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# eGovernance & Social Media

## Editorial

## Articles

# Editorial: eGovernance and Social Media

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The effective use of social media is indeed a difficult process for enterprises and civil organisations, but for governments and public sector entities the challenges seem even more daunting. One of the reasons for this is the difficulties of changing organisational work practices and structures that are generally quite entrenched in long-standing public organisations. However, as this issue of the ePractice European Journal depicts, much is also due to the sheer complexity of the huge range of public sector tasks; in addition to literally having to serve everybody in a transparent way, while also trying to reconcile highly contradictory demands. Yet, governments should employ social media tools given the demonstrable benefits accrued, if done well, in addition to the fact that citizens, businesses and organisations increasingly use social media and have therefore begun demanding that governments use them as well.

Indeed, the aforementioned actors have started to use social media to both usurp government's traditional roles and challenge the way they work and the decisions they take. Fundamentally, social media are challenging governments to reassess the balance between their control and collaboration functions; shifting the balance between representative and direct democracy, and complementing rather than replacing traditional media and communication channels. But, quite clearly, this is only the beginning of the story.

The first article in this issue examines one of the fundamental debates surrounding the use of social media in government, i.e. the democratic paradox arising from the case of Canada. **Jeffrey Roy** deftly analyses the dichotomy of often contradictory tensions between control and communications on the one hand, and collaboration and empowerment on the other. In this regard, Canada is an ideal laboratory, given its high proportion of social media usage on the part of the citizenry. In examining the evidence, the author concludes that there are strong reasons to believe that such a paradox does exist, but it is not sustainable, hence a government like Canada's has a twofold design challenge, First, in the immediate term, in order to create wider space for incremental experimentation, new discursive capacities online have to be forged, premised on principles of inclusiveness, openness and meaningful engagement. Second, over the medium term, the roles and relative power of elected politicians, public officials and citizens should be rethought and redistributed in a new manner that re-aligns representational and participative democracy.

**Jakob Svensson** provides a perceptive lens on this issue through a bottom-up approach. He uses ethnographic and 'nethnograhic' methods to study social media use by middle-class citizens in southern Sweden organising against the local authority's decision to close a public bathhouse. Basic observations are made, such as the key role played by a core group of activists and the complementary reinforcing relationship between traditional and social media in political activism. Underlying this, however, are the ways in which social media are being used by individual activists themselves, not just to change something but also as a form of self-reflexivity and a way of forming their identity in the group and wider society. This is then linked to the 'network logic' which, the author argues, provides an increasingly important filter through which the activists organise, produce and share information, as well as conceive of the world, and how this might challenge and change tradition and the public institutions themselves.

The next paper takes us from Sweden to Portugal, where some similar observations are made by **José Carlos Mota** and **Gonçalo Santinha** in the city of Aveiro. Using a recent case study, in which the city authorities took a unilateral decision to redevelop an important part of the urban area, they demonstrate how social media were employed by local residents to challenge and overturn this plan. They contend that those who are affected by a decision have the right to be involved in the policy-making process, and that their contribution may actually promote more sustainable and resilient solutions. As in Sweden, the authors also underline the key role played by a core group of activists and the complementary reinforcing relationship between traditional and social media. Furthermore, they highlight the dilemma, also noted by Jeffrey Roy, that social media are challenging the perception held by many elected officials that civic movements have no democratic legitimacy. In these officials' view, such movements do not represent a truly active citizenship but instead hide a political agenda aiming to defy the Mayor and other elected representatives, and question the Council's planning and technical expertise. This goes to the heart of the debate between representative democracy on one hand and direct democracy on the other, and how social media, along with other developments, make it possible to change the equation.

On a local level, social media and governance can have their greatest impact. It is at this level that citizens can most readily see the results of their participation in the political process and where digital tools can most effectively support traditional activism.

Moving now east, **Domagoj Bebić**, **Bernard Zenzerovic** and **Milica Vučković** examine how the Croatian local authorities have been using the potential of the Internet to engage citizens in the decision-making process. In addition, they look at how citizens use platforms for participation offered by the local government, either for expressing their cynicism as some theories suggest or for constructive discussion which, according to other authors, improves democracy. In examining evidence from the city of Pula, the authors concur using Habermas' theory that citizen debate has to be structured if we want good results. In addition, they reflect on Schudson's contention that without 'limiting debate, defining issues, and restricting alternatives, no debate can be rational'. This case study shows that, although the potential for distrust is ever present, cynicism can be alleviated to some extent if, first, coverage by the mainstream media encourages citizens' online participation, and, second, if the city authorities thereby improve the way they work.

Our geographical grand tour now takes us a little south to the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia. **Koste Budinoski** and **Vladimir Trajkovik** consider the potential role of social media in governance to increase social capital, transparency, anti-corruption impacts, democracy, law enforcement, trust, citizen inclusion and empowerment. In measuring the use of social media by the government of the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia in the context of the EU's eGovernment benchmarking methodology, they propose to include a fifth stage in the existing stage model focused on eInclusion

and eEmpowerment largely measured by social media. Social media, they argue, have the potential to redefine the social contract between citizens and state.

Moving now to the European level, **Oli Lacigova**, **Anna Maizite** and **Benjamin Cave** chart the evolution of eParticipation projects and discuss the uptake of social media in the latest wave of such projects funded under the EU's CIP PSP 2009 programme, building on the lessons learned from the pioneering eParticipation Preparatory Action. The authors contend that eParticipation projects benefit from the use of social media in two key ways: first, social media platforms such as Facebook make eParticipation platforms more visible to audiences otherwise hard to reach, and second, the use of social media can enhance the likelihood of eParticipation becoming a significant concern of citizen's everyday lives. They conclude that eParticipation can only succeed when engaging citizens through content channels, which are otherwise popular, rather than operating independently of them.

**Yannis Charalabidis**, **Robert Kleinfeld** and **Euripidis Loukis** describe the 'Padgets' project, supported by the EU's Seventh Framework Programme for research, which explores advanced forms of exploiting social media in government for participative policy making, and which aims to intensify interaction with citizens concerning new or existing public policies and services. A platform is being built to simultaneously publish policy-related content and micro-applications for multiple social media, as well as collect data on citizens' interaction with them (e.g. views, comments, ratings, votes, etc.). The information captured will then undergo various types of advanced processing (e.g. access analytics, opinion mining, simulation modelling) in order to extract synthetic conclusions and provide support to government policy makers, always respecting data privacy guidelines. The research is ongoing, but the authors already conclude that, although technology can provide functionalities like these, making them effective will require significant changes in governmental agencies at the organisational, human resource and technological levels.

Remaining at the European level, Efpraxia Dalakiouridou, **Efthimios Tambouris** and **Konstantinos Tarabanis** describe how European institutions have embraced social media and the networks they support. In the context of eParticipation, the authors report on the results of a survey charting how these institutions can use social media to disseminate a wide array of political information regarding Common Market policies; stimulate awareness about their activities and connect with other horizontal networks. Relating their findings to social network theories, as well as to social capital and technological theories, the authors show that Twitter is the preferred method of communication with the European public, followed by Facebook, whilst communication media, such as YouTube and Vimeo, are also used. Overall, it seems that online social media are mainly used as a 'cross-dissemination and awareness space'. The authors conclude that both theoretical and empirical research could further focus on a framework that allows the assessment of social networks and civic engagement and addresses how usage can contribute to democratic discourse and participation.

# Social Media's Democratic Paradox: Lessons from Canada

The purpose of this article is to explore the paradoxical impacts of social media on democratic and governmental processes in Canada - specifically, a dichotomy of often contradictory tensions between control and communications on the one hand, and collaboration and empowerment on the other. In this regard, Canada is an ideal laboratory, given its high proportion of social media usage on the part of the citizenry. Drawing from the Canadian experience, the paper thus seeks to explore: i) how governments are using social media at present; ii) the political-administrative cleavage that shapes this usage; and iii) the main institutional tensions requiring redress in order to more fully leverage social media for more inclusion and collaboration - as opposed to communications and control.

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> A polity that is less trusted and less collaborative at the political level is at the very least going to face a significant handicap in fostering new forms of administrative and participative governance both internally and externally.

# 1. Introduction[1]

*An online democracy cannot and should not mirror the procedures of traditional democratic institutions, but must instead be designed to reflect the fundamental requirements of democracy (consent, legitimacy) in a form that is suited to the unique conditions and human behaviour of the Internet'(Fatman, 2007: 71).*

Rhetoric pertaining to the rise of social media and its impacts on the public sector has often emphasised the empowering and democratising aspects of these new networks. Accordingly, we hear much of the promise of 'Government 2.0' - a movement encapsulating a more participative workforce within government and a more engaged citizenry externally. Despite some credence to this view, however, there are also powerful counter-forces at play. In contrast to widened involvement and collaboration, these inherently centralising counter-forces emphasise communication and control and often view democratisation as threatening or destabilising and thus something to be contained to the extent possible.

Such is the democratic paradox of social media, a dichotomy of often contradictory tensions that are the topics explored in this article with evidence and examples from Canada (and to a lesser extent its neighbour, the United States). Canada is a useful laboratory for such an examination, given its status in 2011 as the country with the greatest proportions of its citizenry embracing social media[2]. Drawing from the Canadian experience, the main objective of this article is to better understand: i) how governments are using social media at present; ii) the political-administrative cleavage that shape this usage; and iii) the main institutional tensions requiring redress in order to more fully leverage social media for more inclusion and collaboration - as opposed to communications and control.

# 2. Social Media and Power

Social media, which is defined for the purpose of this paper, as online venues and networks for information exchange, learning, and collective mobilisation, is an important facilitator of a more expansive and interactive online universe. Like many others, the Wikipedia definition of Web 2.0 emphasises collaboration. This emphasis on collaboration is the linchpin of Web 2.0 as an evolving and more interactive online architecture, an emerging age of participation viewed as an historic occasion to fundamentally rethink and redesign how governments interact and engage with their citizens (Shirky, 2008).

Nonetheless, to claim that social media is inherently democratising is a sweeping generalisation requiring both nuance and reflection. With respect to broad societal changes, here the case for democratisation is perhaps the most compelling, especially in recent times. Along with heightened transparency and awareness in established democracies, it has been witnessed that a rapid emergence of social revolutions in countries such as Tunisia and Egypt that have been facilitated in important ways by a growing online infrastructure and social media channels. Shirky (2008) has been among the most prominent advocates for new forms of societal governance that are driven by the power of collective intelligence and dispersed networks.

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1   The editing and research assistance of Ms. Obbia Barni is graciously acknowledged and appreciated.
2   In 2011, Canada had the most social networking users in the world on a per capita basis, according to eMarketer, a research firm. About 47.4 % of Canadians were using social media at least once a month in 2011, compared to 47.2 % of Americans, 42.4 % of South Koreans and 40.2 % of Australians. Canada is expected to be overtaken by the US in 2012 using this same measurement basis. Source: The Globe and Mail.

Despite this real potential for collective innovation from newly derived strengths of widened networks, others suggest that this strength of weak ties also carries limits. Gladwell (2010), for example, suggests that social media is insufficient for large-scale systemic change:

> The drawbacks of networks scarcely matter if the network isn't interested in systemic change - if it just wants to frighten or humiliate or make a splash - or if it doesn't need to think strategically. But if you're taking on a powerful and organised establishment you have to be a hierarchy (Gladwell, 2010)[3].

Globally, then, there is an undeniable ascent in expectations of transparency and involvement on the part of citizenries, much as governments, in turn, eagerly deploy rhetoric in this regard. Yet, the reality is much more complex than the rhetoric suggests, as much depends not only on the traditional foundations of particular democratic and governmental systems, but on how such systems are evolving and adapting to an increasingly digital environment, where social media is becoming so prominent in many facets of social, civic and market endeavours. In the political realm, promising and delivering empowerment through social media is starkly different.

The most powerful illustration of such duality is President Obama, or more accurately the contrast between then-Senator and candidate Obama and the current President seeking second term re-election. The 2008 campaign was digitally notable for the Obama team's innovative and widespread deployment of social media, not only concerning means of fundraising but also in mobilising volunteers and advocates (Hardy et al., 2010). Such innovations propelled then-Senator Obama past the more established candidate, Hillary Clinton, especially in the so-called caucus states where partisan members must not only vote but also partake in extended meetings where enthusiasm and engagement are prominent determinants of success (Hardy et al., 2010).

Once in power, there was initially much hope that the massive online movement for candidate Obama could be sustained into a new form of political mobilisation transcending traditional partisan boundaries (very much in line with President Obama's calls for greater unity and less division). This has not happened. Instead, the 2012 online campaign to re-elect the President is a sophisticated and highly centralised organisation premised on fundraising, data analysis, and communications (de Fremery, 2012). Whatever the outcome of the 2012 election, in contrast to the aspirations of many 2008 voters, especially the youth and so-called independents (not aligned with either major political party), the national polity during the first Obama mandate has become more polarised and divisive (Hardy et al., 2010)[4].

Some evidence suggests that social media is a contributing factor, reinforcing what a leading Canadian philosopher has called, 'the shout doctrine' where the citizenry becomes more opinionated and competitive, but also less cohesive and tolerant of a plurality of viewpoints and perspectives (Kingwell, 2010). Similarly, the 2012 process of the Republican Party Presidential Primaries has featured a familiar nexus of fundraising and television advertising, with social media subservient to such traditional strands of political organisation and messaging (Brown, 2012).

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3  More specifically, it reads as follows: 'Web 2.0 is a term describing the trend in the use of World Wide Web technology and web design that aims to enhance creativity information sharing, and, most notably, collaboration among users' (March 2012).

4  Caucus states are variations of state-level primary contests leading to the selection of the Presidential nominee in both major political parties. Unlike primaries where voters simply cast a ballot, caucuses entail campaigning on site by candidate representatives including speeches and efforts at swaying voters who, in turn, must appear and often await the final act of voting over the course of an evening or afternoon (in some instances, voting is quite visible as supporters gather in different parts of a common room). It is thus much more important in caucus states to have mobilised teams of volunteers both at the voting site and across communities in order to ensure that voters show up and remain committed to a particular candidate.

# 3. The Canadian Case

An analysis of the 2011 federal election in Canada reveals social media essentially as a communications platform for partisan operatives and traditional media intermediaries, without any notable extension of public engagement and involvement in the campaign and its partisan participants (Baran, 2011). In both Canada and the US, political parties and their electoral contests lie at the heart of the social media paradox - promising democratisation but acting evermore centralised in their actions and communications (Roy, 2010/2011). Democracy can thus still be strengthened through more awareness and competitive debate, but it also becomes more fractious and divisive (Shane, 2004; Owens, 2010).

Such forces further cross-over into the realm of governing and what transpires after elections with a similar set of contradictions at play. An examination of social media usage by the Canadian Government illustrates this point. Despite the presence on social media venues of many politicians from all political parties, the official websites of the legislative branch (i.e. the Canadian Parliament) are devoid of any social media channels and links. By contrast, the executive branch (led by the Prime Minister and his now-majority Conservative Party) includes an array of social media tools mostly all designed to communicate information and imaging on government policies and services. Such pronouncements are typically fashioned in a partisan manner, highlighting Ministerial action and above all else the branding of the 'Harper Government'[5].

Accordingly, the Prime Minister dominates in the realm of Twitter - of course less a reflection of continual tweeting on the part of the individual himself than a sophisticated partisan and communications-oriented apparatus designed to both proactively and reactively shape both image and message. Echoing longstanding concerns about Prime Ministerial dominance that predate but are seemingly accelerated by online visibility and interaction, Prime Minister Harper has nearly twice as many Twitter followers as the next most 'popular' Member of Parliament (though still a tiny proportion of the overall population).

Perhaps more telling is the reality that of more than three hundred elected members of Parliament, only two can boast to having more than one hundred thousand followers (as of March 2012), an extremely modest number in a country with more than thirty million people (and in 2011 the highest proportion of this populous anywhere in the world engaged in social media). Despite many surveys demonstrating a widespread desire across the Canadian populous for social media to serve as a platform of engagement with elected officials[6], the overwhelming usage of social media channels such as Facebook and Twitter at present is broadcast-oriented with little in the way of substantive exchange[7]. Indeed, it speaks volumes that the official Government of Canada website devoted to public consultation exercises is completely devoid (as of March 2012) of social media tools and channels[8].

At the same time, beyond partisan branding and media messaging, Prime Ministers and Ministers must also defend themselves in this new and often confrontational electronic arena - in ways that

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5    See: www.gc.ca for the main Government of Canada homepage.
6    For example, a 2011 Fleishman-Hillard public engagement survey 'revealed that Canadians would be more engaged in conversations on government policy if there were ways to participate online. The same study also revealed that a third of Canadians have an improved view of elected officials who use social media to engage with constituents.' Source: http://www.newswire.ca/en/story/848851/social-media-key-to-citizen-engagement-54-of-canadians-would-engage-more-with-government-if-there-were-ways-to-participate-online.
7    On a recent visit to China, for example, the Prime Minister tweeted of his encounter with a Panda Bear at a Chinese zoo (though antidotal, such an example is indicative of the sorts of tweets often coming from politicians seeking to increase familiarity and personal appeal with the public).
8    http://www.consultingcanadians.gc.ca/cpcPubHome.jsp?lang=en.

are reshaping the boundaries between personal and public. The recent introduction by the Canadian Government of controversial legislation to augment government surveillance capacities over internet traffic led to the Minister responsible for the proposals being subject to online disclosure of highly personal details of his recent divorce proceedings and settlement.

The perpetrator was exposed as a partisan operative of an opposition Party and the leader of that Party issued an eloquent apology in Parliament, yet the incident led to wider concerns about how other Parliamentarians reacted and made usage of this information in online tweets and postings. According to one media commentator of a prominent online venue, such is the new norm in today's shifting political environment, where social media accentuates the most confrontational dynamics of previous eras and delivers enhanced and unrelenting transparency in a manner akin to the expectations and conduct of today's social media generation:

> *Politicians stand in the House all the time and attack each other's intelligence; pundits go on TV and spin us dizzy; parties blanket ridings in push polls at the taxpayers' expense. For the most part, we allow these acts to not only go unpunished, but to be celebrated. We're kicking ass in politics! Here's how you win elections, guys!*

> *The Facebook generation is just taking that message and adapting it to our own bag of tricks. Say hello to the political operatives of tomorrow: cyber bullies, anonymous bloggers and internet trolls. Love them like you would love your children, because they were raised in your image.*

> *Get used to this style of politics. The Facebook generation - already accustomed to full disclosure - just had their political coming out party. Welcome them to the game; they're just taking their cues from those who came first (Owens, 2012).*

This viewpoint illustrates the complex and dangerous dissection of the Canadian polity taking place. Despite a broadly democratised society - in terms of education, online access, and political awareness - the expansion and usage of social media threatens to be more fragmenting than unifying. On the one hand is a highly engaged minority of observers and activists - for whom social media is the next frontier of partisan battles (often reinforcing and arguably deepening and amplifying the confrontational tones of legislative structures such as Canadian Parliament). On the other hand, despite this heightened visibility, political parties and politics more generally are suffering an erosion of civic involvement and rising levels of indifference, cynicism and exclusion (Roy, 2011).

Research in the United States is equally discouraging. A 2010 study of the 2010 Congressional election cycle, for example, found that growing portions of the public utilised the Internet as a means of becoming politically informed - but also recognised that in doing so they were more likely to be seeking out viewpoints similar to their own (Smith, 2011). Moreover, the elections themselves, despite record campaign spending levels, failed to generate a rise in voter turnout and ongoing surveys throughout 2010 and 2011 have revealed a Congress at record levels in disrepute. As noted above, the 2012 election cycle seems likely to accentuate such trends, with social media deployed largely for fundraising and messaging as opposed to new forms of engaging and community-building. The disconcerting and overriding theme is one of 'politics' as a term of disrepute (MacGillis, 2012).

## 4. A Schizophrenic Public Service

In sum, the danger stemming from social media's present usage within existing democratic processes is twofold: i) a growing cleavage between campaigning and governing (the former driven increasingly by confrontational tactics and media spin; the latter requiring civil discourse, compromise, and

learning); and ii) a more generalised polluting of the notion of 'political' as a profession rendering it a form of activity in disrepute across growing segments of discontented and disengaged citizens. The resulting context for governmental experimentation with social media usage in terms of policy and service operations is, therefore, an extremely challenging one. A polity that is less trusted and less collaborative at the political level is at the very least going to face a significant handicap in fostering new forms of administrative and participative governance both internally and externally (Roy, 2008/2010).

For example, across both industry and government there is great enthusiasm for employee empowerment and new forms of mobility and collaborative activity (Hamel, 2007). Predating but accelerated by the advent of social media, demographic change is particularly powerful here as today's young adults - studying and seeking entry into the workforce, are categorically different in having never known a world without significant virtual dimensions. According to Booz & Company, this 'Generation C', those born after 1990 and destined to encompass roughly 40 % of the populations of North America and Europe by 2020, comprises increasingly digitised youth that are "connected, communicating, content-centric, computerised, community oriented and always clicking" (Roman et al., 2010).

Social media is central to their increasingly integrated personal and professional pursuits, where mass collaboration and openness are rivalling the traditional values and traits of a governmental workforce, namely hierarchical deference and anonymity. In Canada, not surprisingly, a number of new movements led by public servants themselves have been formed in recent months and years in accordance with such trends. As one current public servant argues:

> There is no evidence to suggest that the desire to contribute beyond one's immediate function is any less prevalent in the public service. In fact, from the Canadian discussion forum3 of the Govloop social network for public servants, to GCPedia4, to the Canada sections of the Gov2.0 Best Practices Wiki, public servants from different Departments and Agencies are actively contributing personal and professional time and effort to solve common problems and learn from one another. And this is regardless of the position they happen to occupy at the present time… or for any tangible rewards. They are doing it because they want to. The Public Service should continue to consider how best to structure the working environment to access and benefit from more of the intellectual capital currently in its ranks (Conabree, 2011).

Indeed, the facilitation and leveraging of a more agile and engaging public sector are central to a more collaborative ethos for society as a whole. One such optimistic vantage point is well-articulated by Accenture Consulting - a value shift to social prosperity brought about through ubiquitous Internet access and new patterns of more networked and collective intelligence that emerge:

> Cooperation, diversity, openness and sharing of knowledge will not only have a dramatic effect on the economy, but also on society as a whole. Society has become more inclusive where people follow the credo of "share and win." The focus shifts away from the individual toward the community and common welfare. People decide to make use of their collective intelligence, build networks and organise their community activities by themselves. This approach toward collective social prosperity fosters new ways of thinking and dealing with information and intellectual property (Accenture, 2010).

Yet within government, in contrast to this quote, it is the old ways of dealing with information and intellectual property that most often prevail - a point well-illustrated by a 2011 review of IT governance by a British Parliamentary Committee (Public Administration Committee, 2011). Similarly,

an early Canadian study of social media adoption within government agencies determined that the largest overall barrier to more collaborative and effective usage was the insular and secretive mindset of governments owning and containing information as a proprietary asset rather than as a means toward more networked and collective action (Fyfe & Crookall, 2010). This same study also highlights the 'clay layer' of bureaucratic control and risk aversion at the political level as overriding vices on more innovative social media usage going forward (Fyfe & Crookall, 2010).

