (Tsagarousianou, 1999; Tsagarousianou, 1998).

In the information era, democracy is developing along a *continuum* between the parliamentary chain of steering and new kinds of democratic practice (Bellamy, 1999). ICTs contribute to foster the public voice and reconcile the disconnection between people and governmental institutions (Cavanaugh, 2000). ICTs offer opportunities for removing barriers to information access and to active participation in public life. Different scenarios tend to emerge. ICTs help reinvigorate representative democracy, establish more direct forms of democracy and reinforce the power of political elites giving powerful tools (Bellamy, 2003).

E-democracy initiatives and projects should be considered as a process sustaining dialogue and facilitating ongoing civic participation (Freeman & Quirke, 2013) taking different shapes and confirming that technological and democratic linearity does not exist (Grönlund, 2003).

E-democracy relates to e-participation as knowledge, interactive and collaborative process relying on the use of ICTs to support the democratic decision-making

processes (Sæbø, Rose & Flak, 2008). There are different definitions about the meaning of e-participation. «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 the 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 refers to the use of ICTs 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 a direct impact and relations to policy goal and democracy.

Rediscovering both meaning and value of participation should contribute to reinforce citizenship and enhance civic engagement and citizens' participation in the democratic life and public affairs. ICTs can play a relevant and critical role for involving people to participate in public affairs and public democratic life. ICTs permit to sustain democracy in order to improve quality of information exchange government-citizens and to enhance degree and quality of public participation in government (Kakabadse, Kakabadse & Kouzmin, 2003) coherently with the development of deliberative and strong democracies enabling citizens to participate in the discussion about public affairs (Åstrom, 2001; Päivärinta & Sæbø, 2006).

Understanding the characteristics of e-participation

Online citizen participation can enrich and revitalize democratic processes in order to fight political apathy and build public trust by engaging citizens and increasing transparency and accountability. In developed countries, governments tend to sustain e-participation initiatives and adopt e-government strategies (Tambouris, Macintosh, Smith, Panopoulou & Tarabanis, 2012) in order to build a new dialogue between citizens and politicians. Participation of community should be related to government policies that encounter the will of people (King, 2006).

E-participation initiatives should empower citizens for stimulating contribution to greater cohesiveness and inclusion (Ahmed, 2007) as to strengthen representative democracy facilitating a way of communication between citizens and politicians (Treichsel, Kies, Mendez & Schmitter, 2003). New technologies encourage participation of citizens in policy making in terms of services delivery and outcome, quality, efficiency and equity, civic engagement, deliberative and democratic effects (Sæbø, Rose & Flak, 2008).

Citizens can be better informed and included in decision making processes acting petitions, submitting enquiries, employing e-consultation and discussion, participating to policy debates. Internet-based petitions can be interpreted as a response to declining trust of a citizen in the political system (Lindner & Riehm, 2008). New technologies offer greater opportunities for encouraging citizens to participate in decision-making processes. It is necessary to develop models of democratic engagement and embed participation in the organizational and cultural infrastructures of modern governance systems (Luehrs & Molinari, 2010).

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 to facilitate bottom-up ideas exerting influence on 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, Kalampokis and Tarabanis (2008) 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 as web portals, consultation platforms, e-petitioning systems can be implemented to change or reinforce parliamentary institutions governed by path depth processes, to 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 contribute to bridging representation and communication functions. E-petitioning system is citizenship oriented and focuses on the interaction between citizens and public institutions like e-consultations (representation oriented) (Pratchett, 2007).

The dark side of the use of technology for sustaining democracy and participation

Thereby, some risks and limits tend to emerge. Technology can be used as a rhetorical and illusionary means for opposing a civic engagement (Maherer & Krimmer, 2005) emphasizing the role of citizens as effective decision makers (Fuchs, 2009) and following a managerial model of interaction between government and citizens as customers (Chadwick & May, 2003) that reinforces the existing patterns of authority and social structures (Rethemayer, 2006; Parvez & Ahmed, 2006).

Thereby, public institutions seem to be mainly interested in one-way information provision to citizens without searching for the feedback of citizens about legislation or policies (Östling, 2011). E-participation initiatives seem to support e-participation as an alternative communication channel without challenging institutionalized centers of power (Tambouris, Macintosh, Smith, Panopoulou & Tarabanis, 2012).

Technological strategic design and evaluation methods for participatory activities do not ensure effective deliberative participation without engagement and inclusion of citizens in the political decision making (Rose & Sanford, 2007). While the use of coherent ICT tools for different e-participation objectives at different phases of the policy making processes increases the effectiveness of e-participation initiatives (Phang & Kankanhalli, 2008) there are no clear guidelines that effectively contribute to

implementing a sustainable participatory process (Islam, 2008). Research combining stakeholders with methods, tools, and environment, integrating both different disciplinary contributions seems to be lacking (Susha & Grönlund, 2012) and should consider social, political and technical perspectives (Macintosh & Smith, 2002).

Conclusions

Technology opens up to new opportunities leading citizens and public institutions to proceed towards public value creation within communities. Technology offers public administration opportunities for connecting with citizens by building new forms of democracy and enhancing the active participation of citizens. Technology is leading public organizations to behave as responsive institutions engaging aware and active citizenship for policy contribution, engaging citizens in public policy choices, rediscovering citizenship as a relevant attribute of civic and public life.

Sustaining an authentic democratic participation of citizens relies on ensuring an equalized access to technology to involve people into political and democratic decision-making processes (Krueger, 2002). It is necessary to select strategic choices in order to value the contribution of citizens that can be listened about their preferences on policymaking (Cardoso, Cunha & Nascimento, 2006) avoiding that the most of the people are excluded because of the digital literacy divide (O'Donnell & Henriksen, 2002).

Building open, accessible and authentic participatory public organizations rely on embracing technology for engaging people and rediscovering the participation of citizens in public affairs and policy. Thereby, the design and the implementation of e-participation initiatives seems to be still in its infancy. Public organizations strengthening the channels of two-way communication for active participation and following an approach based on citizen-centered collaboration have the opportunity to encourage and foster a participatory democracy technology-driven by linking forms of representative and direct democracy opening up to the contribution of citizens through co-production of social and democratic values.

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