With respect to the requisite governance balance between centralised direction and empowerment, also revealing is the conduct and governance of major technologies companies leading the social media revolution. In North America, Apple, Google, Facebook, and Research in Motion (RIM) have all faced similar tensions in terms of their emphasis on innovation and collaboration internally (facilitated increasingly by social media tools) on one hand, and highly centralised leadership on the other. Notably, Apple and RIM are in transition for different reasons: the passing of Steve Jobs in the former and the not unrelated crisis of the Blackberry in the latter. Both companies are thus pledging increased shareholder democracy, whereas Facebook is viewed by many market experts as potentially overly-centralised around the directive control of its founding CEO (Carmody, 2012).

Nevertheless, two profoundly important differences between technology companies and governments are twofold. First, internally, such companies have been recently created from anew in an organisational and social environment (i.e. Silicon Valley[9]) that shuns hierarchy and embraces flexibility and workplace empowerment. Even alongside highly concentrated leadership at the apex of such organisations, governance arrangements are much more fluid and novel than what is typically found in government where traditions of control and risk averseness run deep. Moreover, the systemic traditionalism of government is closely engrained with paper-based processes, an important vice on the more mobile and collaborative workforce found in the technology sector - and built upon the very devices and processes being created and marketed by these same companies.

Secondly, and externally, despite a widening range of stakeholder engagements and the sorts of aforementioned shareholder democracy pressures, such as those recently experienced by Apple, market-driven accountability remains far less dispersed and complex than what is found in the realm of the state. Whereas technology companies are catering to, and working in concert with, a subset of society embracing technological change and social media usage, governments must remain relevant to not only these individuals but also typically larger segments of their populations more trepid or hostile to online processes generally and wider social media engagement specifically. Public servants in Canada thus find themselves navigating complex and uncharted terrain - featuring a widely distrusted and control-minded political class on one hand, a citizenry marked by tremendous diversity in terms of attitudes and comfort levels with online activity and social media usage, and a social media landscape with a much stronger commercial orientation than a civic one on the other.

One important caveat here is the potential for more collaborative and participative forms of social media usage at the local level as opposed to nationally. Several prominent Canadian Mayors, notably Calgary's Naheed Nenshi are pioneering new online mechanisms and strategies to not only communicate messaging but also seek input and engage with stakeholders and the public. Similarly, the City of Edmonton was the first to undertake an 'apps' competition for local service innovation and its related open data efforts - in concert with other municipalities, reflects the bottom-up nature of governance experimentation that has often shaped public sector evolution in previous reform eras (Roy, 2008).

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9   With the exception of Research in Motion - based in Waterloo, Canada, a region known in Canada as Silicon Valley North.

Such a contrast between national and local examples underscores a prevailing set of contradictory tendencies embedded in classic, territorial-based federalism of the sort characterising countries such as Canada and the United States. Whereas local governments may enjoy additional flexibility to innovate - both administratively and democratically, they are creatures legally subordinate to higher-order governments whose fiscal capacities and digital visibility (across both traditional and social media spheres) often eclipse more localised players, processes and forums. Contradictory tensions are thus at play across jurisdictional boundaries on one hand, as well as between classical forms of representational democracy and newly emerging opportunities for more direct forms of public participation on the other.

In short, then, how government entities can better use social media tools and channels for policy development and service innovation is arguably well understood in terms of prescriptions for both internal and external innovations involving new and wider forms of participation within and across the workforce and the citizenry (Chang & Kannan, 2008; Carr-West, 2009; Sommer & Cullen, 2009; Serrat, 2010). What is far more complex, however, and arguably more consequential, is how the institutional context of electoral and governmental accountability constrains such initiative and reform, seeking instead to apply social media as an additional and powerful new tool for information control and linear communications as opposed to the more networked and collaborative potential that social media could provide.

# 5. Conclusions

By way of summation, the paradoxical and contradictory pressures of social media's rapid growth on the Canadian public sector stem from the democratisation of information and expansion of collaborative opportunities across society on one hand, and a system of representational democracy and hierarchical government predicated on informational control and centralised decision-making on the other. Furthermore, an online polity evermore divisive and polarised exasperates the 'citizenship deficit', to quote Nabatchi (2010), of formalised democratic politics in the age of social media, the origins of which may also be traced to the evolution of eGovernment over the past two decades (Dutil et al., 2007/2010).

It thus follows that government organisations and public managers seeking new opportunities for public involvement via social media in policy and service matters face substantial hurdles: a controlling and risk-averse political class overseeing such experimentation and a sceptical public gravitating to social media sites for mainly commercial and creative pursuits but wary of partisanship and traditional democratic authorities. In the Canadian case at present, the reinforcement of concentrated leadership at the political level due to a return to majority government within the federal House of Commons further accentuates such challenges. The result is a paradoxical usage of social media as a means to greater control and messaging, albeit not without resistance from both within government (i.e. employees seeking to break free from such constraints) and outside of it (i.e. citizens and activists more overtly mobilising against government action and/or calling for new political approaches and mechanisms).

Despite strong reasons to believe that such a paradox is not sustainable - that demographic and technological trends will eventually weaken command and control structures of government to the point where systemic change emerges in some form - such pronouncements provide little comfort in the short term to advocates of reform. Accordingly, the key social media and governance design challenge in Canada at present is twofold: first, in the immediate term, creating wider space for incremental experimentation to forge new discursive capacities online premised on principles such

as inclusiveness, openness, and meaningful engagement; and secondly, over the medium term, to rethink and redistribute the roles and relative power of elected politicians, public officials, and citizens in a new manner that re-aligns representational and participative democracy. To return to the quote presented at the outset of this article, an online democracy 'cannot and should not mirror the procedures of traditional democratic institutions, but must instead be designed to reflect the fundamental requirements of democracy (consent, legitimacy) in a form that is suited to the unique conditions and human behaviour of the Internet' (Fatman, 2007).

One important and additional lesson to derive from this analysis is the necessity of more research devoted to the interplay between political and administrative usage of social media and the potential for ensuing democratic governance reform. In comparison to the Canadian and American experiences at present, the European context presents a richer laboratory of diverse political regimes - and the resulting limitations and opportunities for innovative social media usage across both partisan and administrative realms of the state. Such comparative findings are likely to prove increasingly instrumental to facilitating deeper and more widespread democratic and governmental reforms based upon an open and collaborative ethos and innovatively leveraging social media's potential in this regard.

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# Social Media and the Disciplining of Visibility: Activist Participation and Relations of Power in Network Societies

This paper discusses the relations of power in connection with the use of social media among middle-class activists in southern Stockholm. The method for studying these activists is both ethno- and nethnographic, through participant observations and interviews both online and offline. The theoretical framework is based on late modern theories of reflexive identity negotiation and Foucauldian theories of visibility and power. The paper locates relations of power in the constant monitoring, supervision and negotiation of both ones own and others' identity on social media platforms. This increasing importance of being updated in network societies will be discussed as a form of network logic. Hence, social media usage has not only been about enabling participation of activists in southern Stockholm, but also about disciplining them to be kept updated, which in turn pushes them towards participating in offline activities too.

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## Keywords

Activist Participation, Discipline, Identity, Reflexivity, Power, Social Media

> " The connectedness inherent in the design and use of social media platforms, together with processes of reflexive connectivity among the activists, lead to instantaneous information about what is happening, which seemed to push certain activists to respond, react and participate in offline events too. "

# 1. Introduction

**The Question of Participation and Power in Emerging Network Societies**

One autumn evening in 2009, activists gathered to show their support of saving the local bathhouse from being destroyed in the neighbourhood of Aspudden in southern Stockholm. Many participants had been mobilised because of the information posted on Twitter calling supporters of the bathhouse to assemble outside, since the action group occupying/guarding it, feared police forces were on their way to evict them. Many of the gathered activists felt they had to participate in order to protest against the municipal plans to destroy the bathhouse and to show support for the action group. Many had also directly acted upon text messages posted on social media platforms. This example illustrates not only how social media platforms are used to mobilise participation, but also how this mobilisation was based on a sense of duty to act upon information. This paper aims to describe this process in general and in particular to discuss social media, paving the way for a more equal participation, which is devoid of power relations. The use of social media changes both the possibilities and practices of political participation (Coleman & Blumler, 2009; Dahlgren, 2009; Shirky 2009), but as it will be argued here, this does not mean that the question of power has become obsolete in emerging network societies (van Dijk, 2006).

Before addressing power in network societies, the paper begins by making some conceptual clarifications such as, how to understand the rather loose notion of participation. It has been common practice among scholars to distinguish between narrow and wide definitions of participation (Bengtsson, 2008: 116). Narrow definitions sometimes include nothing more than casting a vote every fourth year, whereas wide definitions include all kinds of opinion expressions, from blogging to civil disobedience. Verba & Nie (1972: 2) add another dimension by defining participation as an attempt to influence public decision-makers. However, participation has also come to refer to activities with the purpose of influencing society at large and not only decision-makers (Esaiasson & Westholm, 2006: 15). These discussions are used to differentiate political participation from representative democratic institutions (parliamentary participation), actions from outside the Parliament with an outspoken aim to influence public decision-makers (activist participation), and actions from more popular culture sphere, that is not primarily set up for political purposes (cultural participation, Svensson, 2011a). Following this differentiation, the activities in Aspudden is activist participation, since action took place outside the town hall but with an outspoken aim to influence the decision-makers assembled in it.

Emerging digital technologies are today claimed to democratise participation, making participation in the form of expression of opinions and political mobilisation more accessible for a wider range of the population (Jenkins, 2006; Bruns, 2008; Shirky, 2009). In particular, social media has been regarded as an instrument for political campaigning and mobilising support (Montero, 2009). What often emerges from discussions are online social media platforms that are not tied to traditional offline media. The word 'social' here seems to refer to the users' ability to influence content, interact and network with others. O'Reilly (2005) claims for example that for a website to be defined as social media, the user should be able to contribute to the content of the site. Boyd & Ellison (2007) take the definition one step further by referring to social network sites as practices in which users are able to articulate their social networks and to make them visible through (semi)public profiles, linking these profiles to other users, the connection of whom will in turn be made accessible. Thus, Facebook and Twitter are good examples of social network sites of this kind.

The increasing possibilities of users' participation and social networking on communication platforms online do not only make political participation in the form of opinion expression and demonstrations easier. It has also been claimed that they change relations of power (Jenkins, 2006; Bruns, 2008;

Shirky, 2009). Since the production and distribution of information is becoming more accessible to everyone, people are able to communicate directly with one another without the mediation of traditional media. Consequently, some argue that we are witnessing the growth of a participatory culture that will change fundamentally citizenship practices (Jenkins, 2006; Bruns, 2008; Shirky, 2009). Dystopian descriptions of an increasingly sceptical, distrusting and inward-looking citizenry in late modern societies (Boggs, 2000; Bauman, 2001) are today countered by accounts of a rising network society claimed to flatten out governance hierarchies and to distribute power more evenly (Rheingold, 2002: 163). In network societies, action coalitions are claimed to rely rather on loose, non-hierarchical and open communities of participants, often making use of social media for communication and coordination (Bruns, 2008: 362).

But how can one say anything useful about contemporary political participation, and its intersections with social media platforms, without lapsing into futurology or engaging in the uncritical painting of democratic utopias? This paper tries to discuss political participation by conducting an in-depth study of the network of activists in southern Stockholm, and with a special focus on relations of power. Why is power relevant here? Accounts of an emerging network society have been accompanied by a considerable number of claims when it comes to power (Jenkins, 2006; Bruns, 2008; Shirky, 2009). However, there is no reason to believe that increasing practices of social organisation in networks will create a society without power relations (Elias, 1998). Rather what we are witnessing is a shift from more tangible and easily observable relations of more hierarchical power relations, to more non-transparent and complex horizontal relations of power (or soft power) (Bakir, 2010: 7). Since the network implies an emphasis on connections and connectivity between people, relationships are multiplying (van Dijk, 2006: 24). And if a conception of power as processes that take place between people is adhered (Elias, 1998: 115-116; Foucault, 1994: 324), it becomes interesting and relevant to investigate into power relations in the transition towards a network society in which relations and connections between people are brought to the fore.

As shall be discussed in the following sections, even though participatory practices were tightly connected to the uses of social media in southern Stockholm, relations of power were still at play. Social media usage seemed to encourage or even demand a social negotiation of the activist self. Additionally, by following Twitter accounts, joining Ning- and Facebook groups, the activists received updates on the battle for the bathhouse and could, if possible, engage. In this way, practices of online social networking and communication not only made it easier to spread information but, at the same time it seemed to push activists towards participation. Thus, this paper will not only echo popular accounts of the mobilising potential of social media usage among like-minded people. It will also provide a more critical understanding of activist participation in network societies. It will do so by theoretically departing from an understanding of our time as late modern, a sociological framework in which contemporary forms of visibility can be connected to power and participation.

## 2. Theory: Visibility and Power in Digital and Late Modernity

It is common to define our time as late modern, in which heightened processes of identity and individualisation are central (Giddens, 1991; Beck, 1995; Bauman, 2001). Individualisation refers to the lack of sense of social belonging, a process in which communities, personal relationships, social forms and commitments are less bound by history, place and tradition. In other words, the collective and the traditional have faded in importance in favour of the individual identity formation project (Giddens, 1991). This emphasis of one's self, as something that can be constructed and managed, bears upon the individual to such a degree that the self becomes a reflexive project, namely, we are always considering ourselves from different perspectives (ibid.: 32).

The aforementioned processes of reflexive individualisation are increasingly taking place in public. Public display of identity was already noted by Arendt (1998: 41, 49), who conceived the public realm in ancient Greece as a place for individuality and permeated by a spirit where everybody had to distinguish him- or herself. Today, this kind of practice has moved online. Questions such as who to message, whose posting to comment on, or how to respond to messages and postings, are used by people as raw material in their identity work (Rheingold, 2002: 25). Hence, social changes towards individualisation are intertwined with the technological shift towards digitalisation. Nowadays, social media platforms have established themselves as the main loci for mediated communication and socialisation among the young crowd in network societies, in some cases even overhauling offline spaces in perceived importance (Medierådet, 2010). Hence, social media platforms alter the way people live and socialise, and are shaping the way things are done, enabling access to information and providing people with new tools for arranging and taking part in all sorts of activities, encounters as well as social and political agencies (Dahlgren, 2009: 152).

The rise of social media platforms has been accompanied by a large number of claims of its impact on political participation. They have been regarded as tools for more reflexive and identity-based participation as well as remedies for contemporary disinterest in parliamentary politics thanks to their increasing affordance of two-way communication, production and distribution of information. Indeed, social media platforms do seem to afford possibilities for both reflexive identity negotiation and political mobilisation at the same time (van Dijk, 2000: 36). The paper approaches political mobilisation and reflexive identity negotiation as two sides of the same coin by suggesting an expressive type of rationality (Svensson, 2011b). A focus on identity and processes of identification require the expression, maintenance and redefinition of discourses in order to make participation meaningful and relevant.

In order to discuss participation and power in network societies, it is important to link late modern processes of reflexive individualisation to the concepts of power and visibility. Power and visibility are implicitly intertwined with an understanding of rationality as expressive and of participation as motivated by identity (Svensson, 2011b). This analysis will be made explicit in this paper in order to move beyond the mere praise of social media platforms potentially mobilising for political participation. To achieve this, the paper turns to Foucault. According to him, visibility and power have always been interconnected but in different ways across times (Thompson, 2001/1995). In antiquity, the visibility of the few by the many was connected to power. However, in modern times being watched is connected to a subordinate position of being disciplined by the subtle normalising power of the gaze (at schools, armies, hospitals, penal institutions etc.). In digital late modernity, people are participating in this disciplining by free will in order to reflexively negotiate and maintain their identity and to also secure a place in the social arena. It is not clear whether being watched in the context of social networking is related to exercising power or being subordinate to it. Foucault provides a way to approach this question. According to him, individuals over whom power is exercised are these that made information visible by themselves (Foucault, 1994: 84). The central question of deciding what shall be visible and to whom, becomes a balancing act for the user, since negotiating a continuous, attractive identity in the network may imply the publication of information that could be used to control her/him. Numerous accounts of an emerging surveillance society have underlined this controlling/surveillance mechanism of social media (Andrejevic, 2007). Hence, online social networking requires a new form of competence in order to manage ones' visibility online, and at the same time, avoid being subject to surveillance. Concepts such as online social networking skills and digital literacy, i.e. how to understand and process meanings of various types of digital content and how to display information on digital platforms to reaffirm self-conceptions and negotiate status vwithin the peer-group, are addressing such issues (Hsieh, 2012).

To assess practices of information display online, Foucault's understanding of power in the form of disciplining offers new insights. He claims that people are in the midst of a disciplinary society (Foucault, 1994/1973: 52, 57). What is constitutive of this society is that power is exercised through disciplining, normalising power and the knowledge-power formations that support these discursive practices. The disciplining of individuals started being performed by a series of authorities and networks of institutions of surveillance and correction (Foucault, 1994/1973: 57). Power is understood here as a type of relationship between people, influencing others' actions rather than immediately acting upon others (Foucault, 1994/1979: 324). Through this influence, people are disciplined to act in certain ways, which in turn structure the field of further possible actions (Foucault 1994/1982: 343). Hence, disciplining is used to refer to practices of adjusting activities and behaviours in front of the gaze of others, as well as, the gaze of one's self (the gaze of one's self illustrates very neatly what late modern reflexivity is about). These are monitoring gazes that are increasingly made possible by social media platforms. Foucault's discussions of power as a means of discipline can be applied remarkably well in digital arenas. He outlines a form of power that turns individuals into subjects, tying them to their identity by conscience and self-knowledge (Foucault, 1994: 331). In other words, the late modern reflexive subject is the result of a form of power exercised upon it. Before applying these theories of power as disciplining visibility on the activists in southern Stockholm, the paper will examine the methodological considerations.

## 3. Method: A (n)Ethnographic Case Study in an Activist Setting

The author once received a Facebook message suggesting that he signs an online petition against the plans to demolish the old community-run (but city-owned) bathhouse. He was also proposed that he joins the action group created with the purpose to saving the bathhouse that he eventually did. He signed the petition; started to follow Twitter feeds; joined the Facebook group and added many friends. Despite the protests, the bathhouse was finally demolished, with the only remnant being a network of activists that later formed a group called SÖFÖ (Södra Förstaden, the Southern Suburb). This network has continued to act mostly against development plans in the suburbs, in order to preserve green areas and playgrounds. SÖFÖ largely consists of loosely affiliated neighbours, many of them having their children going to the same school or kindergarten or live close to each other.

The action group has been followed in its crusade to save the bathhouse and their subsequent activities as SÖFÖ both online and offline since April 2009. Most activities on social media platforms took place during the couple of months leading up to the overtaking and demolition of the bathhouse. During October and November 2009, the activists used Twitter feeds mostly to spread information on activities and as a means to mobilise participation (see the references for a list of URLs). In total, 27 tweets were posted, the last one on 26 November, one day after the police had stormed into the bathhouse. Lengthier postings and comments were posted on the Facebook group called Rädda Aspuddsbadet (Save the Aspudden bathhouse). The first few postings on this group date back to November 2007. Activities reached their peak in December 2009 with 142 postings. A core action group of activists of around fifteen people were the most active users. During the eviction month of November 2009, 135 postings were made by 57 different users, most of whom only made one posting each, but with one activist making 26 postings.

Some of the bathhouse activists continued to be active through SÖFÖ. Today the board of SÖFÖ consists of six members with three of them being very active online. The activities on the SÖFÖ social media platforms have also been considerably less, than during the campaign to save the bathhouse. The group switched to a Södra Förstaden Facebook page in December 2010 (even though there are still some activities on the 'Save the Aspudden bathhouse' Facebook group). In February 2012, there

had only been 18 postings, all from the chairperson, who uses a SÖFÖ profile to post information, mostly about events and rallies.

SÖFÖ activists are more involved in the Ning community, on which members have their own profiles, can connect and message each other as well as start discussions, specialised groups, etc. In February 2012 the community had 159 members. During 2011, 13 individual blog postings were made, six of which belonged to the chairperson. 28 discussion threads had been started by 15 different users and seven specialised groups have been created in the Ning community. The most active group concerns green areas and exploitation plans in the neighbourhood and has approximately one posting in the discussion forum per month. The most active section of the Ning community is the event information page, where approximately four events are posted per month.

In this paper, the choice to study this network of southern Stockholm activists was made for ethnographic reasons, as a result of the author having lived and shared experiences with the group and the circumstances they found themselves in. As a consequence, the results of this study may not be generalised to all forms of activist participation in all types of settings. Aspudden is a suburb populated by an educated and politically aware middle class, and when it comes to Internet usage, Sweden is ranked very high (Nordicom-Sverige, 2011). Such contextual circumstances heavily influence the result of this study. But the results will resonate in similar settings and, last but not least, they will contribute from a different perspective to the discussions of participation and power among activists in network societies.

The author, being particularly interested in online practices of social networking and organisation, was influenced by recent discussions of nethnography, i.e. ethnography online. In a nethnographic study, researchers are released from the physical place in order to conduct observations in a virtual context on communities, focusing on user-generated information flows (Berg, 2011). The author followed the activists on all their different social media platforms, took field notes and screenshots once a week or more often when something particularly interesting was observed. During the peak of the battle for the bathhouse, the author collected screenshots every day and participated in discussions on Ning, Twitter and Facebook, commented on postings, retweeted tweets, forwarded invitations etc. How has this double role of an inhabitant and a researcher influenced the study? The author has certainly benefited from having access to people and from an understanding of the situation and issues at hand. Still the empirical material was consciously reflected upon from a more theoretical rather than personal point of view.

Nethnography works well in combination with a more traditional ethnographic method, especially since the online and offline world mutually influence each other (van Dijk, 2006; Baym, 2010). This was especially the case in Aspudden, with the activists using both social media platforms and traditional offline methods. The online observations and interventions have therefore been complemented by continuous and numerous offline observations and participations in meetings and rallies during 2009 and 2010. Five more in-depth interviews with activists were also conducted during late 2010 and early 2011. The selection was made considering experiences from both core and periphery activists, while at the same time reflecting participants' differences regarding age and background. The author interviewed a middle-aged mother and a female artist belonging to the core of the bathhouse activist group, a Green Party politician who first joined the group actively when it established itself as SÖFÖ, a young politically engaged student who did not live in the neighbourhood but was active during the height of the bathhouse campaign and finally a retired media entrepreneur belonging to the periphery. In spite of the small number of the interviews, they were rich enough to provide depth to the study.

# 4. Analysis: Disciplined Practices of Updating in Southern Stockholm

By observing and talking to activists in southern Stockholm, it becomes evident that they use digital media in general and Facebook in particular to connect to issues and people with similar opinions. For example, the student interviewed said that he is against the growth of car use and motor traffic in the Stockholm region. He has therefore joined several groups on Facebook against highway constructions. Every time he would log into his Facebook account, he would receive updates about what is going on concerning these issues. Similarly, the Green Party politician confessed that he joined SÖFÖ's Ning- and Facebook groups in order to come in contact with the group and become informed about their various activities. From that moment on, he was connected to the cause and information that would flow back to him as soon as he would access the Internet. Hence, social media platforms seem to be designed for and used by activists to connect to issues they care for and to people with similar interests and opinions. This can be referred as the *connectedness of social media*.

The connectedness of social media is tightly intertwined with late modern processes of reflexivity and identity. Observing the different profiles of SÖFÖ activists on Facebook and Ning, it becomes obvious that much of what is going on is identity negotiation and maintenance. The groups and forums activists participate in can all be conceived as material for their identification processes as activists. This is also underlined by the student who expands on the importance to join political groups and causes on social media platforms, not only to get informed, but also to show support, to tell the group that he is with them and to show to his friends and network connections that he supports this group and this cause. In other words, it seemed that social media platforms afforded processes of identity negotiation among the activists through its connectedness. This implies that choices of topics for political participation were reflexively chosen, since it is likely that the activists will make their engagement visible on social media platforms. Hence, social media were used to negotiate and make visible their identity as activists in front of selected others. This publication of links to other users, groups and causes, freeloading on their supposed connotations to which activists wished to tie images of themselves, is referred to *as reflexive connectivity* (Donath & boyd, 2004).

The connectedness inherent in the design and use of social media platforms and their affordance of identity negotiation through processes of reflexive connectivity is closely intertwined with practices of responsiveness. For example, during the battle for the bathhouse, the Twitter-feed served to inform the followers about what was happening, whether for example a new political decision was made or the police had entered the bathhouse. This information clearly pushed followers to respond and to participate in offline demonstrations. Supporters of the bathhouse confessed that they felt compelled to come when the action group called for their participation, during the police eviction of activists who had camped inside. A young mother phrased it as if she had no other choice than to come and show her support for the cause and the activists camping inside. Similarly, a young student described a kind of request inherent in the information sent out by the action group. The information implied what she described as a duty to respond. She felt she ought to go down to the bathhouse and join the activists in order to show them and others her support. The conclusion is, thus, that having connected to social media platforms aiming to save the Aspudden bathhouse, brought with it a sense of duty for certain activists to respond to the information and requests generated by this connectedness. In other words, the connectedness inherent in the design and use of social media platforms, and processes of reflexive connectivity among bathhouse activists did lead to instantaneous information about what was happening on the ground. And for many activists this information seemed to push them to respond, to react and to participate, also in offline events.

This led to the practice of updating. When asking the student how he would proceed to change a political decision or mobilise people regarding a case, he said that he would first of all start a

Facebook group in order to update his network about what was going on and to see if there was any interest among his connections. Similarly, a female artist said that she uses Facebook due to her urge to update her friends and connections about what is going on in her different projects. The importance of updating was also evident during the battle for the bathhouse. Important documents were uploaded and thus publicised. One activist read in a politician's blog that the Sport and Leisure Committee would decide to demolish the bathhouse during their next meeting. This information was then immediately sent out on Twitter along with a call for an emergency meeting. At that meeting, it was decided to guard the bathhouse twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week. From then on, the bathhouse guards started to manage the Twitter-feed in order to keep their supporters updated and, consequently, send information with the implicit aim of mobilising activists connected to the network.

The previous example points towards a two-way practice of updating. The practice of updating is not only about informing the network of connected activists of what is going on. It is also about being informed about what is happening in other networks. For example the student, interested in reducing cars and motor traffic in the Stockholm region, follows the decision-making processes concerning these issues, especially by subscribing to blogs and by joining Facebook groups on this topic. When he was asked about the kind of discussions that are taking place in these Facebook groups, he said that there were not as many discussions, as there were updates on political decisions and committee statements. He further stated that he would have never known about the plans to destroy the bathhouse, if it were not for social media. He continued that he might have read it in the newspaper but he would have never been able to get as much information about the issue as he got online that eventually made him respond. Primarily, he attended a meeting and at a later stage, he started to follow the bathhouse activists on Twitter.

Therefore, it seems that the use of social media platforms facilitated activists' engagement. By using social media, activists were updated on the different activities in the neighbourhood and could engage if they so wished. Hence, by being updated, activists also made themselves engage-able. According to Heidegger, Hands (2011: 25) this is described as being on standby. This expression captures well the situation among activists in southern Stockholm. Many activists were on standby. For instance, when a student is asked about his political engagement nowadays, he describes it as slumbering, although he follows the debate and he is updated concerning the issues that are of importance to him as an activist. In other words, he is on standby. Similar statements were made throughout the interviews. This suggests that by connecting and organising through social media platforms the possibilities to involve activists increase, more so since many seem to be on standby.

So far, the story about the southern Stockholm activists' use of social media platforms resembles previous scholars' claims of the mobilisation potential of digital media (Bruns, 2008; Shirky, 2009). While not dismissing such claims, the paper takes the argument one step further and relates the practices of updating in southern Stockholm to the Foucauldian theories of visibility and power. The implicit request for response and action on the updates of the network, commonly understood as the mobilising potential of new media, could also be understood by Foucault's concept of disciplining discussed in the theory section. As previously mentioned, to connect to a cause and to follow bathhouse activists brings a kind of duty for connected activists to respond to the information and requests generated by this connectedness; but as updating works two ways, so does disciplining. Activists were not only disciplined to respond and react to the updates of their connections, but also to keep themselves updated in the first place. The Green Party politician claims that if he is not constantly updated on what is happening on the SÖFÖ Ning group, it is easy for him to lose track of the discussion going on there. He admitted that it is sometimes difficult to add a posting to a discussion thread, and if a user has not followed the thread for a while, then s/he is left behind.

Some activists in the study expressed their reluctance to join an online discussion that they had not followed or maybe had not all the information about. The reasons for this kind of behaviour were that they did not want to risk stating the obvious or repeating things that had already been mentioned. This reasoning suggests that some activists felt they had to be updated otherwise their information might not be accurate and they might be left behind.

The disciplining aspects of emerging practices of online social networking should not be underestimated. It is almost as if the connectedness of social media pressured the activists to be updated. When the Green Party politician talks about the bathhouse blog as something that should be followed, he also implies that he had to follow it in order to know what happened and to be informed about the different activities around the bathhouse campaign. In this way, the activists are disciplined to be ready to respond, participate, connect and update. Such disciplined practices of updating are intertwined with the demand for reflexive self-presentations in late modernity. The artist, for example, talks about her online channels as something that has to be used in order to update her network, get things done and earn attention for it. Self-disclosure, to update the activist network on doings and activities, is thus equally important to gain trust, achieve and maintain relationships with other activists in the network. This leads to an ever-increasing need for self-clarification, and social validation, observed through acts of self-disclosure among the activists on social media. Activism, social media, processes of reflexivity and identity are thus tied together in intriguing ways, which also include relations of power in the form of disciplining visibility.

When relying on the Foucauldian notion of disciplining, it is important to also think about what is at stake. In southern Stockholm this seemed to be the position of the network. For example, a Green Party politician claims that he had to be continuously updated on the discussions and happenings in the network otherwise his information might not be accurate and then he would have to renegotiate his position in the network. Hence, when the activists log on to their computers, it is not only about exchanging information that is taking place, they are also negotiating their social place within the activist network. Similarly, the artist argued that she comments a lot on friends' postings on Facebook, in order to occupy the centre of attention, a centre that she then uses to promote different projects and issues that she is involved in. Before taking part in an activity, she makes sure that her friends know what she is doing and she also checks who else is going to participate in the activity, adds them as friends and if they already are friends perhaps makes a comment on their Facebook wall. Hence, in order to keep her position in the network, she has to connect, respond and update. This highlights the fact that through online social networking, these activists embedded themselves within the peer group (see Livingstone, 2008). We are thus referring to identity through connectedness and updating.

Networks of like-minded people have power over peoples' decisions because they work as a kind of filter (Anderson, 2006: 108). Life choices seem to be multiplying and the responsibility for making the right choices is increasingly put on the individual when modern institutions loose in relevance. In late modern societies, every citizen can construct their own custom lifestyle and select their worldview from a large number of choices (Manovich, 2001: 42). People are thus experiencing an ever-expanding range of elective identities offered together with the ease with which they may be embraced or rejected. This can be liberating (Beck, 1995) but also loaded with stress about making the right choice. When tradition and modern institutions become less prominent, other guiding mechanisms are needed and it is precisely this point that our network connections have influence over our decisions and over us. The network has become an increasingly important filter, through which the activists organise, produce and share information, as well as conceive the world. Besides informing us about the variety of choices and what others before us have done with these choices, there is also peer pressure within social media (Anderson, 2006: 174). Pictures of the likes and

dislikes of peers and like-minded people, together with aggregated past choices and behaviours make us anticipate our future needs and wants (Hands, 2011: 128). In this way, networks have power over us and our decisions but they also discipline us into certain behaviour. In the conclusion discussion, it will be suggested that this could be labelled as network logic.

# 5. Conclusions

Late modern processes of reflexivity and identity do not only signify the liberation of the individual from social regulation of modern institutions (family, church, social movements) but also create a demand for constructing and making visible our biographies, importing ourselves into our biographies through our own actions (Beck & Beck-Gernsheim, in Leaning, 2009: 76). Hence, the activists in southern Stockholm are disciplined to both practices of reflexive updating and to being constantly updated. By arguing for the concept of updating, the aim of this paper was to relate participatory practices among activists in southern Stockholm to late modern theories of reflexivity and Foucauldian theories of power and visibility. Practices of updating illustrate types of power relations that reveal themselves in the continuous preoccupation of expressing and negotiating ourselves and our positions, as well as interpreting others through the production, maintenance and sustenance of network visibility. Since updating also demands a level of responsiveness, the mobilisation potential of new media could also be understood from a disciplining perspective.

The activists in Aspudden were disciplined to update and be updated, and they seemed to do this willingly in order to reflexively negotiate and maintain their activist identities and also to secure a place in the activist network. Such disciplined practices of updating took place between activists and influenced other activists' actions rather than acting immediately upon them. Hence in front of the gaze of others and in front of the gaze of themselves, they were adjusting their participatory practices. These monitoring gazes were increasingly created by the use of social media platforms. We could thus understand disciplined practices of updating as following a kind of *network logic*, emerging in network societies.

The argument for network logic is based on deductive reasoning; when the overall media and communication landscape changes, participation will adapt to new circumstances bringing about new types of political engagement and citizenship practices. So what is this network logic? In the case of the activists in southern Stockholm, network logic disciplined the activists to negotiate visibility online and to maintain and extend their activist network by continuously and reflexively updating it in order to negotiate a position within the activist network. Hence, it seems that activists in late modern and networked societies need to master a new form of sociability. The power of this network logic is manifested in the push/urge for updating and in the constant monitoring and negotiation of both one self's and others' visibility.

With this suggestion, understanding the relations of power in emerging network societies as a kind of network logic, the author wishes to contribute to the discussion from a more critical point of view in order to study and understand practices of online social networking and to offer a complement to the popular conception of social media as affording user empowerment. While the Internet opens up new arenas for political participation, these arenas are dependent on the network structure, its constitution and management.

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# Social media and civic engagement: Discussing the case of Aveiro, Portugal

Public participation has become a key issue in the decision-making process. It has been extensively argued that increased community engagement in public policy design and implementation creates many important benefits. One of these benefits is the acceptance that those who are affected by a decision have the right to be involved in the policy-making process and that their contribution may promote more sustainable and resilient solutions. Another benefit is the increase of public accountability for decisions concerning the allocation of public resources. Expanding the opportunities for public participation has, therefore, been welcomed in the fields of political and social sciences. A common recent debate on this subject concerns the need for innovative approaches that highlight a two-way interaction between policy makers and the community through digital channels. Social media technologies emerge in this context as having the potential to induce citizens' participation in decision-making processes. However, little empirical evidence can be found about their actual role. This article presents and discusses the roots and impacts of three related civic initiatives in the city of Aveiro, in Portugal. The use of social media provided the opportunity for deepening civic engagement in decision-making and, when possible, for counteracting local governments' decisions in spatial planning. This analysis intends to be a step towards providing greater clarity regarding the interaction between citizens, social media and local government.

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**Keywords**

Spatial planning, local government, public participation, social media, civic movements

66 Social media technologies create a context in which citizens can have access to more detailed information and, through a collective dialogue, mutually share and develop their sights effectively in order to form quality local public policies. 99

# 1. Introduction

Political and social sciences have increasingly paid attention to the importance, impacts and means of public participation in the decision-making process. In the particular case of spatial planning, public participation has become a core component of the official discourse and a driving force for what is generally labelled as sustainable development. Although public participation is generally perceived as the involvement of citizens in decisions about and the implementations of social and economic change (Macnaghten & Jacobs, 1997), the purpose of its use has been the subject of debate. It can be seen as a way of citizen's empowerment (Arnstein, 1969; Crozier & Friedberg, 1977), a source of collaborative governance (Healey, 1997), a dialogical and face-to-face approach (Innes & Booher, 2011; Harper & Stein, 2006) and a social learning process (Flyvbjerg, 1998). Nonetheless, these arguments largely acknowledge that participation is based on the existence of a community of interests, where citizenship is reinforced through collective mobilisation for decision-making. This, in turn, is considered to be a positive development, and hence is welcomed by citizens. Although the concept of public participation, the ways to implement it and the impacts achieved can vary from country to country, depending mostly on the political culture, the development of conditions to promote a qualified share of power amongst decision-makers, stakeholders and citizens in general, remains a central issue.

Several relevant initiatives addressing the issue of public participation and civic engagement can be found worldwide. In Europe, for instance, several positive experiences were created around the idea of the Local Agenda 21, a comprehensive action plan to be taken by local governments under the umbrella of the sustainable development concept. A recent study developed by the Environmental Studies Group of Universidade Católica Portuguesa (2011) shows that in Portugal alone there were 167 processes of this initiative potentially capable of influencing 50 % of the population. Apart from this initiative, the notion of participatory budgeting, with roots in Porto Alegre, Brazil, is also worth noticing. According to Cabannes (2009), participatory budgeting is a way through which citizens can contribute towards the decision of where and how to allocate public resources. Thus, at least 1 000 cities worldwide have already adopted this idea.

But bottom-up initiatives led by independent civic organisations can also be found as attention-grabbing examples of civic engagement. In the United States, for instance, civic movements have recently emerged around the notion of tactical urbanism, aiming at the mobilisation of citizens to intervene in their cities through either critical thinking or putting in practice ideas linked to *low-cost urbanism*. In Portugal, a movement called *Cidades pela Retoma* has recently been launched. It is a civic initiative with similar aims of the above mentioned movements that connects people with different professional backgrounds. Currently, within this movement, the Global City 2.0 project is being developed, which is an open invitation to anyone who wishes to think about the role of urban civic movements and their potential to transform cities and urban life, especially in these hard economic times. This project network is presently producing a worldwide map of blogs or websites of street, neighbourhood or city-based organisations, promoted by citizens who are willing to think collectively about the future of the places where they live and work. This constitutes a platform that can be used to share information, learn about who else is working in this field and, when possible, start collaborating on common issues.

At the turn of the century, the issue of public participation has been heightened with the adoption of Information and Communication Technologies (ICT). The continuous upgrade of these technologies, the way information is spread worldwide, a widespread public interest in the potential of ICT to be more legitimately informed and recent world-wide crisis have drawn new attention to the governments' growing need to re-engage citizens in the decision-making processes in order to

attain a more democratic governance (Santinha & Castro, 2010). Social media technologies emerge in this context as means that can potentially promote citizens' participation in policy design and implementation. Due to their rapid evolving and user friendly nature, their ability to scale and enable the creation and exchange of user-generated content, several authors (see Sassen, 2011) argue that these technologies are in many cases acting as drivers for collective engagement. According to Sassen (2011), the success of recent movements based on these technologies is highly linked to the capacity to combine a certain technology already being massively used by citizens. The same author mentions that "the technical properties of electronic interactive domains deliver their utility through complex ecologies that include (a) non-technological variables - the social, the subjective, the political, material topographies; and (b) the particular cultures of use of a technology by different actors". The author adds that social networks, such as Facebook, "can be a factor in very diverse collective events… but that is not the same as saying they all are achieved through Facebook".

Even though social media *per se* are not an unprecedented phenomenon, these technologies are indeed emerging as innovative means both to enhance communication between citizens and public administration and to influence policy decision-making, thus providing the opportunity for deepening civic engagement. Some examples can be found on a worldwide basis, such as Future Gov, City Camp, Talk About Local, Openly local, Every Block or even Cidade Democrática. Overall, these initiatives show how simple web-based tools have the potential to go a long way with respect to public participation and civic engagement, by supporting informal groups of citizens, integrating fragmented social networks in a single platform, gathering and disseminating information and articulating physical civic dynamics with virtual ones (and *vice-versa*).

While there is growing support for using these technologies in public participation and civic engagement, the nature and scale of the impacts and challenges for policy making are still difficult to be evaluated, as it is still a very recent phenomenon. The aim of this paper is thus to address this issue by presenting some current practices being held in Aveiro, a medium-sized city (with approximately 50 000 inhabitants) located in the centre of Portugal. By discussing the roots and impacts of three case studies - *Amigos d' Avenida*, *Contra o Alboi cortado ao meio* and *Contra a Ponte Pedonal no Canal Central* - the paper seeks, on one hand, to widen the debate regarding how social media can be used in a proactive way to promote public participation and civic engagement and, on other, to issue a challenge to decision-makers to participate and discuss more actively their role in the issue at stake. Drawing heavily on experience, as one of the authors has been actively involved in the above-mentioned initiatives, the paper addresses this subject as follows: first, it focuses on the main civic movement (*Amigos d' Avenida*), its process of creation and how web-based tools were used to enhance the civic participation mechanisms; second, it presents the other two initiatives in which the role and dynamics created by the first movement were crucial; finally, it takes an over-arching perspective and provides some concluding remarks, outlining the key lessons and challenges arising from these experiences.

## 2. Amigos d 'Avenida: a civic movement created in the city of Aveiro

Throughout history, the city of Aveiro has favoured the emergence of civic movements aiming at developing collective ways of thinking about its future. According to Oliveira (2000), there were several famous gatherings held during the 50s and 60s with key personalities of the political scene claiming for more freedom and justice. However, over time this tradition was somehow lost, mostly due to the city's size and the conservative nature of the residents.

The recent social and economic development of the city, in which the local University has had a prominent role in both attracting thousands of students from across the country and providing a qualified workforce for the technological and industrial fabric of the region, has created a renewed interest in the development of civic movements, particularly engaged in the discussion of the city's future. *The Plataforma Cidades* (*cities' platform*) is an initiative worth mentioning that emerged within this context. Set off in 2003, by a known architect in Aveiro (Pompílio Souto), this initiative is a forum for debate and collective thinking on the city of Aveiro. It is constituted by approximately 30 citizens with different personal and professional backgrounds, originating from the public, private and the third sectors. The group gathers every other month to discuss the future of the city in terms of spatial planning, culture, health, education, economy and public policies. Since then, several public seminars have been promoted by the movement to present insights on the future of the city and to get feedback from the local community. Although the movement acts mainly through traditional channels, a blog was designed so that citizens could have access to several articles written by the movement members about Aveiro. Above all, it is important to stress that what began as a small group of people interested in discussing strategic issues concerning the future of Aveiro, soon became an important initiative to get citizens more interested in discussing local public policies.

Following a public debate launched in 2008 by the local government regarding the future of one of its main and historical avenues in the city centre - *Avenida Lourenço Peixinho* (Figure 1) - that has over the years lost an important part of its social and economic liveliness, an informal civic movement was created by some citizens to discuss the future of the avenue: the *Amigos d' Avenida* (*Friends of the Avenue*). To complement the traditional face-to-face meeting sessions, a blog was created, which has been used ever since as a virtual gathering place to share each ones' opinion about the avenue and other related subjects. Although the movement involves a permanent number of 15 citizens who meet on a regular basis, the amount of followers is flexible, depending on the specific subject under discussion, and growing due to the open and transparent way the process has been dealt with by the movement.
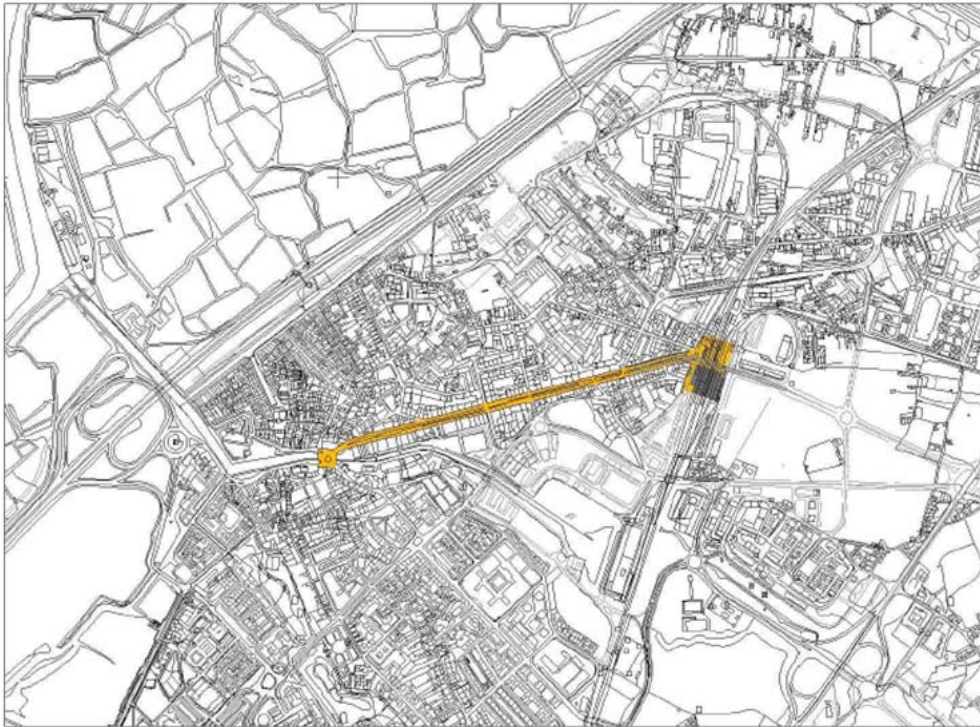
Figure 1: A view of the city centre of Aveiro and Avenida Lourenço Peixinho

Source: Aveiro City Council Web-page

Even though there are plenty of opportunities to promote regular face-to-face meetings amongst the members of the movement, the use of web-based technologies has been crucial to the development of their activities. Concerning the blog, it is a platform accessible to anyone willing to participate, operating as a collective opinion forum, a repository of diverse information, and a space for disseminating information concerning the movement and city policy and community activities. In three and a half years, the blog has had approximately 2 800 posts, 100 000 visits and more than 160 000 page views. In addition to the blog, the movement uses another digital channel that also allows a shift from the traditional broadcast (from one to many) to conversation mode (from many to many). The online discussion group created by the movement gathers almost 350 members and it discusses several topics about the present and future of the city.

It is worth noting that several activities were developed by the movement and enhanced by these digital channels, all organised in three different periods of time. The first one is related to the first year of the movements' intervention (2008/2009), focusing mostly on pondering and discussing how part of the avenue and its link to one of the main squares of the city centre - *Praça Melo Freitas* - could be revived both in urban and cultural terms. The idea mainly emerged from the mailing-list discussions as well as from a challenge launched by the local government to celebrate its 250th birthday, seeking for proposals to revitalise the public space and attract the local community and tourists to the city centre. Besides providing several thoughts for the contest and creating the conditions for gathering the community around those ideas, the movement launched a manifesto with key issues for developing public spaces with quality in Aveiro (*Manifesto pelo Espaço Público*), which was supported by all political parties during the local governments' election period in 2009. Following the *manifesto,* one local film society (*Cine-clube de Avanca*) promoted in collaboration with *Amigos d' Avenida* a cinematographic activity called Aqui (Here), with ten short-films about ten different public spaces located in ten cities around the world. This activity was promoted worldwide through social media.

The second period (2010/2011) disclosed an expansion of the activities of the movement towards Aveiro from a twofold viewpoint. Firstly, the geographical boundaries of the movements' area of intervention changed: the concerns and reflections were no longer simply focused on the avenue, rather on the whole city. Secondly, it added to the perspective of developing initiatives a critical analysis on how the local government was listening to peoples' voice in decision-making processes on key issues. The use of social media in this period was wider, as Facebook, one of the largest social networking sites, was used as well. This platform is a good example of a simple tool that has been used to spread information, connect users faster than ever before and create interesting conditions to help promoting civic engagement around several matters of interest.

One example of the activities promoted during this second period includes the requalification of the already mentioned *Praça Melo Freitas*. The local government not only hardly took advantage of the efforts made for six months by the community to provide liveable initiatives in that public space, but also did not consult peoples' opinions on what to expect from future developments in the square. A civic protest was organised through social media mobilising more than 100 citizens. This issue was soon followed by further queries regarding other public spaces of the city. Another example comprises the cutting down of all trees along the *Avenida Lourenço Peixinho* and the subsequent new species plantations with no explanation to the local community. This attitude was not well apprehended by local citizens who saw this as an attack to the cultural heritage, especially in a period in which they were committed to seek for solutions to overcome the economic, social and transportation problems that the avenue had been facing over the years. A civic request was then develop using several web-based technologies, galvanising immediately many citizens. For instance, the Facebook page mobilised more than 500 citizens in just a couple of days and was used as a platform of communication and sharing information.

The third period comprises these last months (end of 2011 and beginning of 2012), which add to the previous activities the collective rational of what to expect from the city of Aveiro in 2020. In other words, through mutual thinking and collaborative work, the movement is trying to develop a framework that is able to gather peoples' perceptions on what kind of city they would like to live in 2020.

It is worth mentioning that Facebook was also used in other contexts to actively promote civic participation. In this sense, several pages for discussion were created, namely:

- The future of Teatro Aveirense, the main city theatre, with approximately 250 friends;

- The problems and potentialities that the municipality parishes are facing, with around 100 friends;

- The future of the BUGA, the free bicycle service of Aveiro, with nearly 90 friends;

- The participatory budgeting of Aveiro, with nearly 90 friends as well;

- The future of Avenida Lourenço Peixinho, with about 150 friends;

- The future of the city - Aveiro 2020, with more than 500 friends.

All these digital channels are working in *tandem*, with multiple links from one page to the other, providing people with the opportunity to easily have access to various kinds of information and discuss all the themes they are interested in.

Quite interestingly, though, the dynamics prompted by this civic movement induced the emergence of two other movements that go beyond the main focus of *Amigos d 'Avenida* and help consolidate an integrated vision of the city: *Contra o Alboi cortado ao meio* and *Contra a construção do Canal Central*.

# 3. Two additional initiatives

## 3.1 Contra o Alboi cortado ao meio

In 2008, the City Council designed a project proposal and applied for funding from the National Strategic Reference Framework (NSRF 2007-2013). The project - *Parque da Sustentabilidade* (*Sustainable Park*) - aims to establish a greenway crossing on a significant part of the city centre (199.106 m2), articulating a set of facilities and promoting an innovative environment for residents and tourists under the umbrella of the sustainable development concept (Figure 2). It involves 15 local and national partners and a budget of nearly €14 million, subdivided in 17 subprojects.



Figure 2: Project proposal Parque da Sustentabilidade

Source: Aveiro City Council Webpage

Even though legislation foresees public discussion for this type of projects, citizens were essentially informed through the Press. Having such an impact on the community's infrastructures and daily life, as soon as the news came out to the public, citizens rose against the fact that no public participation process had been promoted to discuss, or at least inform, the community about the proposals' aims. In fact, this was a fervent subject for discussion by the local community through web-based technologies, with a subsequently strong impact in the local and national media. Figure 3 shows one of the project proposals: *Bairro do Alboi* (*Alboi neighbourhood*). Although the requalification of its historical garden was foreseen, creating a more attractive site for the community, the proposal also included the design of a new road that would split the garden in two units, raising immediately several questions. The potential harmful consequences of that proposal for recreational activities, road traffic and not least to the daily lives of residents, created the appropriate conditions to set up in 2010 a civic movement called Contra o *Alboi cortado ao meio* (*Against the cut of Alboi in half*) with the support of *Amigos d' Avenida*.

Figure 3: Project proposal for Bairro do Alboi (before and after)

Source: Google Maps & Aveiro City Council

Several activities were organised by the movement in order to raise public awareness on the problem and produce technical support from planners, architects and engineers to counteract the proposal. Even a questionnaire was elaborated and passed on to residents to have a full overview of the community's opinion about the project: more than 90 % of the 300 enquired rejected the proposal. In the meantime, during the process, several appeals were made to City Council to promote an active dialogue between the local government and the citizens, but the few meetings held between the movement representatives and the Mayor revealed that there was no intention to amend any proposal.

It was within this context that social media began to have an important role, functioning as a link between the Alboi neighbourhood residents (circa 300 inhabitants), the movement itself and all interested citizens willing to oppose to the proposals' idea. Hence, a blog and a Facebook page, with approximately 2 500 friends, were created to be used as means of information dissemination and as for a, where citizens could share opinions and experiences. One important initiative emerged during the discussions held through these digital channels: *Alboi Cortado ao meio? Não!* (*Alboi cut in half? No!*), a poster that was disseminated throughout the community (Figure 4). In an additional initiative that involved the cooperation between this movement and *Amigos d' Avenida*, in June 2011, the film director and musician Joaquim Pavão presented a short-film entitled DOCUMENTÁRIO Alboi - Um Canto de Mundo (Parte I) (*Documentary about Alboi - a little piece of the world, subtitled in English*), with a huge impact on the Internet, radio and national TV. Just to give an idea of its impact, the YouTube video had more than 5 000 viewers in a couple of weeks' time.

Figure 4: The poster Alboi Cortado ao meio? Não!

Source: Alboi Cortado ao meio Facebook Page

The path covered by *Contra o Alboi cortado ao meio* shows that the integrated use of web-based technologies allowed spreading efficiently the movements' activities, helped sensitising people to the issues at stake, enhanced the impact of the activities and citizens' voice, induced civic engagement and promoted a favourable environment to alter the project's proposal. And indeed, in October 2011, one year after the initial steps of the movement, the local government, facing a sensitive political context (the ruling party lost its majority on the City Council), embraced the movement's proposal and, with the involvement of the opposition party, changed the initial proposal.

## 3.2 Contra a Ponte Pedonal no Canal Central

The project *Parque da Sustentabilidade* also envisaged controversial issues, such as the construction of a pedestrian bridge over the central water channel aiming to link the central park *Rossio* with Alboi neighbourhood and related facilities, like restaurants and bars (Figure 5).



Figure 5: Pedestrian bridge proposal (Ponte Pedonal do Rossio)

Source: Aveiro City Council

As soon as the City Council decided to open a bidding process for the pedestrian bridge *Ponte Pedonal do Rossio*, in the end of 2008, the movement *Amigos d'Avenida* publicly expressed its objections concerning both the potential impacts that a bridge in that place could cause and the fact that the local community's voice was not taken into account. Not only was there no reaction from the local

government to the movement's suggestion, but also the proposal awarded to construct the pedestrian bridge projected a considerable visual impact over the channel and contradicted other spatial plans already approved for that area. Accordingly, the movement *Amigos d' Avenida* propelled a set of activities to sensitise citizens on the issue at stake by promoting public debates, holding meetings with technical services, distributing an open letter explaining the key points under debate and enlightening the community about the possible social impacts of the bridge (associated mostly with the fact that it might favour the moving of night entertainment activities and people from one of the most common places for night entertainment near Rossio, *Praça do Peixe*, to Alboi neighbourhood). Despite all the efforts, the local government did not respond to any of the challenges proposed, so all doubts about the implementation of a €1 million bridge persisted in people's minds.

During this process, and following a debate created in *Amigos d' Avenida* mailing-list, another civic movement emerged in order to promote citizen engagement around this specific issue: *Movimento Cívico Por Aveiro - Contra a Ponte Pedonal no Canal Central*. With a slow pace in its initial phase, this movement has since very recently (2012) assumed a high leading role in this process as the construction of the bridge was about to start. One of the main activities promoted by the movement was the possibility to include the local residents in a public hearing provided by the Hydrographic Region Administration Centre (ARHC) to express their opinion regarding the pedestrian bridge. In a short period of time, this movement captured the attention of many citizens. As an example, the 50 initial active key persons of the movement promoted a meeting with the local government, during which more than 250 citizens participated in what was later referred to as the highest-attended debate of the City Council one could remember. Less than a month later, the movement participated in a debate concerning the pedestrian bridge prepared by the local newspaper *Diário de Aveiro* and the Commercial Association of Aveiro, in which more than 100 persons attended.

One month later, a letter of objection to the bridge with more than 3 500 signatures was sent to the ARHC. Including both technical and juridical support based on arguments expressed by several associations and professionals with different backgrounds, the letter was sent as well to other institution, like the Secretary of State of Environment and Spatial Planning, the Regional Development and Coordinating Commission of Centro and the Inspector General of Local Administration, just to mention a few. The letter was then presented to more than 100 citizens at a dedicated information session. Since then, other similar activities were developed to sensitise the central government in this matter, stressing the importance of reassessing the bridge implementation process, not only due to environmental and urban constraints, but also because the use of structural and public funds ought to be thought and applied in a different perspective. Finally, in the course of these actions, a plethora of articles were published in *Diário de Aveiro*, showing an enthusiastic participation of the local community in the debate.

It is worth mentioning that web-based technologies were a crucial support to the whole process. If in an initial phase a mailing-list was used to connect the already mentioned 50 key actors (showing incredible dynamics with more than 800 messages exchanged among members), the more recent use of the Facebook page, with more than 1 400 friends, and the blog, which has had in two months more than 2 000 visits, helped engage a vast number of citizens on the discussion of the bridge construction. Likewise, both media facilitated the collection of the signatures needed for the letters referred to the above. This, in turn, has provided the desirable boost to place the issue in the national media agenda, with several TV reports and newspaper opinion articles across the country.

# 4. Conclusions

Judging from the reaction of the community to the use of social media and by observing the impacts of the three civic movements, it is possible to identify four main points concerning public participation and civic engagement with the help of these technologies.

The first point concerns the capacity of social media to transform virtual opinions and ideas into real initiatives. The public debates, the information sessions, the posters and the publication of articles in newspapers are just some examples of successful activities that were previously prepared with the support of web-based technologies. Of course the mere existence of technologies is not sufficient: the presence of a central number of persons that are able to 'make the wheels go round' is fundamental to engage citizens in purposive efforts. Furthermore, the number of participants that embrace these movements through the use of social media is also important, not only in motivating those already involved and providing fresh ideas, but also in amplifying the debate outside local boundaries. Figure 6 displays an example of how the movements' activities were debated in public broadcasting (in this case, the national TV). In 2008, Canavilhas, a national researcher, published an article in a national newspaper entitled "Blogs are promoting the debate about the future of cities", in which a clear reference is made to movement's like *Amigos d' Avenida*: "A blog genuinely produced by a citizen or a group of citizens without 'political' interests is an excellent form of civic participation (…) it is a new tool for civic participation and political debate, a means to have a voice in their communities, but it depends on amplification in local newspapers" (Canavilhas, 2008).



Figure 6: The civic movements' activities being debated on national TV

Source: RTP

The second point is about the political reaction to civic movements that seek to counteract policy decisions designed without taking into consideration people's demands. The reaction of local government representatives was negative throughout the aforementioned three processes, hesitant to any changes and with no will of discussing the issues with the community, even when faced with the wide impact caused by social media technologies. Two reasons can justify such a reaction. First, there is an overall perception from elected officials that civic movements of this kind have no democratic legitimacy. In their view, these movements do not represent a truly active citizenship but

are rather both hiding a political agenda that defies the Mayor and the other elected representatives and questioning the Council's planning and technical expertise. In fact, during a press conference in November 2011, the Mayor stated that "someone is arguing in the name of an institution that legally has no support (…) those responsible for the movement should rather be concerned with legalising the movement (…) hence there is no reason whatsoever to change our political decisions, which should follow their natural path". Second, there is no tradition in promoting public participation outside the common arenas, namely the municipal assembly or the public meetings promoted by the local government that are compulsory by law. Both arenas tend to fail (i) achieving genuine participation in decision-making and (ii) improving the decisions that local governments make. This hence increases the already existing reluctance in discussing ideas, supporting arguments and sharing information. And this, in turn, often alienates citizens who are really willing to help in policy design and implementation and contributes, as Putnam (2000) suggests, to the disengagement of citizens from civic activities.

The third point relates to the pedagogic and constructive nature of these civic movements and the way social media positively contribute to this purpose. Although citizens mainly express themselves when a lot is at stake for them personally, evidence shows that they do get involved in such processes when (Innes & Booher, 2010): they have more access to information; learn about the problems and potential solutions; notice that there is a common share of ideas amongst the community and that their voices can be heard. Social media technologies were indeed a good support in this regard, hence creating a context in which citizens could (and can) have access to more detailed information and, through a collective dialogue; they could mutually share and develop their sights effectively. This, in turn, can generate a learning curve throughout the whole community about the advantages of creating a cooperative means of public involvement in decision-making processes, although it can be an uphill battle, especially at an initial stage, for those who wish to participate.

The fourth and final point concerns the recognition of the social media technologies' significance in promoting citizens' joint effort to set direction for their community as a necessary but not sufficient condition for encouraging civic engagement and public participation in policy design and implementation. Authors have already mentioned the important role of a small number of key actors to create the basic conditions for engaging the local community directly in discussions both internally and with decision-makers. But, in addition, it is essential to bear in mind that, albeit simple web-based technologies may be easy to use, a lack of digital skills and education is still noticeable, especially amongst elderly people. A good number of citizens who usually support civic movements of this nature, in which spatial planning issues are involved, are those with an historical, cultural and experienced background who, with their tacit knowledge, can add other arguments to discussions.

Even though the three empirical cases described and discussed in this paper are context specific, they offer an understanding of the possibilities of public participation and civic engagement with the support of social media, as well as a broad perspective for approaching the subject in various other contexts. Future research is thus needed to understand how this issue is being addressed in other parts of the country and the world.

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# Online participation in Croatia: Moving beyond citizens' cynicism - The case of the city of Pula

Building on the arguments of those who see the Internet as a medium for a broader political participation and bearing in mind that online technologies may provide a platform for building political ties between representatives and the represented, this paper examines if and how the local authorities in Croatia have been using the potential of the Internet to engage citizens into the decision-making process. Furthermore, it examines how citizens use platforms provided by the local government for participation for expressing their cynicism as some theories suggest or for civilised discussion which, according to many authors, improves democracy. The paper explores the case of the city of Pula, which is the only city in Croatia that has introduced eConsultations in order to stimulate citizens to influence city's policies. Using longitudinal content analysis, the paper examines citizens' contributions related to two city projects, differentiating thereby between 'constructive' and 'cynical' inputs. Using two control variables, a) reporting of the newspapers about eConsultations projects and b) changes in the management of the eConsultations website, the results of the analysis suggest that certain steps may be undertaken to move beyond the citizens' cynicism default.

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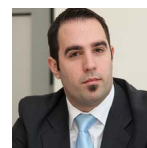
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## Keywords

eConsultations, citizens' cynicism, online participation, engagement, online technologies, Internet, city of Pula, political participation, local authorities, decision-making process

> From the analysis of the public's (negative) perception of the projects, one thing emerged as a common feature: the examined projects encountered communication and transparency issues.

# 1. Introduction

Many citizens believe that governments make decisions like private clubs, without the engagement of citizens who can no longer find any connection between the process of governing and their own elective vote (Hain, 2003). Furthermore, many authors believe that contemporary trends in the field of political media coverage, as well as trends in political communication sometimes regarded as "spin democracy" stressing high inclusion of media logic in the political process, have resulted in general distrust in political institutions, citizens' scepticism and disengagement (Entman,1989; Hart, 1994; Cappella/Jamieson, 1997; Schechter, 1997). Coleman (1994) finds that the commercialisation of the media market has led to: 1) the expectation that news and topics of public interest should compete with other news for better rating, 2) the time reserved for coverage of politics is decreasing and that the time for real political analysis is much shorter, 3) professional journalists are trapped in the world of political messages and event managers, so the news fight is actually a fight between rival public relations manipulators, 4) finally, inside this tiny political sphere citizens have become merely coincidental passers-by who scan and jangle.

Hence, it is not surprising that in this new environment the interest in issues of public interest has been gradually decreased. This trend in the public sphere is one of the arguments that led us to the conclusion that democracy is in crisis (Pattie, et al., 2003) and that public officials of democratic culture should offer new solutions for stimulating citizens' interest in issues of public interest.

The Internet appeared as a possible solution. The argument advocating the role of the Internet in reconnecting fellow citizens and invigorating civic engagement is two-fold: first, the Internet seems to have the potential to engage people in the public discussion about issues of common concern, thus bringing politics back to the people and restoring the public sphere (Coleman & Hall, 2001); secondly, the Internet is believed to have the capacity to restore broken social ties (Bebić & Grbeša, 2007). Chadwick (2006: 26) finds that the Internet emerges as "a medication for the perceived ills of modern society: isolation, fragmentation, competitive individualism, the erosion of local identities, the decline of traditional religious and family structures, and the downplaying of emotional forms of attachment and communication."

However, not everyone has been thrilled with this solution, because many authors disagree with the notion that the Internet could replace the public sphere, and many see the Internet as a platform for increasing citizens' cynicism and distrust (Chadwick, 2006, Carlsson, 1995; Danitz & Strobel, 1999; Street, 2001). These arguments will be discussed thoroughly in the theoretical section of this paper.

Nevertheless, taking into account all mentioned controversies, this paper shall try to answer if the Internet can indeed overcome the problem of cynicism and distrust and if well-structured internet forms can engage citizens and increase their participation in the decision-making process. A case study of the city of Pula will make this discussion even more relevant, considering the fact that the level of distrust in institutions and political parties in Croatia is decreasing and is significantly lower than in other European countries[1].

In the first chapter, the arguments of the authors who see the Internet as the medium for broader political participation will be presented. Moreover, it has been argued that online technologies can serve as a platform for reconnecting citizens and the government. In this section, the concept of eConsultation, as a political tool that enables participation in public consultation by using information and communication technologies will be discussed. Following this theoretical part, in the second chapter, the Croatian context will be briefly reviewed and a detailed description of the case study pertaining to the city of Pula will be provided. The third chapter deals with two

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1    http://ec.europa.eu/public_opinion/standard_en.htm.

examples of eConsultations conducted in Pula. In this section, citizens' comments will be analysed, categorising them as constructive or cynical. In the fourth chapter, the two eConsultations will be compared and the results of a media content analysis will be discussed.

## 2. The Internet as a remedy

Taking into account the growth of the Internet and possible implications these might have for democracy and addressing interactivity as the key element led authors to explore possible changes in the nature of citizens' participation in politics and public life in general. They contend that the Internet has the potential to restore the deteriorating public sphere by providing a forum in which citizens debate issues of public concern, hold those in power accountable and improve the existing form of democracy (Coleman, 2004; Street, 2001). Street finds that the Internet may offer solutions for problems that have been obstructing political participation - "time, size, knowledge and access" (2001: 217). Curran even refers to Negroponte to suggest that these developments generate a new world order based on international communication and popular empowerment (Negroponte, 1996 in Curran, 2000: 137). All these arguments are suggesting that political websites should provide infrastructure for deliberation and that political participation will follow (Chadwick, 2006: 26).

The optimistic viewpoints on the possible role of the Internet in politics strongly stress the strengthening of the ties between the representatives and the represented ones, the two way communication with citizens in the role of enhancing democracy (Coleman, 2001) and not just a new technique of political spin.

Yet, these enthusiastic conceptions of the Internet face several problems. It has been argued that the ties that bind members of a virtual community are not as strong as the old ties of family, locality, religion, or even political structures like local party and lobby group associations (Chadwick, 2006). The Internet, in this view, takes the impersonality of modern society to a new level, substituting the real things with a diluted form of community and social capital (Doheny-Farina, 1996, in Chadwick, 2006: 27). The argument basically comes down to Putnam (1994, 1995): the only functional community is the one based on face-to-face communication; the more we connect with other people on a face-to-face basis, the more we trust them. Besides, face-to-face interaction usually imposes well-known demands of basic civility. Chadwick (2006: 27) argues that the "removal of such discipline from the online environment makes it much easier to express all manner of other prejudices flourish online, where individuals can hide behind the cloak of anonymity or pseudonym, both widely accepted practises in cyberspace". Face to face connections remain important. Failing to focus on human contacts in favour of technology may mean diverting precious resources from other areas (Carlsson, 1995; Danitz & Strobel, 1999, in Wall 2007: 264).

The potential of the Internet to create free public spheres has simultaneously been criticised for the poor quality of interaction between individuals, as well as their tendency to produce a plurality of deeply segmented political associations. "Democracy involves deliberation and dialogue in the formation of collective goals, rather than the aggregation of individual preferences" argues Street (2001: 219). And the Internet is all about registering individual preferences. This concern has been probably best articulated in Berry Wellman's (2003, in Chadwick, 2006: 27) conception of the Internet as a "hybrid form of networked individualism".

Although scepticism expressed in these accounts may be justified, it does not entirely invalidate the hypothesis that Internet may provide a way around the practical problems posed by modern democracies, at least to a certain degree. It is still believed that the Internet has a more positive impact on the political life in general and that arguments discussed in the introduction advocating

this thesis are much stronger then contra arguments discussed earlier. From this point, one of the possible forms that can be applied on political websites in order to engage citizens in the decision-making process will be discussed. This form is called eConsultation.

## 2.1 eConsultation: meeting point

At the core of the eConsultations concept is the Internet, which is used to facilitate public discussion by providing a technological and structural forum, and the city authorities initiating the public discussion and setting the agenda for it. Although this demand for agenda setting may seem unpopular in the light of political and economic interests that may be driving it, Schudson finds that without "limiting debate, defining issues, and restricting alternatives, no debate can be rational (1992: 156)." An unstructured flow of thoughts leads nowhere. "It has to be a small set of identifiable, branching alternatives that can be examined reasonably enough one at the time", argues Schudson (ibid.: 156). More structured inputs encourage a more focused debate.

Since eConsultation is a relatively new concept, there are still ongoing debates about its definition, advantages and disadvantages. In the broadest sense, eConsultation is a political tool, which enables participation in public consultation by using information and communication technologies (ICT). The more specific definition we will use here comes from the Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister arguing that "eConsultation is an online consultation process that uses the Internet to ask the public their opinion on one or more specific topics and allows for discussion between participants" as a "component of the processes put in place to achieve consensus in public affairs between the government and those outside government"[2].

According to the experts of the e-consultation.org website benefits of eConsultation can be divided into three groups (1) opportunity of access (2) the media and the message and (3) speed of response [3]. Opportunity for access to the Internet means that each person, regardless of the circumstances or location, can participate in the process of eConsultation, as long as they have access on electronic means. Furthermore, it is argued that traditional consultations rely mostly on paper forms or text based media, while now, thanks to ICT, people have many alternatives that are more efficient; they even encompass more people, who for instance many not have basic literacy skills or are visually impaired; in that case, they can simply leave a voice message on the webpage. Thirdly, what is considered as the key benefit of using eConsultation is time efficiency. This means that participants can get instant feedback and the data analysis can be made at proper time, without slowing down the whole process. In a more general view, benefits of eConsultation, according to the UK Department for Business Enterprise and Regulatory Reform[4], are for example: the potential to reach, quickly and easily, a wide and diverse audience; the opportunity for respondents who have limited time, to respond interactively to consultations and send their comments online, rather than by post; the opportunity for more informed consultations, by providing access to further information through links to online resources; the opportunity to filter and analyse responses automatically as they are received electronically; the opportunity to generate feedback to respondents automatically and to provide them with email alerts when, similar consultations are launched in the future.

The main disadvantage of the eConsultations falls into a much broader problem that is widely discussed in the literature, known as the digital divide. Since the discussion about this concept is beyond the scope of this research, this paper will focus on a debate asking what eConsultation means for democracy. Does it encourage democracy or does it undermine the democratic process? Some

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2     http://www.e-consultation.org/.
3     Ibid.
4     Replaced by the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills, in 2009 (http://www.bis.gov.uk/).

authors (Chadwick, 2006; Carlsson, 1995; Danitz & Strobel, 1999.) argue that this kind of citizen's participation increases citizen's cynicism and harms the democratic process.

In the next chapter, the paper explores how eConsultations were perceived in the case of the city of Pula.

# 3. eConsultation in practice - case study of the city of Pula

In this section, two examples of eConsultations in Pula will be discussed. Primarily though, the paper will briefly discuss the Croatian context and the reason why the city of Pula has been selected as a case study.

## 3.1 Croatian context

The state of research in terms of the relationship of new media and politics in Croatia is at a low level although 50 % of the population has an access to high internet speed, which is a relatively high number, thus placing Croatia as one of the regions leading countries in Internet penetration[5]. Vehicles of politics and local politics are usually organising their political agenda online in order to get their candidates (re)elected and to strengthen the parties' political marketing potential through getting their message across to the citizens and gain more supporters. However, in general, what they do not do is to support the discussions set by citizens on the Internet in order to help them debate about those issues and hence make the result of that deliberation their political platform for their decision-making. For that and no other reason eEngagement in Croatia is underdeveloped. In the light of the discussion on the democratic potential of Internet and given the low level of trust in political parties in Croatia the voters are not encouraged to get politically involved via the Internet.

In terms of how low the level of trust in political parties and political institutions is, the Euro barometer research demonstrates the results, which shows that in 2009, 12 % of Croatian citizens said they trusted their government compared to 29 % of the European average; with citizens' trust in political parties being as low as 4 % compared to the also alarming 16 % in Europe[6].

Yet, despite the distrust and the government's initial failure to offer online platforms to engage citizens, citizens themselves demonstrate certain enthusiasm to use online technologies to politically engage themselves. Non-partisan collaborative blogs and citizens websites about politics are very popular in Croatia (www.pollitika.com is the most popular among them), as it is making YouTube movies. The YouTube movie 'Kiro prosviro' (Kiro went nuts, in English) featuring out-of-context statements by the Minister of Internal Affairs was seen by 2 million viewers, which is a great number of people in Croatia or by any standard. This movie solely led to the deterioration of the minister's image and further contributed to his removal from the office. In that way, new media in Croatia imposed itself as a platform for discussion and interaction between interest groups, ad hoc groups, pressure groups or cyber protesters. However, this paper will present an initiative of the local government in the city of Pula to engage citizens in the decision-making process.

## 3.2 Digital City Project - by Pula

Istria is one of the most developed regions in Croatia. Specific historical circumstances allowed Istria to acquire a certain degree of cultural and political autonomy, which then resulted in adopting more

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5    http://www.internetworldstats.com/stats4.htm#europe.
6    http://ec.europa.eu/public_opinion/standard_en.htm.

open regional and local models of governance. The city of Pula is the economic, administrative and political capital of the Istria region.

In 2006, Boris Miletic (at the age of 30) was elected mayor of Pula. At that time, the city administration of Pula was facing many difficulties. The city budget had a debt of about one sixth of the annual budget, the workforce structure was problematic - it was an example of an inefficient city administration.

What caused this situation was to be tracked down in four key segments: 1) organisation and human resources, 2) financial resources, 3) project management and 4) IT support. To reach the final objective the new city management set - effective and transparent local administration - each of these problems was analysed in details and reforms were conducted in each segment. Full digitalisation of the city administration was considered a condition sine qua non for improvements in each of these segments.

With this purpose a project called Digital City was implemented, aiming at:

a. Digitalising city administration, making it more efficient and more accessible to the public;

b. Enabling citizens to use online technologies to obtain services delivered by the city; and,

c. Engaging them more actively into the decision-making process.

Despite all the problems, the strong support of the management and the persistence to implement the project was finally paid off and within six months, the city administration was fully digitalised, thus raising the general level of efficiency. Moreover, on 18 December 2009, a fully functional website (www.pula.hr) was launched. The website provides several services from the eGovernance domain, such as a full online tracking service that enables users to track down their cases and draws upon the insights from their progress and current status, or a text service that allows citizens to receive on their mobile phones information on the changes regarding the status of their cases. Furthermore, citizens are enabled to view online the urban plan of the city of Pula, with information such as conditions for construction, type of constructions that can be built, allocation of land etc. The website also offers the 'eConsultations' services, which enable citizens to actively engage into the decision-making process.

The Digital City project made Pula one of the leading cities in the country in terms of digitalising its administration, by using online means for providing services to citizens, as well as for enhancing transparency and openness of the local public administration.

## 3.3 eConsultations in the city of Pula

Keeping in mind that due to the transition process in Croatia the general level of trust in institutions and political parties is very low, it is not surprising to find that the city administration of Pula had specific experiences regarding the public support/opinion towards some of its main projects. Projects such as a wastewater treatment plant, although planned and conducted by EU standards, faced strong resistance from the NGOs, specific interest groups and a part of opinion makers. The city administration was perceived as detached from the public and self-willed in planning and implementing the main projects; this led to a weak public perception of Pula's administration as well as to negative connotations for the projects.

From the analysis of the public's (negative) perception of the projects, one thing emerged as a common feature: the examined projects encountered communication and transparency issues. The public and the media perceived that the information was withdrawn from them and that there was

not enough information given to the public, especially during the preparation phases of the projects.

To overcome these issues, the management of city of Pula decided to change the way projects were planned and implemented by encouraging citizens' participation in the early planning phases. In this aim the city of Pula became the first administration in Croatia to introduce eDemocracy through the 'eConsultations' project. eConsultations seemed as the best solution to the aforementioned problems, as they are - by definition - a platform that enables citizens to engage in city projects and become co-authors of those projects.

Using longitudinal content analysis two eConsultation projects conducted by the city of Pula have been analysed. The first eConsultation dealt with the traffic and parking area problem in the district of Monte Zaro and the second one was dealing with the construction and decoration of the Pula docks[7].

### 3.3.1 eConsultation 'Traffic and parking in the district of Monte Zaro, Pula'

This section will discuss how eConsultation was applied in this case and what the analysis of this particular eConsultation has revealed.

To solve the parking area problem in the district of Monte Zaro, the city administration had a plan: to construct two public parking areas near the community centre; to put physical barriers on the pavements so as to ensure that they are available only for the pedestrians; finally, it would have to introduce traffic diversions on existing roads. By implementing these three solutions the aim was: to solve the problem of uncontrolled parking by securing new parking places; to bring back pavements to the pedestrians and improve the speed and security of traffic.

Furthermore, the city administration wanted to engage the public in this process. It enabled citizens to provide their comments and possible solutions to the Monte Zaro problem through the eConsultation web page, which was available on the city's website. The process of participating in eConsultation was very simple and all that a citizen had to do was to fill in the questionnaire posted on the website.

The questionnaire for the Monte Zaro eConsultation had a total of 13 questions. There was eight agree-disagree questions and five open-ended questions (see Appendix 1).

Since the first eight questions could only give a general overview of public opinion on certain solutions to the problem, the focus of the analyses was derived from the open ended questions where citizens provided their comments, based on the kind of comments citizens give and what their perception of eConsultation is.

### 3.3.2 eConsultation 'Construction and decoration of city docks'

The second eConsultation offered to the citizens was the concept of the construction and decoration of the city docks.

A validated master plan had to be adopted by the city parliament to allow any actual physical works at construction and decoration of the Pula docks. A master plan defines the purposes, possible functions, conditions for construction etc. for a certain geographical area. The city management (although it is their legal right) decided it will not simply define by themselves the purpose and function of the docks, instead they will involve experts by making a public call for creative solutions for construction and decoration of Pula docks.

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7    These eConsultations were conducted in two phases: from December 2009 to January 2010 and from April to May 2010.

A public call for creative solutions was open for architect studios which have references for this sort of planning. The city management also wanted to engage the public from the initial step of this major city project; the programme basis for the public call for creative solutions was available on the eConsultations web page. The programme basis for the public call had been simplified for a better and easier understanding of the general public. It listed the possible purposes and functions of the docks, and the citizens were given the opportunity to comment on these proposed solutions and moreover, to give new ones, which would then serve as a basis for the public call.

The questionnaire about the construction and decoration of Pula docks was specific and different from the questionnaire for the first eConsultation project. This time the simplified version of the whole document (the programme basis) had been made available on the eConsultation web page. Furthermore, the questionnaire had only one open-ended question, which enabled the citizens to give their comments, ideas, suggestions and directions on the proposed document.

# 4. Research design

Using content analysis, this paper investigates the type of comments that citizens give and what their perception of eConsultation is. More precisely did they use the service of eConsultations to provide constructive and meaningful comments, or they used it just as a platform for expressing their cynicism towards the local government?

A deductive approach to content analysis was applied meaning that a pilot analysis was conducted to define dominant categories of the comments which will be content analysed in the research. The results have revealed that two categories dominated the comments: constructive comments and cynical comments.

Secondly, relying on the theory that media coverage has a great impact on citizens' political behaviour; content-wise media stories that mentioned the eConsultations have been analysed. In this case, this paper coded the unit of analysis (TV or radio news, newspaper article), as positive, negative or neutral, regarding eConsultations (see Appendix 3).

Thirdly, since there was the opportunity to explore two different eConsultations conducted at a different time, any changes in the government management that might have an impact on citizens' participation could also be seen.

Thus, the main objective of this study is to answer the following research questions:

>   Q1: Did citizens use the eConsultations to participate in the decision-making process of their local government by giving constructive and meaningful comments, or they used it as a platform for expressing their cynicism?

>   Q2: In which way did the media cover the government's initiative for eConsultations?

>   Q3: Does the city management have any impact on the citizens' use of eConsultations?

## 4.1 Methodology and coding

Similar research studies so far used either discursive analysis to identify citizens' cynicism, or public opinion surveys. Although discursive analysis seems to be a more appropriate method for our purpose, content analysis, as a methodology for 'making inferences by objectively and systematically identifying specified characteristics of messages' (Holsti, 1969: 14), was still deemed adequate to

identify and quantify the citizens' use of eConsultations.

The pilot study revealed two different types of comments: constructive and cynical comments. Once identified, each type of comment was then assigned three questions. These questions were used as indicators of the specific type of comment.

Cynical comments were defined as those consisting of:

- Negative/cynical/insulting comments without any supporting arguments;

- Generally negative comments without making any reference to the issue addressed;

- Comments in which citizens express disbelief that the authorities are going to indeed implement the project.

Constructive comments were defined as those which:

- Directly referred to the project/document and make positive or negative comments with supporting arguments;

- Contained alternative solutions or propositions with supporting arguments;

- Provided an informed opinion and applicable solutions with issues being addressed.

The definition of 'cynical' and 'constructive' comments did not assume the support or disagreement with the project/document presented through eConsultations. The support or disagreement to the project did not present a relevant variable for the comment to be classified as cynical or constructive. For instance, comments about the project/document could be negative but if they were well argumentative and contained alternative solutions they were classified as 'constructive'. On the other hand, comments about the project/document could be positive but if they contained cynical/insulting comments they were classified as 'cynical'.

Using Holsti's (1969) method for agreement, the inter-coder reliability test was conducted with two independent coders on 20 randomly chosen comments. The average reliability score across categories was assessed at 0.98

## 4.2 Sample

The analysis included all comments (answers on open-ended questions) from the first eConsultation, as well as from the second eConsultation, all together 111 comments. The unit of analysis is a comment or answer on the open-ended question.

# 5. Results

## *Results of the Monte v eConsultations*

The Monte Zaro eConsultation remained opened for 45 days during which 46 comments were received (0.00069 % of the total population of the city of Pula which has 67 000 inhabitants).

The content analysis of open-ended commentaries shows that from the total number of received comments (see Figure 1):

- 63.04 % are categorised as cynical (29);

- 36.96 % are categorised as constructive (17).

Here are some of the comments categorised as cynical:

- "Where is the circus coming?"

- "I disagree because I want to drive the car into my office, and not to leave it on the parking place."

- "As usually, new proposals and none of these projects is going to be implemented, another bla, bla project."

Here are some of the comments categorised as constructive:

- "I suggest that the city administration transforms Gajeva and Eminova Street from a two way road into a one-way road, where one lane would be for the traffic and the other for parking places."

- "I disagree with the parking in front of the community centre of Karlo Rojc because this space has to stay with the sole purpose for satisfying the needs of tenants of Rojc. I will give you a list of all the activities which take place there....."

- "Parking is the biggest problem in Pula, all available free spaces should be used for parking. The space in front of Rojc is large and it would be an excellent parking space due to its location."

Although the results from the first eConsultation seem to support in the first place the theory that the Internet is the place for expressing citizens' cynicism, this paper moves on with the results of the next example prior to deriving any conclusions.
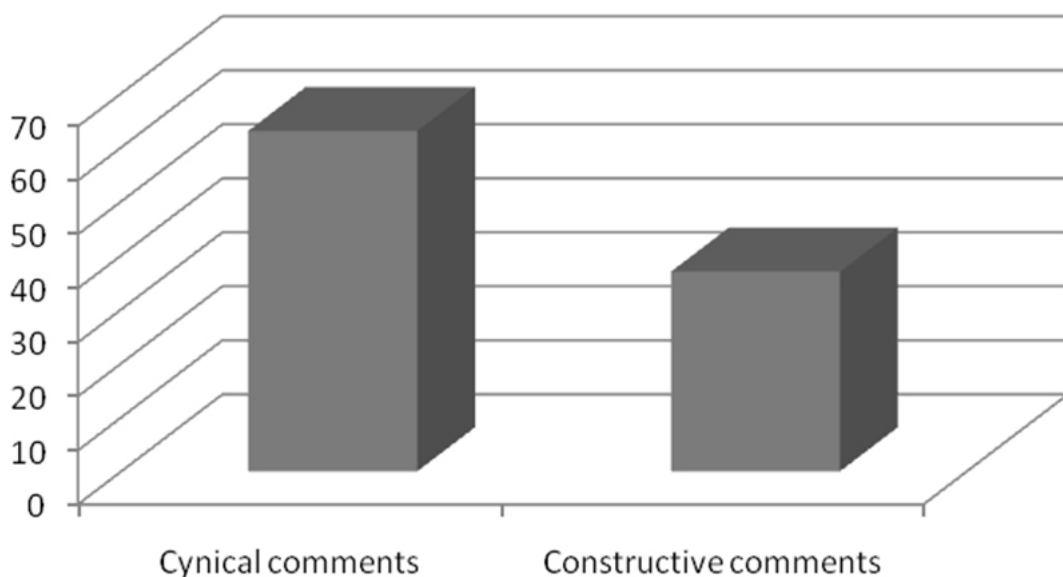


Figure 1: Monte Zaro eConsultations

## Results of the Pula docks eConsultation

The construction and decoration of Pula docks eConsultation was opened for 31 days and in that period 65 comments were received (0,00097 % of the total population of the city of Pula which has 67 000 inhabitants).

The analysis of the open-ended comments demonstrates that from the total number of received comments (see Figure 2):

- 46.15 % are categorised as cynical (30 comments);

- 53.85 % are categorised as constructive (35 comments).

Here are some of the cynical comments about the construction and decoration of Pula docks eConsultation:

- "As you did in the past, you will sell our land to the foreigners who will buy us all."

- "This is just a cover for the new apartments and new tourist facilities; you do not care about the local people".
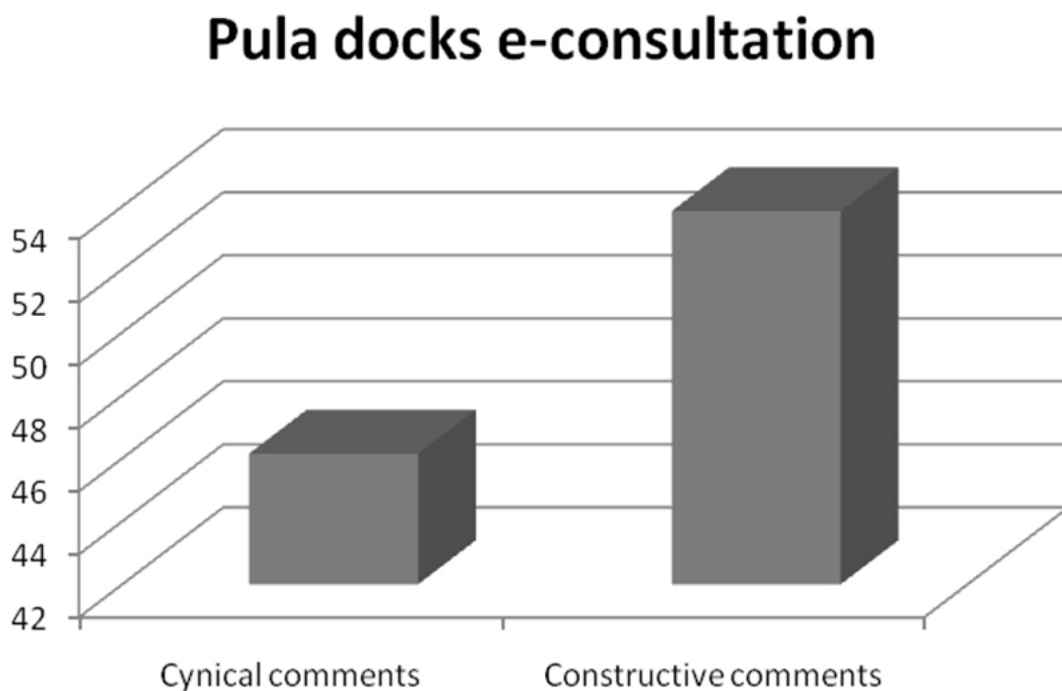
Figure 2: Pula docks eConsultations

Here are some of the constructive comments about the construction and decoration of Pula docks eConsultation:

- "One hundred years ago Pula had a tram and my idea is to bring the tram back to the streets of Pula, to drive along the docks as a sightseeing tour."

- "I suggest that one part of the docks should be built from steel and glass. This way a natural aquarium would be made."

- "The idea of moving the cargo rail station outside of the docks is ok with me, but the moving of

the passenger railway station outside of the docks is completely unacceptable, because the rail station is one of the symbols of Pula."

The longitudinal analysis of two eConsultations shows that the number of comments is still low, although it has been slightly increased, with the key change being in the quality of the comments, i.e. the increase in 'constructive' comments (see Figure 3). Therefore, what should be further examined are the reasons for the increasing number of constructive comments.

There were two intervening variables which were examined between the two eConsultation waves:

- the coverage of mainstream media; and,

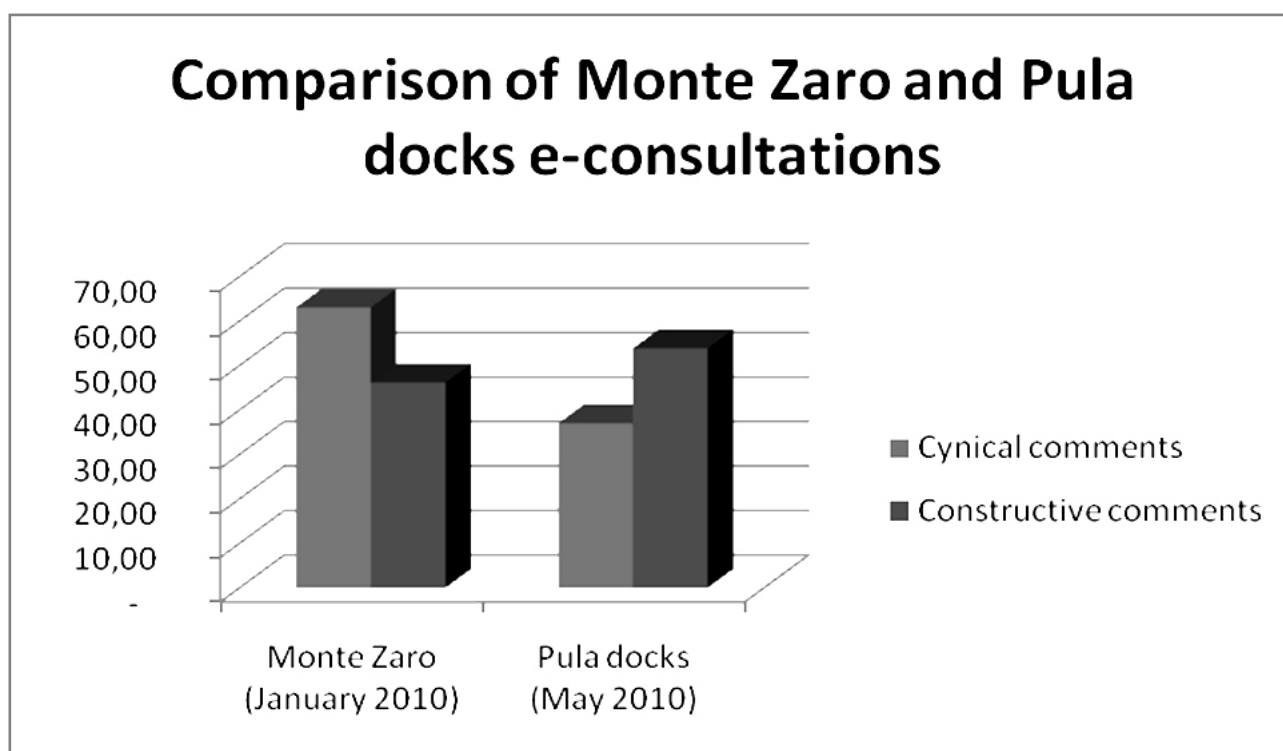- the quality of management of the eConsultation.



Figure 3: Comparison of Monte Zaro and Pula docks eConsultations

## 5.1 Content analysis of the media coverage

The fist examined intervening variable was related to the coverage of mainstream media, which tends to portray a cynical reporting of local politics. As Cappella and Jamieson (1996: 84) suggest origins of political cynicism are commonly attributed to the "mismatch between promise and delivery, or the failure of incumbents to solve social problems, or the failure of the major parties to provide real alternatives in governance". However, the role of the media in producing and reinforcing public cynicism has been too often overlooked. Cappella and Jamieson (ibid.) argue that the media have a significant role in affecting public cynicism i.e. that the way in which the news media frame political events stimulates citizens' cynicism.

Therefore, considering that the level of cynicism is usually high in the media coverage of local politics and bearing in mind the aforementioned consequences this may have for the level of public cynicism, it was quite surprising that the media coverage was very positive on eConsultations from

the first day the project was launched. All articles in print media, radio and TV stations were positive and in favour of it.

### 5.1.1 Research design

The unit of analysis was a single article, TV or radio story. Since the sample was quite small, consisting of 15 articles and 10 news and radio stories, there was no pilot research done, but two coders content analysed articles and stories at the same time, and reliability test gave the highest score at 1. A simple content analysis was conducted on 15 articles. It revealed that the overall valence of the article was positive in all articles, for instance 'Development of city by shape of its citizens' (Glas Istre, 26-01-2010), 'Monte Zaro as citizens want it' (Glas Istre, 03-01-2010). As for the broadcast media the analysis has revealed the same trend: all news stories had a positive slant[8]. Although in some of the media there was some public argument/disagreement about the project that was put on eConsultation, the media coverage of the eConsultation itself was favourable and positive.

Two facts have probably contributed to such a favourable media mood towards the project. Firstly, it might be the case that this was the first project of this kind in Croatia. Secondly, the engagement of the key city opinion makers and interest groups in the process gave additional media attention to the eConsultations. Before the second eConsultation started, a round of presentations to the main political parties was held, and political consensus regarding the project was reached. The same was done for the unions, main NGOs, the business sector and other interest groups. Introducing the project to the key city opinion makers meant additional favourable voices in the media and presumably through a "two step flow" model of the media effects might have also had some impact on the public (Severin & Tankard, 2001: 31).

## 5.2 City management evaluation

The second examined variable was the management of eConsultation, which has significantly changed between the two phases of eConsultations. In this quality change in the management of eConsultation there are three key features[9]. First of all, the quality of input (project documentation) given in the eConsultation was significantly improved. The project documentation available on the second eConsultation was more structured; also it was more understandable to the citizens and more user-friendly. Secondly, the role of the eConsultation comments was better explained to the public. From the eConsultation itself it was clear what part of the process/project implementation is this eConsultation going to affect. Moreover, the steps of the overall project implementation were better explained. And thirdly, the involvement of experts in the eConsultation gave additional credibility. Experts were involved during the preparation of the documentation for the eConsultation and also during its presentation to the media and general public.

Two cases do not represent a sufficiently large sample to draw any conclusive evidence. It is rather an indication of a possible correlation between improvements in the city management and more constructive comments. In order to acquire more meaningful evidence and results, an in-depth longitudinal analysis should be conducted, involving a series a forthcoming eConsultation cases. However, it could be argued that the findings from the detailed analyses of the two eConsultation cases support Schudson's findings that without "limiting debate, defining issues, and restricting

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8    The analysis included the period surrounding the launch and distribution of results of the first eConsultation (December 2009 - January 2010) and the period announcing the second eConsultation (April 2010). The media included in the analysis are the most influential media in Pula i.e. Glas Istre: regional newspaper; Radio Pula: regional radio station; Croatian national television, NOVA TV and TV NOVA Pula TV stations (see appendix 2).

9    City management report on eConsultations (Pula, 2009).

alternatives, no debate can be rational" (1992: 156) are also supported in this comparison of two presented cases, because more structured inputs encourage more focused debate.

# 6. Conclusions

Building on the notion that the Internet can serve as a medium for engaging citizens in the political discussion as well as that online technologies may provide a platform for reconnecting citizens and governments, and by looking at the two examples of eConsultations implemented by the city of Pula, this paper made several assumptions. Firstly, analysing the comments from eConsultations, it has been argued that citizens are willing to engage in the decision-making process if a platform is available. Secondly, it has been found that comments posted by citizens can be categorised as either 'cynical' or 'constructive'. Thirdly, contrary to pessimists' beliefs who view the Internet as a platform for expressing citizens' cynicism, it has been demonstrated that citizens can provide constructive comments, if the available service is both well-structured and user-friendly. Finally, it has been found that media coverage plays an important role in citizens' participation, meaning that positive media reports about eConsultations *per se* will encourage the quality of citizens' participation.

Habermas (1989) and Schudson (1992) believed that only a well-structured discussion can be constructive and rational. A comparison of our two eConsultations supports the following assumption: once the city management improved its services, providing more user-friendly reports about the projects and better instructions, and introducing key opinion makers to this service, the number of comments in general and the number of constructive comments in particular increased.

Citizens' distrust of political institutions presents a serious obstacle to the projects of this kind to be introduced because citizens tend to be generally cynical about government's actions. However, our findings demonstrate that cynicism can be alleviated to some extent if (1) the coverage of the mainstream media encourages citizens' online participation and (2) if the city management improves its work.

However, since the sample used in this analysis was rather small, the analysis presented here does not have either the ambition or the potential to provide any conclusive evidence. Instead, it provides a constructive hint on what can be done to improve communication between the representatives and the represented in terms of the quality of feedback and the number of engaged citizens. In short, a) media coverage of the eConsultations projects and b) changes in the management of the eConsultations website are the variables one should control when trying to engage citizens and overcome their cynicism.

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# Incorporating Social Network Services in eGovernment Solutions: A Case Study

This paper presents the state of eGovernment sophistication in the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia. For this purpose, a survey is conducted using the 20 basic public eServices based on a five-stage sophistication model. The potential impact of social media in eGovernment was explored and a new 6th stage of sophistication into the maturity model called 'Citizen Inclusion' was introduced. This stage refers to citizens' empowerment and inclusion into eGovernment using social network services, while also providing citizens with the ability to receive feedback on how government operates.

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66 Case study for social network usage in eGovernment. 99

# 1. Introduction

eGovernment services should increase the efficiency and transparency of the public sector. The government services already developed in the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia are aimed at facilitating the communication between the government institutions and the business community (G2B); however, there are several services that are focusing on the interaction between the state administration and citizens (G2C) or the interaction within specific government institutions (G2G). In this paper, all 20 public services defined by the European Commission have been measured and monitored by Capgemini for the European Union (Capgemini, 2009/2010), together with their online sophistication score in the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia for the period 2007-2010. The resulting data showed an average score of 45 %, which places the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia at the bottom of the third level of sophistication or 'two-way interaction' according to this model.

Social networks have attracted millions of users worldwide, introducing new methods for communication between users and providing opportunities for users to engage in community participation. Furthermore, they are seen as a convenient means for introducing a two-way interaction, i.e. help revitalise dialogue between citizens and governments and promote transparency, anti-corruption, law enforcement and democratic society. Social networks can be powerful tools for citizen inclusion in government processes and trust towards eGovernment services. This paper explores many different aspects in the way the government can use social networks.

There are three major questions tackled in this paper:

- What is the level of sophistication of the 20 basic services in the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia using the 5th stage model defined by the European Commission and monitored by Capgemini for EU?

- How social media may improve eGovernment?

- What is the level of the government usage of three social media sites: Twitter, Facebook and YouTube?

The objective of this paper is to provide an overview of the key benefits that governments can achieve from using social networks. We introduce an extended model by including a new stage called 'Citizen Inclusion'. This stage is particularly important to positively transform the relationship between the government and citizens.

This paper is divided into six sections including this introductory remark. In section two, the research model is explained followed by a discussion of the resulting data. The potential impact of using social media in eGovernment is explored in section three, while in section four, a six-stage maturity model is introduced followed by a discussion of the resulting data in section five. Finally, section six provides conclusions.

# 2. Research Model

According to the Conceptual framework for benchmarking the digital Europe created by the European Commission, the 20 basic services can be benchmarked using the following three indicators:

E1: Online availability and interactivity of the 20 basic public services for citizens and enterprises;

E2: Percentage of individuals using the internet for interacting with public authorities by level of sophistication;

E3: Percentage of enterprises using the internet for interacting with public authorities broken down by level of sophistication.

The model reflects how businesses and citizens can interact with the public authorities. Governments' service delivery processes are described according to the following stages: 1) information, 2) one-way interaction, 3) two-way interaction, 4) transaction, and finally 5) targetisation. Sophistication stages are depicted in Table 1. Until 2007 each elementary service was graded on a scale from zero to four. In 2007, the European Commission introduced a new 5th stage, which refers to the personalisation of services.

Table 1: Level of sophistication of eGovernment services

| LEVEL 1: INFORMATION 0-20 % | LEVEL 2: ONE-WAY INTERACTION (downloadable forms) 20-40 % | LEVEL 3: TWO-WAY INTERACTION (electronic forms) 40-60 % | LEVEL 4: TRANSACTION (full electronic case handling) 60-80 % | LEVEL 5: TARGETISATION (pro-active and automated) 80-100 % |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| The information necessary to start the procedure and obtain a public service is available online. | The publicly accessible website offers the possibility to obtain in a non-electronic way (by downloading forms) to start the procedure and obtain this service. | The publicly accessible website offers the possibility of an electronic intake with an official electronic form to start the procedure and obtain this service. | The publicly accessible website offers the possibility to completely treat the public service via the website, including decision and delivery. | The government pro-actively performs actions to enhance the service delivery quality. Data is reused. There is no need for the user to request the service. |

The third and the fourth levels, two-way interaction and transaction, have become a standard for many countries: electronic forms are available for most services, while the transactional approach (also known as full electronic case handling), where the user applies for and receives the service online, without any additional paper work, is increasingly becoming mainstream. The fifth level, targetisation, provides an indication of the extent by which front and back offices are integrated, data is reused and services are delivered proactively. The fourth and fifth levels are jointly referred to as 'full online availability'. Using this model, 20 basic public services have been monitored in a four-year period, as depicted in Table 2. These services have been defined and monitored according to the suggestions explained in Capgemini, 2009 and Capgemini, 2010. Since 2001, Capgemini model has been used for benchmarking eGovernment services in 31 countries on behalf of the European Commission.

12 of these 20 basic services focus on the interaction between the state administration and citizens, while eight of them aim at facilitating the communication between government institutions and the business community. The results were collected from the web sites of numerous official government parties, which provide these basic services in the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia.

Table 2: The 20 basic services

| CITIZENS | BUSINESS |
|---|---|
| Income Taxes | Social Contribution for Employees |
| Job Search | Corporate Tax |
| Social Security Benefits | VAT |
| Personal Documents | Registration of a New Company |
| Car Registration | Submission of Data to the Statistical Office |
| Application for Building Permission | Custom Declaration |
| Declaration to the Police | Environment-related Permits |
| Public Libraries | Public Procurement |
| Birth and Marriage Certificates | |
| Enrolment in Higher Education | |
| Announcement of Moving | |
| Health-related Service | |

## 2.1 Analysis of Results

In terms of sophistication, the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia achieved sophistication of 45 % in 2010, compared to 34 % in 2007. Achieving an average score of 45 %, places the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia at the bottom of the third level of sophistication or 'two-way interaction'. Table 3 lists all 20 public services together with their online sophistication score as they have been measured for the period 2007-2010. The first 12 services measure the online sophistication for citizens' services, and the remaining eight concern business services. The final overall score for the country is expressed in percentages (%), whereby 100 % means that all services have reached their highest level of sophistication or targetisation.

Table 3: Annual Sophistication Results

| | 2007 | 2008 | 2009 | 2010 |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Income taxes | 20 % | 40 % | 40 % | 40 % |
| Job search | 40 % | 60 % | 60 % | 80 % |
| Social security benefits | 25 % | 30 % | 30 % | 35 % |
| Personal documents | 60 % | 60 % | 60 % | 60 % |
| Car registration | 40 % | 40 % | 40 % | 40 % |
| Building permission | 20 % | 20 % | 30 % | 35 % |
| Declaration to the police | 0 % | 0 % | 0 % | 0 % |
| Public libraries | 60 % | 60 % | 60 % | 60 % |
| Certificates | 40 % | 40 % | 40 % | 40 % |
| Enrolment in higher education | 0 % | 5 % | 5 % | 5 % |
| Announcement of moving | 20 % | 20 % | 20 % | 20 % |
| Health related services | 0 % | 0 % | 0 % | 0 % |
| Social contributions | 60 % | 60 % | 60 % | 60 % |
| Corporate tax | 70 % | 70 % | 70 % | 80 % |
| VAT | 70 % | 70 % | 70 % | 80 % |
| Registration of a new company | 40 % | 40 % | 40 % | 50 % |
| Submission of data to statistical offices | 0 % | 0 % | 0 % | 20 % |
| Customs declaration | 20 % | 40 % | 60 % | 70 % |
| Environment-related permits | 30 % | 30 % | 40 % | 50 % |
| Public procurement | 60 % | 60 % | 70 % | 80 % |

Figure 1 depicts that in 2010's benchmark, the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia achieved a sophistication of 45 %, increased by 11 % compared to 34 % achieved in 2007.
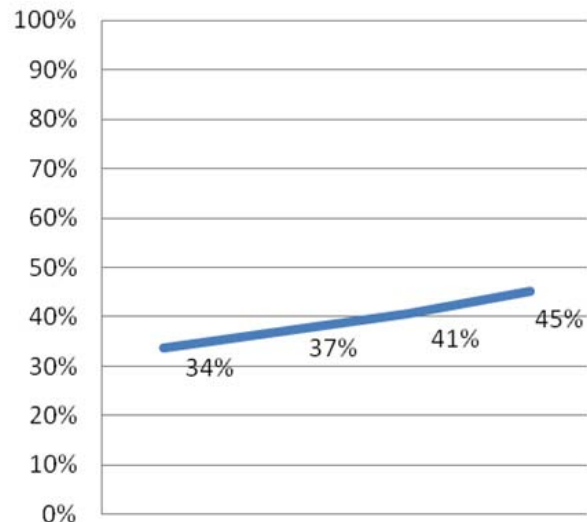
Figure 1: The Growth of Sophistication of eServices for the period 2007-2010

Figure 2 depicts an online sophistication score for citizen services and for business services. It shows that more progress has been achieved in G2B services, while the majority of applications were aimed at facilitating the communication between government institutions and the business community. The sophistication score can be split into 35 % for citizen services and 54 % for business services.
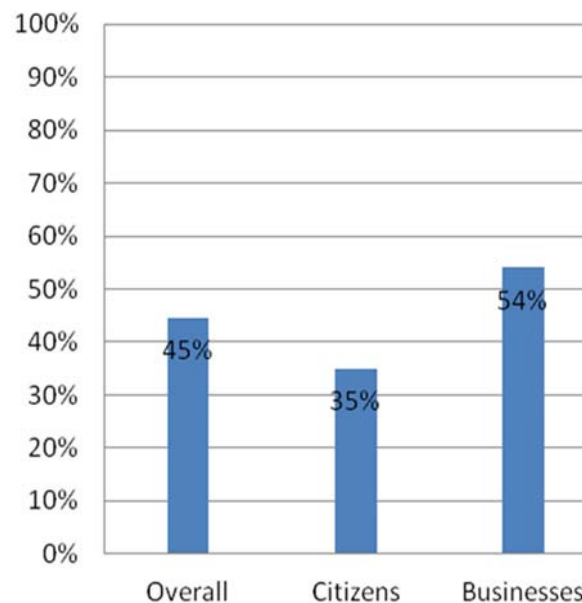


Figure 2: Online sophistication score for citizen services and business services for 2010

The eGovernment performance of the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia has been growing slowly. Many of the services share the same sophistication level as demonstrated in the previous survey (Gusev, Spasov & Armenski, 2007) for the period of 2004-2007. Achieving an average score of 45 %, places the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia at the bottom of the third level (two-way interaction) of the 5th stage maturity model. This means that further progress will need to be made, while interacting with citizens and public sectors. The emergence of social networks is changing people's social life. At this point, a shift is required for governments to stay in line with citizens' needs.

# 3. Social Networks

Social networks can transform the way governments provide online information and services, as well as how they interact with citizens and stakeholders. Governments can benefit in many ways from using social networks: social capital; transparency; anti-corruption; democracy; law enforcement; trust; and citizen inclusion and empowerment.

*Social capital* refers to connections among individuals - social networks and the norms of reciprocity and trustworthiness that arise from them (Putnam, 1993). Social capital includes the reputation that one enjoys among their peers (Landsber, 2010), or obligations and expectations that one may have; the important information channels that sustain networks and informal organisations; and the social norms that bind our actions and create an expectation that others will behave in predictable ways (Landsber, 2010; Coleman, 1988).

It makes sense to use social networks to make government information available and provide means of direct contact with the government. *Transparency* is a powerful tool to improve access to government information. It provides civil society with data that allows active and informed participation to governments to provide more accurate and timely information. The vast majority of government information needs to be digital and many users have access to it in an electronic form (Jaeger & Berto, 2010; Bertot et al., 2010).

eGovernment has a great impact on controlling corruption (Anderson, 2009). In terms of *anti-corruption*, social media has four major potential strengths: collaboration, participation, empowerment, and real-time discovery (Bertot et al., 2010). Social networks are collaborative and participatory by their nature. They allow anyone to share information, so social networks are empowering their users. Social media enable real-time discovery by allowing anyone to easily publish information as soon as it becomes available.

Due to social networks' collaborative and participatory nature, citizens can engage in *democratic* decision-making processes; this is also known as eDemocracy, which entails a more active involvement of citizens in addressing public challenges.

Using social media, citizens can be involved in and strengthen policing and *law enforcement*. This is the case with the United Kingdom, where all kinds of applications have been developed by the government aiming at informing citizens and involving them in - for instance - criminal investigation tasks (Huijboom & Broek, 2011).

*Trust* is the foundation of all human and institutional interaction (Duck, 1997; Kramer & Tyler, 1995). A very important step for eGovernment concerns adoption, as this is a determining factor for citizens to gain a high level of trust (Teo et al., 2009). Since social networks provide an effective way to connect with communities, they will play an important role in enhancing citizens' trust. The government needs to use social networks for communication and for providing citizens with convenient and dependable online services. Such a type of publicity will rapidly increase citizens' perception of government's trustworthiness.

# 4. Introduction to the Six Stage Maturity Model

"It is not enough just to implement organisational change... to make real progress on transforming government services one should aim to positively transform the relationship between government and citizens... by making the front-office fully customer focused, and understanding the citizen as a

customer with complex needs, far beyond the private sector understanding of a consumer" (cc:eGov, 2007; Trajkovik, 2011). Top priority for eGovernment should be users' inclusion and empowerment. Social networks can be used by the government to include and empower citizens, providing the means that would enable citizens to participate more actively in the government decisions by offering direct feedback. For example, they can share ideas and use collaboration to determine the public opinion on different issues. In this way, social networks allow interaction, creation and sharing of information, in cases where users are also producers; additionally, social networks allow for a better sophistication of services than services that allow targetisation. Furthermore, social networks provide information directly to citizens, which may help them to have a better understanding of how government works. Most European countries have reached the highest level of sophistication or targetisation, and they should aim to positively transform the relationship between government and citizens. As a result, a new 6th stage of sophistication into the maturity model called 'Citizen Inclusion' is proposed.
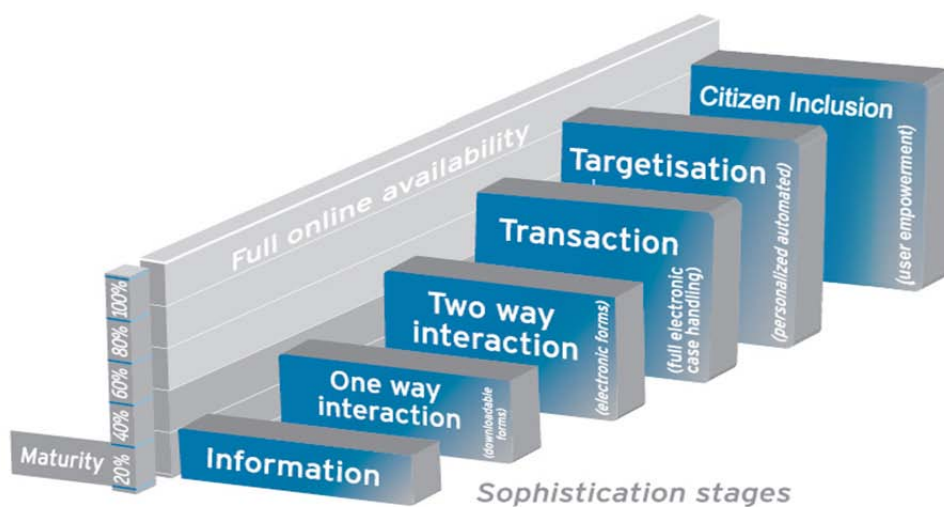


Figure 3: Sophistication stages of a six stage maturity model

The use of social networks in eGovernment of the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia is measured using the newly introduced 6th stage of sophistication, which refers to citizen inclusion and empowerment. The research was conducted through completing an analysis of 22 national government organisations on the utilisation of three social networking sites in the period between 21 and 27 October 2011. For the purposes of this research, it has been decided to focus on all ministries of the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia (including government) and some agencies and funds that are most used by the citizens. In addition, several social networking sites had to be chosen. The selected sites are based on the number of internet users and various functionalities they have, such as bulletin boards, blogs and videos. Therefore, the research is focused on three commonly used social network services globally and locally in the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia: Twitter (micro-blogging service), Facebook (social networking services) and YouTube (video sharing service).

## 5. Analysis and Results

For the purposes of this research, it has been decided to concentrate on the government organisations depicted in Table 4. The first column shows monitored government organisations, while the next three ones designate whether that specific government has a presence (yes) or not (no) on Twitter, Facebook or YouTube.

Table 4: Social Networking Usage Results

| | TWITTER | FACEBOOK | YOUTUBE |
|---|---|---|---|
| Government | Yes | Yes | Yes |
| Ministry of Defence | No | Yes | No |
| Ministry of Interior | No | No | Yes |
| Ministry of Justice | No | Yes | No |
| Ministry of Foreign Affairs | No | No | No |
| Ministry of Labour and Social Policy | No | No | No |
| Ministry of Finance | No | No | No |
| Ministry of Education and Science | No | Yes | No |
| Ministry of Economy | No | No | No |
| Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry and Water Management | No | No | No |
| Ministry for Information Society and Administration | Yes | Yes | No |
| Ministry of Transport and Communications | No | No | No |
| Ministry of Health | No | Yes | No |
| Ministry of Culture | No | Yes | Yes |
| Ministry of Local Government | No | No | No |
| Ministry of Environment and Physical Planning | No | No | No |
| Employment Agency | No | No | No |
| Health Insurance Fund | No | No | No |
| Real Estate Agency | No | No | No |
| Pension and Disability Insurance Fund | No | No | No |
| Central Register | No | Yes | No |
| State Statistical Office | No | No | No |
| **Total** | **2 (9 %)** | **8 (36.4 %)** | **3 (13 %)** |

The results show that most government organisations do not exploit social networking sites to reach their citizens and other potential users. Two out of 22 government organisations use Twitter (9 %), 36.4 % has a presence on Facebook and 13 % use YouTube.

## 5.1 Twitter Analysis

As mentioned previously, two out of the 22 surveyed government organisations or 9 % of them have a Twitter presence. The user account that is followed by most other Twitter users is the Twitter account of the Ministry of Administration and Information Society, which is followed by 219 users. The surveyed government organisations with their official Twitter accounts are following, on average, 138 other users. Accounts are followed, on average, by 243 users. The following table sets out minimum and maximum values for these two parameters.

Table 5: Minimum and maximum values for the following / followed parameters for Twitter accounts

|  | MINIMUM | MAXIMUM | AVERAGE | TOTAL |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Followed | 235 | 252 | 243.5 | 487 |
| Following | 9 | 267 | 138 | 276 |

The regular use of this service and intense communication means increase the number of accounts that follow the official government accounts of the organisations. For this purpose, the number of accounts that follow government Twitter accounts in the period between 26 July and 26 October 2011 has been examined. The data showed that the number of users that follow these Twitter accounts constantly increases (Figure 4).



Figure 4: Average number of users who follow the Twitter accounts of the government organisations

However, the interaction or direct communication is one of the most important features in the use of this service for social networking. The analysis of the accounts showed that none of their published tweets are addressed to one or more other accounts (using the option 'reply to'). Another indicator is retweets, i.e. when you re-publish information that another Twitter user has written. However, none of the government tweets are retweeted.

## 5.2 Facebook Analysis

The largest presence on social networks is witnessed on Facebook. Eight out of the 22 government organisations or 36.4 % have a presence on Facebook. Each Facebook account has a network of users who have shown interest in the contents by pressing the 'Like', 'Join' or 'Become a friend' button. The accounts have 567 users on average. The most notable account is that of the Ministry of Culture with 2 286 users, and the account with the fewest users is that of Ministry of Justice with only 12 users. Eight Facebook accounts that have a total of 4 525 users have been analysed. The following table sets out minimum and maximum values for the number of users.

Table 6: Number of users of Facebook accounts

|  | MINIMUM | MAXIMUM | AVERAGE | TOTAL |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Users | 12 | 2286 | 567 | 4527 |

Each Facebook account gives an option to enter basic information about the organisation. The analysis showed that five (62.5 %) of Facebook accounts contain such information.

## 5.3 YouTube Analysis

Three out of 22 examined government organisations or 13 % have a YouTube presence. These three organisations have uploaded 69 videos, with an average of 23 uploaded video clips. The channel with the most uploaded videos is the YouTube account of the Ministry of Interior, with 59 uploads (85 % of the total number of uploaded videos). The remaining 10 video clips belong to the Ministry of Culture and the Government account. The following table sets out the minimum and maximum values for a number of uploaded videos.

Table 7: Number of uploaded videos on YouTube channels

|  | MINIMUM | MAXIMUM | AVERAGE | TOTAL |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Videos | 2 | 59 | 33 | 69 |

Any user who has a YouTube account can subscribe to a channel and then automatically receive a notification for each new uploaded video. These three channels count 104 subscribers.

# 6. Conclusions

eGovernment can deliver massive benefits to the citizens. When implemented correctly, it enables cooperation between independent organisations and transforms the way citizens interact with the government.

The eGovernment performance of the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia is growing steadily but the speed of growth could be enhanced. The country has made progress on most Information Society and eGovernment indicators, but is still trailing in Europe, especially in direct citizen participation and inclusion in adoption of eGovernment services. The research have shown an average score of 45 %, which places the country at the bottom of the third level of sophistication or 'two-way interaction' according to Capgemini 5th stage sophistication model for eServices.

The emergence of social networks is changing people's social life. A shift at this point is required for governments to stay in line with their citizens and achieve many benefits. Social networking sites can be used to further promote government information and services, recruitment, announce events, achieve a government's mission.

Using the full potential of social networks, the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia can drastically improve the online sophistication of services and interaction with citizens and the public sector. The study has found that approximately 19 % of the country's government organisations have some presence on social network sites. In most cases where social media was used, governments maintained a presence for information dissemination. In order to provide a better level of sophistication and reach a greater number of users, government organisations should aim to use the social media and creative methods and policies to better use these valuable tools.

Further research should be made in order to determine the most efficient and suitable way (from government perspective) and most trusted way (from citizen perspective) for further incorporation of social services and their platforms into eGovernment services.

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# eParticipation and Social Media: a Symbiotic Relationship?

This paper charts the evolution of eParticipation projects and discusses the uptake of social media by the latest wave of eParticipation projects funded under the CIP PSP 2009 call, building on the lessons learned by the pioneering eParticipation Preparatory Action. The shift towards social media is clearly visible on two currently active projects: Puzzled by Policy and OurSpace. This paper proposes that eParticipation projects benefit from the use of social media in two fundamental ways: 1) Promotion of projects via internationally popular social networks such as Facebook makes eParticipation platforms more visible to audiences otherwise hard to reach. These networks also assist in targeting specific audiences interested in the project's subject matter. 2) Designing eParticipation projects from a social media standpoint enhances the likelihood of eParticipation becoming part of citizens' everyday lives. Moreover, it is suggested that the development of new eParticipation tools should be conducted in concert with the latest advances in social media to ensure eParticipation is not sidelined as an online activity, failing to engage a new generation of European citizens, whose online behaviour no longer reflects the traditional models of participation through proprietary web spaces.

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> This paper charts the evolution of eParticipation projects and discusses the uptake of social media by the latest wave of eParticipation projects funded under the CIP PSP 2009 call, building on the lessons learned by the pioneering eParticipation Preparatory Action.

# 1. Introduction

In the last decade the European Commission (EC) has led the promotion and support of initiatives aiming to enhance political participation of citizens through the use of Information and Communication Technologies (ICT). Since 2005, the EC has launched - as part of the 5th and 6th Framework Programmes - a Preparatory Action on eParticipation and from 2006 to 2008 funded over 20 eParticipation projects targeting various themes with the ultimate aim of testing eParticipation on a European scale. The first three waves of eParticipation projects ended in 2010/2011. Some of these projects enjoyed huge success, while others failed to achieve widespread uptake, but all contributed to a deeper understanding of the environment in which eParticipation functions and the methodology for achieving desired results. The production of reports assessing the impact of the eParticipation Preparatory Action, such as the Impact Assessment and the Consolidated Report written by the eParticipation monitoring project 'Momentum' (Charalabidis, 2010) and the publication of other scientific papers examining the success of the completed eParticipation initiatives, such as 'On Sustainable Participation' (Molinari, 2010), all deepened this general understanding.

Several key lessons can be drawn from these reports: a) the number of participants in project pilots was below the predicted levels, b) the impact of the projects on decision-making was somewhat limited and, c) most projects did not outlive their funding schemes and the project outcomes therefore had limited sustainability options.

Based on the impact assessment reports and literature evaluating the success of the eParticipation projects, the EC launched the ICT Policy Support Programme (CIP PSP CALL 3bis). Special reference should be made to objective *3.5: eParticipation - empower and involve citizens in transparent decision making in the EU* - under which several new projects were funded. Contrary to the first three waves of eParticipation projects, the emphasis of this call was not on developing new ICT, rather on: 1) using new trends in communication such as social media to generate mass participation, 2) deploying and enhancing existing validated ICT, and 3) achieving project sustainability. This paper will examine the uptake of social media by the eParticipation projects funded under ICT PSP in 2009, using the following case studies: **Puzzled by Policy** and **OurSpace**. In particular, this paper will analyse the specific use of social media by the two aforementioned projects, propose the benefits social media can deliver that traditional eParticipation tools cannot and based on the case studies, it will suggest the ways social media should be best implemented to maximise the success rates of eParticipation projects and initiatives.

# 2. Identifying New Trends in eParticipation

In the early 2000s, Europe recognised the need to follow the American style of more aggressive government, driven by technological innovation in the private sector (Nixon, 2007). As a result, the EU adopted several strategies aiming to make Europe more competitive on the global scale. 'eEurope 2002', part of the Lisbon Strategy, recognised the value of the Internet and encouraged its broad take up by governments, citizens and businesses, while ensuring all users are equipped with the appropriate competencies and skills. The follow-up 'eEurope 2005' strategy aimed to modernise and integrate public services through the newly deployed internet infrastructure, allowing eGovernment to expand into new areas such as health and education. In addition, the strategy supported the growth of mobile services and ICT-based knowledge management, while addressing the issues of internet security and interoperability. The follow-up initiative 'e2010' aimed to position Europe as the foremost facilitator of innovation, embracing the full use of ICT and developing a true information society (Nixon, 2007).

In this context, eGovernment was placed at the forefront of the e2010 initiative as the key driver of European transformation into a fully functional information society. eParticipation was promoted and used as an active tool for encouraging engagement with democratic processes as well as motivating the fulfilment of civic duties. Various eParticipation projects developed during the mid and late 2000s having helped to form a knowledge base for identifying the key criteria that are necessary for successfully embedding eParticipation in the organisation of society. By tracking the evolution of the eParticipation projects funded under the eParticipation Preparatory Action, certain patterns that allow for a better understanding of what tools are can be detected; additionally, strategies eParticipation projects must entail in order to reach their objectives. The most significant feature of successful projects is the emphasis on the deployed ICT, the maturity of the ICT, as well as the newest trends in online interaction. Furthermore, higher success rates were noted for projects deploying eParticipation tools tailored to the technical skills of the end-user emphasising easy-to-use interfaces and visually appealing graphic designs. In essence, the development of eParticipation projects reveals a common trend: the format of the project is of paramount importance relating to its long-term impacts, sustainability prospects and society's acceptance (Millard et al., 2009).

## 3. Embracing Social Media

Nowadays, social media represents a disproportionately high share of internet traffic, with people spending increasing amounts of time on sites such as Facebook, YouTube and Twitter. Moreover, these types of online activities are perceived as trendy, convenient, easy-to-use and universally appealing, revealing the following correlation: The strengths of social media are the alleged weaknesses of the pioneering eParticipation projects (Sæbø, 2008). It has been acknowledged that "given the importance of eParticipation to Europe's future, it is essential to experiment with these new tools to support European policy making and democracy, also because of the leadership and economic advantages this will bring" (EC, 2009: 28). Thus, the use of social media can be considered as a logical choice for filling in the gaps that prevent eParticipation from becoming part of people's lives in the following ways: 1) increasing general awareness of the issues at stake, 2) making eParticipation platforms more accessible to audiences otherwise not engaged in political debates and, 3) utilising the newest trends in online communications to its advantage, making users' participation easier and more intuitive.

In order to illustrate the need of linking eParticipation with social media, the validity of these theoretical claims must be strengthened by showing the exploitation of social media by two currently running eParticipation projects funded under CIP PSP 2009.

## 4. Case Studies

### 4.1 Puzzled by Policy

'Puzzled by Policy' is an online platform that encourages people to become actively involved in discussions concerning immigration policies across Europe as well as increases interaction levels between various stakeholders, mainly ordinary citizens and decision-makers. Moreover, Puzzled by Policy gives people a medium to exchange opinions and ideas across the borders of their own countries with the potential of influencing public policy at the European level. From a practical perspective, the Puzzled by Policy pilot is currently deployed in four countries: Italy, Greece, Spain and Hungary. The key features of this platform allow users to: 1) identify where their views on immigration stand in relation to current policies in the field, 2) join online discussions on different

strands of immigration-related policies and, 3) install the Puzzled by Policy widget on their platform of choice in order to share it with friends and engage directly with policy-makers.

The key rationale behind designing Puzzled by Policy project was to "combine tried and tested eParticipation concepts and tools such as EU Profiler and a debate forum (U-Debate), with new widget applications to reduce the complexity of decision making at the EU level and 'push' the platform to popular social media sites such as Facebook as well as to users own desktop and mobile devices -in effect bringing policymaking 'to the people' rather than relying on people to come to a specific site" (Puzzled by Policy, 2012).

Apart from furthering the wider policy objectives, the project embraces the use of social media to reach mass audiences and thus follows the latest web 2.0 trend as "today, everything is about Social Media" (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010: 67). To date, the project has been successful in realising the set objectives. The project offers countless interactive features to its users who can install the PbP widget on anyone's social network, blog or other destination and share the widget with friends or colleagues. Installing and sharing the widget allows the user to see the views of his/her friends on the same immigration issues and leads the user into a debate on the subject. In addition the project can be followed on social media sites such as Facebook, Twitter, Linked in, Flicker and YouTube. The platform places a great emphasis on becoming better known via users' recommendations to their friends: one of the most influential functions of the social media. Most importantly, the user-driven community created by the project on various social media sites promises the project sustainability even without direct funding from the EC. Thus, the use of social media for increasing eParticipation can be an efficient, cost-effective way to establish continued presence for policy-projects, allowing them to become part and parcel of people's everyday lives.

## 4.2 OurSpace

Social networking plays an increasingly important role in young people's lives, as belonging to various online social networking sites has become the norm for opinion and news exchanges while serving as the key source of youth daily entertainment. At the same time, young people are becoming more disengaged from any political processes both at the national and supra-national levels. The outcome of the 2009 European Elections confirms that a vast gap exists between European decision-makers and their citizens. More than two-thirds of voters between 18 and 24 did not vote in the 2009 European elections (DG Communications, 2009).According to a research conducted by SEK-Youth in 2004, only 35 % of young people in the EU know their rights. Young people have a limited knowledge of the EU legislation and their obligations in the new European framework (Matsas, 2005). OurSpace is a project that attempts to bridge this gap by "contributing towards bringing the EU closer to the youth by improving their role within the democratic system of the EC through the use of ICT" (OurSpace, 2012).

OurSpace embraces the success of social media as its key foundation for furthering eParticipation in two separate but equally important directions. First of all, the project's format as a social networking site, aiming to include the commonly used features such as user's profile, invitations, recommendations, rating and statistics, is a way to appeal to young audiences that have been taking full advantage of similar sites in different areas. OurSpace is reaching to wide audiences by its own Android App, iGoogle gadget and a Facebook app, enabling mobile access to the platform and adjusting to the current trend that an increasing number of people use their mobile phones rather than their laptops to engage in online activities. Secondly, the promotion of OurSpace on very popular social networking sites, such as Facebook and Twitter, generates a wide user base from young audiences.

Having social media embedded at the core of the OurSpace design makes youth involvement in political and social debates more realistic and prevents the project from being rejected by its target users for being 'old-fashioned' and too complicated to use. In short, OurSpace demonstrates the attempt to tailor traditional eParticipation tools based on the dominant trends of web 2.0.

## 5. Analysis of the Case Studies

The two case studies described in the previous section demonstrate the recent efforts of eParticipation to place social media at the core of the projects' design. The first presented project, Puzzled by Policy, uses social media to reach out to masses, while the later project OurSpace uses the format of a social media platform to appeal to its target users - the young people.

Nearly two years into the projects, the first signs of successes and failures from using social media to achieve the projects' objectives can be observed. Puzzled by Policy launched its pilots in February 2012 and by May 2012 the widget has been downloaded more than 750 times, through it social media presence attracted more than 3 000 users participating in the debates and had more nearly 2 000 people to complete the profiler. OurSpace opened its pilots in May and, only after few weeks in operation, attracted more than 300 posts and 45 different debates from more than 250 active users. Based on the current trend of preliminary results, Puzzled by Policy and OurSpace are expected to significantly outperform previous eParticipation projects because of the use of social media.

Thus, it can be argued that the use of social media is complementary to traditional eParticipation tools and practices and can in fact increase user engagement.

## 6. Conclusions

Having examined the newest trends in ICT development and online activities as well as the latest eParticipation tools, it has been suggested that eParticipation has higher chances of succeeding, if it engages citizens through content channels that are otherwise popular, rather than operating independently of them. eParticipation is more effective as a passive content requirement of interface behaviour (social media interfaces) rather than as an active requirement of citizens to navigate to a dedicated portal to engage in these activities. In other words, utilising people's existing preferences for engagement in online activities should shape eParticipation and not the other way around. As people spend an increasing amount of time using social media, its inclusion in eParticipation tools is logical as well as a necessary development, and it can be predicted that the future of eParticipation will be intrinsically linked to the newest developments and trends in the field of social media. As presented by the two case studies examined in this paper, social media can be exploited to the advantage of eParticipation in two ways. Firstly, eParticipation projects can utilise popular social media platforms such as Facebook and Twitter to engage mass audiences and raise awareness about the project, as it has been done in the case of Puzzled by Policy. Secondly, if a certain eParticipation project can succeed to take the form of a social media site, as is happening with OurSpace, these types of developments should be highly encouraged.

In short, by linking social media to previously existing eParticipation tools, the overarching objective of eParticipation - engagement of audiences that usually are not active participants in policy processes - can be significantly enhanced. Hence, the future creation of eParticipation projects should go hand in hand with the newest developments in social media to increase the chance of people perceiving active interaction within policy processes as easy and accessible as logging into Facebook. The key to ensuring that eParticipation does not become a sidelined activity is to move beyond proprietary web platforms toward greater integration with existing social media, integrating eParticipation into the online behaviours of citizens across Europe.

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# Towards a Rationalisation of Social Media Exploitation in Government Policy-Making Processes

There has been significant research and practice oriented towards the rational exploitation of the rapidly expanding social media by private sector enterprises. However, much less research and practice have been done in this area with respect to the public sector. This paper explores advanced forms of rational exploitation of social media in government policy-making processes, aiming to strengthen and widen participation of and interaction with citizens, concerning new or existing public policies and services. The proposed approach is based on a platform, which can publish policy-related content and micro-applications towards multiple social media simultaneously, also collect data on citizens' interaction with them (e.g. views, comments, ratings, votes, etc.), using the application programming interfaces (API) of the targeted social media. The information gathered through social media will then undergo various types of advanced processing (e.g. access analytics, opinion mining, simulation modelling) in order to extract synthetic conclusions from them and provide substantial support to government policy-makers, always respecting data privacy guidelines. In addition, an extension of this 'stimulated/ guided crowdsourcing' approach is presented, based on 'non-moderated crowdsourcing' by government agencies. The above approaches allow a more advanced and rational exploitation of social media by government for supporting evidence-based decision and policy making.

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Social Media, Public Policy, Simulation, Opinion Mining, Analytics, Crowdsourcing

“ Social media bring evidence-based decision and policy making closer to reality. ”

# 1. Introduction

There has been significant research and practice oriented towards the rational exploitation of the rapidly emerging web 2.0 social media by private sector firms (Constantinides, 2009, 2010; Evans, 2010; Dwivedi et al., 2011). This has generated a considerable body of knowledge on how social media can be used effectively by enterprises for supporting and strengthening various functions, such as marketing, customer relationships, new products development, etc. It is widely recognised that social media already play an important role in many sectors, and this is going to increase tremendously in the near future. However, much less research and practice have been done towards the rational exploitation of social media in the public sector (Punie et al., 2009; Moreira et al., 2010).

Government agencies have been for a long time interested in establishing a communication with the citizens they serve, and this led to the development of public participation ideas and practices, initially based on traditional 'offline' (i.e. non electronic) channels (Barber, 1984; OECD, 2003; Rowe et al., 2000; Rowe et al., 2004). The emergence and increasing penetration of the Internet in everyday life, was used for supporting and widening public participation, giving rise to the development of eParticipation (OECD, 2004; Sanford et al., 2007; Sæbø et al., 2008; Loukis et al., 2011). The first generation of eParticipation was based on the development of numerous 'official' eParticipation spaces operated by government agencies of various levels (e.g. Ministries, Parliaments and Municipalities), offering citizens information on government activities, decisions, plans and policies, and also the possibility to express their opinions and suggestions on various topics. However, the use and outcomes of the first generation of eParticipation were much lower than expected (Chadwick, 2009a; Ferro & Molinari, 2010). Governments assumed that citizens would visit these websites, in order to participate in public debates on various proposed public policies or legislations, and become adapted to the structure, language and rules of these websites; however, this happened only to a limited extent. At the same time, many of the topics discussed were defined by the government and very often did not directly touch citizens' daily problems and priorities. Also, most of the ICT tools used in these government eParticipation websites were not sufficiently user-friendly and appropriate for wide citizens' participation. Web 2.0 social media offer a great opportunity to address the above challenges and proceed to a second generation of a wider and more inclusive eParticipation, leading to a more intensive and deep interaction with the citizens.

Moreover, in many of these social media, there is already significant 'bottom-up' (i.e. initiated by the citizens and not by government agencies) political activity (Chadwick, 2009b; Honeycutt et al., 2009; Agarwal et al., 2011; Larsson et al., 2011); many political discussions are taking place there, political information and news are exchanged and propagated, and offline political events (e.g. movements, demonstrations) are also organised. Therefore, government agencies cannot be absent from these important electronic spaces; they should organise their presence in the web 2.0 social media, in order to express their positions, justify their decisions and policies, and at the same time 'listen' to the citizens and gaining a better understanding of their needs and opinions.

For the above reasons, it is necessary to build up knowledge on how social media can be used rationally and effectively by government agencies in order to promote and enhance participative public policy-making and communication with the society in general. This paper contributes in this direction by exploring advanced forms of taking advantage of the social media in government in order to intensify interaction with citizens, considering new or existing policy, legislation and public services. They are based on the concept of a central platform, which can publish policy-related content and micro-applications to multiple social media simultaneously and also collect data on citizens' interaction with them (e.g. views, comments, ratings, votes, etc.) in an efficient manner

using the application programming interfaces (API) of the targeted social media. These interaction data will then undergo various types of advanced processing (e.g. calculations of analytics, opinion mining, simulation modelling) in order to make use of them to the highest possible extent for extracting synthetic conclusions and for providing substantial support to government policy-makers, promoting and supporting evidence-based decision and policy making. This research is conducted as part of a research project called PADGETS ('Policy Gadgets Mashing Underlying Group Knowledge in Web 2.0 Media' - www.padgets.eu), which is co-financed by the 'ICT for Governance and Policy Modelling' research initiative of the European Commission. Then, an extension of this 'stimulated/guided crowdsourcing' approach is described, which is based on 'non-moderated crowdsourcing', through the collection and analysis of policy-related citizen-generated content from multiple social media. This direction is explored as part of a research project, called NOMAD ('Policy Formulation and Validation through non moderated crowdsourcing' - www.nomad-project.eu), which is co-financed by the 'ICT solutions for governance and policy modelling' initiative of the European Commission.

The paper is organised in seven sections. In section two, the theoretical background of the proposed approach is briefly presented. Then in section three, the architecture of the central platform is described, while in section four, the focus is placed on the decision support functionality provided, which is based on processing citizens' interaction data. In section five, some findings are presented concerning the benefits this approach can provide and the preconditions for its practical application, while in section six, an extension of this approach is described based on the concept of 'non-moderated crowd-sourcing'. Finally, in section seven, the conclusions are summarised and future research directions are proposed.

## 2. Theoretical Background

The basic theoretical background for the proposed approach is the 'wicked problems theory' initially introduced by Rittel and Weber (1973), and then further developed by other scholars (Kunz et al., 1979; Conklin et al., 1989; Conklin, 2003). This theory argues that in the last decades the nature of public policy design problems has changed considerably, and this necessitates new and more sophisticated methods for addressing them. In particular, since the societies have become more heterogeneous and pluralistic in terms of culture, values and lifestyles, public policy problems have become 'wicked'; this term denotes that they lack clear and widely agreed definition and objectives; they are characterised by high complexity as there are many stakeholders who perceive different and heterogeneous views of the problem and objectives. The previous generation of 'tame' public policy problems had clear and widely accepted definitions and objectives, and could be solved by 'technocratic' approaches based on the use of various mathematical optimisation algorithms. On the contrary this new generation of wicked public policy problems require a two-phase approach, which combines, on the one hand, public participation in order to formulate a shared definition of the problem and the objectives to be achieved and on the other hand a technocratic analysis to be followed by experts.

Thus, the first and fundamental phase should be a consultation process among problem stakeholders (i.e. all the groups affected by the social problem that a public policy attempts to address), during which negotiations take place, aiming to synthesise the existing different views and formulate a shared definition of the problem and the objectives to be achieved. Based on this, a technocratic analysis by experts can proceed in the second phase, using mathematical optimisation algorithms for the well-defined at that phase problem (i.e. based on the shared definition of the problem and the objectives that have been formulated in the first phase).

Subsequent research on this approach (Kunz et al., 1979; Conklin et al., 1989; Conklin, 2003) has revealed that it can be greatly supported by the use of information and communication technologies (ICT), and in particular by appropriate 'Issue Based Information Systems' (IBIS), which can "stimulate a more scrutinised style of reasoning, which more explicitly reveals the arguments. It should then help identify the proper questions, to develop the scope of positions in response to them, and assist in generating dispute" (Kunz et al., 1979).

The emergence of the Web 2.0 social media creates even more opportunities for a wider and more inclusive application of the above participative approaches, which involves more citizens and social groups than previously. It enables a stronger interaction among government institutions and the multiple stakeholder groups affected by a new public policy (e.g. having the form of a new legislation or a new public service). Social media, due to their ease of use, wide reach and high popularity among Internet users (attracting large numbers of citizens from various diverse groups with regard to education, age, sex, ethnicity, religion, and political beliefs) allow a wider and more inclusive discourse and synthesis of views on public policy problems that government faces. Additionally, social media enable government agencies to collect large amounts of experience and knowledge acquired by citizens on the highly complex public policy issues under discussion ('crowdsourcing'), rapidly, efficiently and at a very low cost (Brabham, 2008; Nam, 2012). These can result in better and more socially-rooted and balanced public policies, taking into account the views, objectives and knowledge of a greater number of citizens. Governments have started moving in the above direction, but currently they limit themselves to isolated, fragmented and non-coordinated uses of some Web 2.0 social media for the above purposes (Punie et al., 2009; Moreira et al., 2010). Therefore, it is necessary to build up knowledge on how social media can be used more rationally and effectively by government agencies in order to promote and enhance participative public policy-making and communication with the society in general. Our research contributes in this direction.

## 3. Platform Architecture and Functions

The proposed approach of using rationally and effectively web 2.0 social media for making more participative their public policy-making processes is based on a central platform which can i) publish policy-related content and micro-applications to multiple social media ($SM_1$, $SM_2$, .., SMn) simultaneously, ii) collect data on citizens' interaction with this posted content/applications (e.g. relevant citizens views, comments, ratings, votes, etc.) in an efficient manner using the application programming interfaces (API) of the targeted social media, and iii) make advanced processing of the collected data (e.g. calculations of analytics, opinion mining, simulation modelling) (Figure 1).
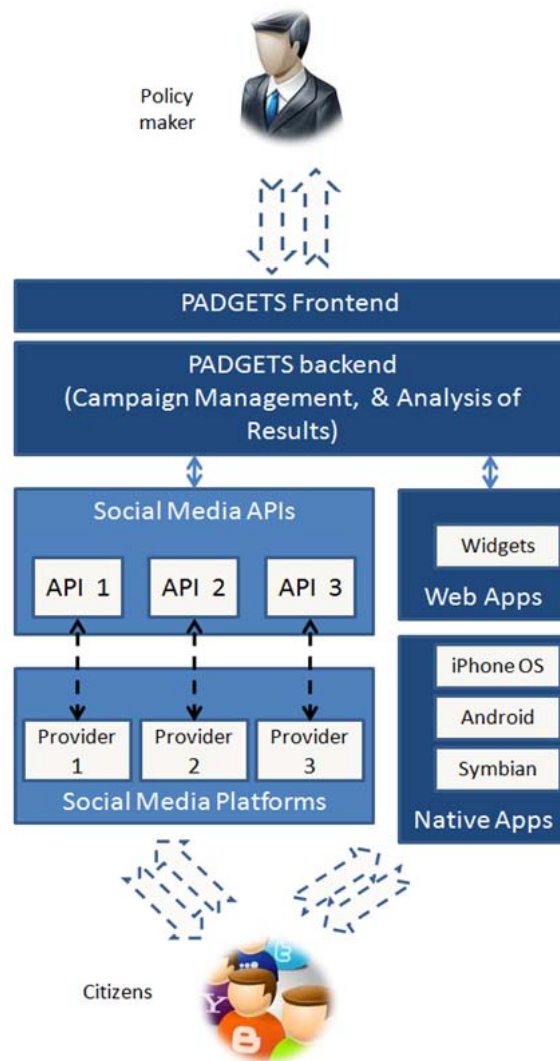
Figure 1: The PADGETS architectural framework

This enables government agencies to develop electronic political campaigns on various public policy issues under discussion across multiple social media. For this purpose, a package of relevant multimedia content will be created (e.g. short description, longer description, video, images, etc.), which then will be distributed to multiple social media (attracting the main groups of citizens that government wants to involve in the discussion), according to the type of content each of them can host; for instance, the short description can be published on Twitter, the longer one in one or more relevant blogs, the video on YouTube, the images on Picasa, etc. In particular, the following categories of social media platforms will be targeted:

- Platforms for Communication, such as Blogs, Internet forums, Presence applications, Social networking sites, Social network aggregation sites and event sites.

- Platforms for Collaboration, such as Wikis, Social bookmarking (or Social tagging) sites, social news and opinion sites.

- Platforms for Multimedia and Entertainment, such as Photo sharing, Video sharing, Livecasting and Virtual World sites.

- Platforms for News and Information, such as Google News, Institutional Sites with a high number of visitors (i.e. EU, Human Rights and WWF sites) and newspaper sites.

- Platforms for Policy-making and Public Participation, such as governmental organisations' forums, blogs, petitions, etc.

In order to examine the feasibility of the aforementioned approach, the APIs of the most popular social media (Facebook, Youtube, Linkedin, Twitter, Delicious, Flickr, Blogger, Picassa, Ustream and Digg) have been analysed. From this analysis, it was concluded that there is a clear strategy of these social media to become more open and accessible to third party applications by conforming to open API standards (Charalabidis et al., 2010). In particular, they provide a rich functionality through their APIs for posting and retrieving content, exposing methods that 'go deeply' into their innermost functionalities and provide third party developers with an ever growing set of capabilities. This includes, on one hand, content push functionality (i.e. methods for publishing text, images, videos or more complex forms of media such as 'events', 'albums' etc); also, a large part of the APIs is dedicated to the creation, uploading, modification and deletion of such content. On the other hand, a functionality that supports the direct retrieval of various types of content generated by users also exists (i.e. methods for retrieving user ratings, unique visits, textual comments, retransmissions to other nodes of a social network). On the contrary, only a few social media allow deploying micro-applications in their environment. The above findings from the analysis of the APIs of the most popular social media confirm the feasibility of the proposed approach.

Going into more detail, the technical architecture of the central platform is highly modular, consisting of the following five areas:

i. Web Front-end, for handling all communication with the policy-maker through the Web (i.e. pages for login/register, getting input from the policy-maker for setting up a campaign, presenting citizen feedback on the campaign to the policy-maker, presenting advanced processing results, etc).

ii. Mobile Native Application and Widget area, for supporting all the abovementioned types of communication with the policy-makers, and also for providing to the citizens with alternative channels of accessing the platform, reading its policy-related content and commenting on it (through mobile smartphones and Google widgets).

iii. Publishing, Tracking and Storing Content area, for publishing the volume of different content types provided by the policy-maker across suitable social media platforms, monitoring citizen feedback on the published information and storing all relevant information (published content, citizen interaction, social media analytics).

iv. Service Discovery, Composition and Binding area, for providing the required infrastructure that enable service communication, both internally among the different platform components and externally among the platform components and external systems (such as the native mobile application, widgets and social media platforms).

v. Decision Support area, for processing all the accumulated set of data (e.g. data provided by the policy-maker, citizen feedback, analytics collected or produced by social media, etc) and providing decision support to the policy-maker on his/her published campaigns. This area is described in more detail in the following section.

# 4. Policy-maker Decision Support

The objective of the decision support area of the central platform is to process using various advanced methods the data retrieved from various social media (concerning various types of users' interaction with the policy messages published on them), in order to extract useful decision support information for policy-makers. This information aims to assist the policy-maker in understanding the level of awareness and interest of the citizens about the public policy under discussion, the opinion of citizens about it -in general- (e.g. positive, neutral or negative), the elements of the public policy which are commented, liked or disliked by the citizens, and also their suggestions for improving the policy in question.

The architecture of the decision support area consists of three layers, which are shown in Figure 2.

The first layer will retrieve and process the 'raw analytics' which are provided by the analytics engines that nearly all social media have, either directly through a user interface, or through appropriate methods of their APIs. From the investigation performed on the relevant capabilities of the most popular social media, it has been concluded that a rich variety of such raw analytics can be provided; furthermore, there is a continuous evolution and new development towards this direction.

The second layer will provide more advanced 'PADGETS analytics' focusing on the textual input (e.g. blog postings, opinions, comments, etc.) of the users of the targeted social media. By using social media APIs, the textual input of citizens as postings, comments and opinions will be retrieved and stored in PADGETS central platform. All textual input is produced by the user via interactions with the published policy message. These texts will be processed using methods of opinion mining, in order to identify the general sentiments on these policy messages (classifying them as positive, neutral or negative), and also the particular issues raised and the relevant sentiments (positive, neutral or negative) (Maragoudakis et al., 2011).

Finally, the third layer will include the use of simulation modelling for two purposes: i) for screening the numerous proposals made by citizens in all the targeted social media on public policies under formation or application, by estimating their outcomes (i.e. effects on various important socio-economic variables), and ii) for projecting in the future the current awareness and interest of citizens in the particular policy and the level of its acceptance (e.g. forecasting their evolution in the next 12 months). This simulation modelling will take input from various 'social indicators' produced by the other two layers (Charalabidis et al., 2011).

From a review of opinion mining methods (Maragoudakis et al., 2011), it has been concluded that a useful body of knowledge has been developed in this area consisting of methods for addressing the following three problems:

- classification of an opinionated text as expressing - in general - a positive, negative or neutral opinion (document-level sentiment analysis).

- classification of each sentence of such a text as objective (fact) or subjective (opinion), and then focus on the latter and classification of each of them as expressing a positive, negative or neutral opinion (sentence-level sentiment analysis).

- extraction of the particular features/subtopics commented by the authors of these texts, and for each of them identification of the orientation of the opinions expressed about it as positive, negative or neutral (feature-level sentiment analysis).
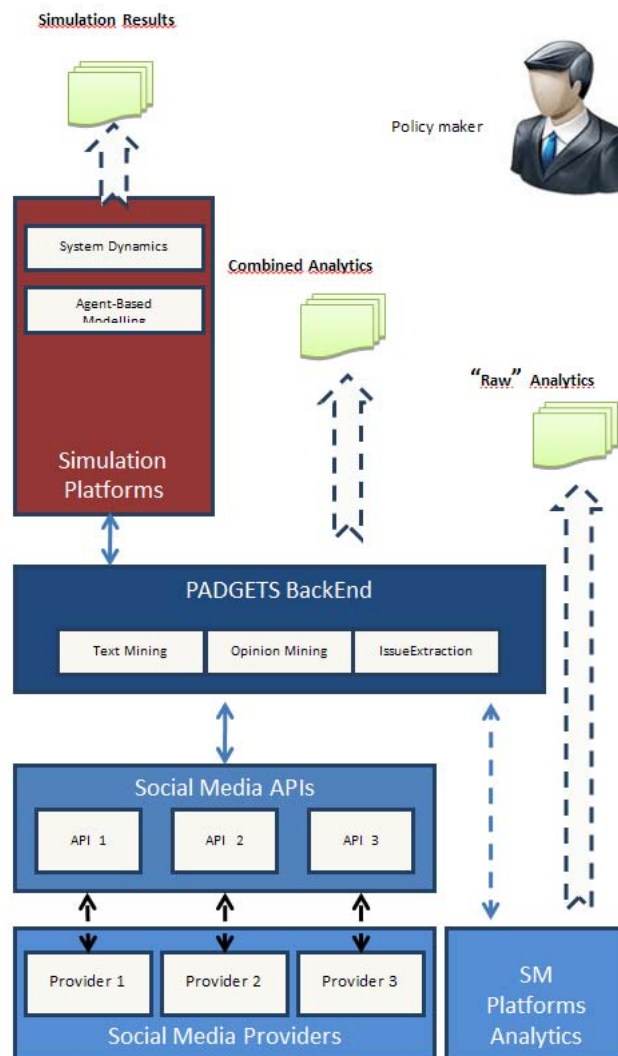
Figure 2: Architecture of the Decision Support Area

Based on the conclusions of this review, a basic framework for the use of opinion mining methods in our central platform has been formulated, consisting of five stages:

i.  Classify each posting on the policy under discussion as positive, neutral or negative, using methods of document-level sentiment analysis, and then calculate relative frequencies of positive, neutral and negative postings.

ii. For each posting, identify its subjective sentences (expressing opinions) and classify each of them as positive, neutral or negative, using methods of sentence-level sentiment analysis, and then calculate relative frequencies of positive, neutral and negative subjective sentences.

iii. Compare and integrate findings of the above steps I and II, as well as the findings from the analysis of other types of citizens' non-textual feedback (e.g. numbers of users who voted in favour or against the policy/decision under discussion in an eVote tool, or rated it positively or negatively in an eSurvey tool, or even liked or disliked a relevant content published on social media). This will allow conclusions to be drawn as to the citizens' general sentiments/feelings (positive or negative) on this government policy/decision.

iv. By further processing all postings on this policy/decision using feature extraction methods, identify the main issues raised and commented by citizens.

v. Finally, for each issue classify each of the postings' sentences containing it as positive, neutral or negative using methods of sentence-level sentiment analysis - opinion orientation, and then calculate relative frequencies of positive, neutral and negative subjective sentences. This will allow the identification of the main issues raised by the citizens and the particular sentiments/ feelings on them (e.g. positive and negative aspects and effects of the policies/decisions under discussion, implementation barriers, improvement suggestions, etc.).

Additionally, a review of the simulation modelling area has been conducted, examining existing approaches as to their suitability for the abovementioned two purposes (for screening the numerous proposals made by citizens, estimating their outcomes and for projecting in the future awareness, interest and acceptance) (Charalabidis et al., 2011). From this review, the following conclusions have been drawn, indicating two main approaches:

a. System Dynamics (Forrester, 1961; Schwaninger et al., 2008) seems to be one of the most promising approaches for the above purposes, which require high/macro level modelling and simulation of complex social or economic systems in continuous time for assessing the impacts of different policy-related proposals. Such systems include various individual processes with 'stocks' (e.g. users and non-users of various services or new technologies, employed and unemployed citizens, citizen groups of various income levels, etc.) and 'flows' among them (e.g. some citizens start using a new technology or service, so they move from the non-users' stock to the users' stock), which are influenced by public policies, so System Dynamics is well positioned for modelling and simulating them.

Another advantage is that Systems Dynamics has been successfully used in the past for assessing the evolution of a number of critical variables of economy and society, such as unemployment, economic development, taxation income, technologies penetration, pollution, poverty, etc. So it is not any more in an 'experimental phase'; it has become mature in terms of knowledge and experience that have been gathered from its use in the above areas.

b. Agent-based Modelling and Simulation (Epstein, 1999; Ferro et al., 2010) can also be useful for the aforementioned purposes, as it can be used for modelling and simulation at both meso- and macro levels. This approach does not require us to define the basic structure of the system in order to estimate its macro behaviour (as in Systems Dynamics), but the behaviour and interaction rules of the individual units (e.g. persons, firms, etc.) instead.

Taking into account that usually for social and economic systems it is easier to define the former (structure) than the latter (behaviour and interaction rules of the individual units), it can be argued that Systems Dynamics might be more advantageous than Agent-based Modelling and Simulation in most cases. However, in cases that it is easier to define behaviour and interaction rules of the individual units, Agent-based Modelling and Simulation might be the preferable approach.

# 5. Findings

The value generated by the proposed approach has been investigated and elaborated through a series of interviews with experienced staff from the three government agencies participating in the PADGETS project (Piedmont Region, Italy; Observatory for the Greek Information Society, Greece; Centre for e-Governance Development for South East Europe, Slovenia). This value unfolds along a number of dimensions, and may vary among the different phases of the policy-making cycle. In essence, the proposed approach is perceived as a way to further reduce the distance between policy-

making and society's needs, compared with the 'first generation' eParticipation approaches, both in terms of time and tools required. It provides a low cost and efficient mechanism to better inform the policy decision process by providing a clear and dynamic vision of the disparate stakeholders' opinions and priorities, exploiting in a rational and centrally managed way highly popular web 2.0 social media. By giving policy-makers a privileged 'interface' for 'hearing society's voice' directly, in the electronic spaces where citizens choose to express their opinions, the proposed approach enables an innovative way to gather, evaluate and decide upon society's input. Taking into account that public policy design problems are usually 'wicked', as explained in section two, the proposed approach allows for rich interaction among the various stakeholders of the public policy under discussion, and also with the government, in a rational, efficient and low cost way. This facilitates the formulation of a shared definition of the problem to be addressed by each public policy under formulation and the particular objectives to be achieved for this purpose, resulting in better and more socially-rooted and balanced public policies.

It can provide significant advantages over the existing practices of government agencies in this area, which consist mainly in isolated, fragmented and non-coordinated uses of some Web 2.0 social media. The possibility to publish policy-related content from one single point to multiple social media, results in time and cost efficiencies, and also in homogeneity of presence in all these social media. In addition, the ability to collect citizens' interactions and feedback from all targeted social media in a single point, allows a synthesis and - at the same time - a comparison across many different groups of citizens. The central platform generates indirect positive externalities for the different classes of actors engaged in the process, as well as different types of benefits for each actor class: convenient and smooth participation accompanied by more socially-rooted policies for stakeholders; fresh, useful and low cost inputs for policy-makers.

It should be emphasised that electronic campaigns of this kind may be launched at any phase of the policy-making cycle: agenda setting, policy analysis, policy formulation, policy implementation, and policy monitoring and evaluation (according to the phases of the policy-making cycle proposed by the OECD, e.g. see OECD (2003)). The purpose, function and, as a consequence, value proposition of each campaign may vary according to the stage of the policy cycle in which the campaign is launched.

The main novelties introduced by the PADGETS platform can be summarised as follows:

i. Relaxation of current constraints in terms of size, frequency and quality of citizens' participation. All different stakeholders are free to participate in any policy process they are interested in, at a preferred time, spending the amount of effort they are willing to, and above all using tools they are already accustomed to. From the opposite perspective, policy-makers can continuously access reports pertaining to stakeholders' opinion, being allowed to quickly modify and adapt the policy issues under discussion.

ii. Integrated management of multiple social media channels. The presence of a Web dashboard dedicated to the policy-maker with the main results of his/her campaigns reduces the complexity and heterogeneity that usually comes, when using different social media platforms, each of which exhibits peculiarities in terms of aims, interfaces, functionalities, target audience, content types and degree of content sharing.

iii. Creation of an 'open' decision support system. Opening up the decision support process means integrating it with activities carried out over social media platforms. This allows establishing a direct link between government decision process and the external world, as well as to reason on fresh and relevant information, and finally to support and promote evidence-based decision and policy making in the public sector.

iv. Finally, the decision support component provides a number of promising functionalities that generate precious knowledge to be used in order to inform the decision making process. In particular, this component allows to generate snapshots on the levels of awareness, interest and acceptance of a given policy, create possible scenarios of how such levels of awareness, interest and acceptance may vary over time (e.g., in the next 12 months) and, finally, single out relevant opinions emerging from the interaction of the end users with the policy message.

However, the interviewees emphasised the preconditions for the practical application of this novel approach and for realising the above benefits. They clearly mentioned that this new multi-channel approach to eParticipation will require significant interventions and changes in government agencies at the structural, processes, human resources and technological levels:

- It will require the creation of a new organisational unit in order to organise and manage the presence of the government agency in these multiple eParticipation channels, and also to analyse the large quantities of both structured data (e.g. citizens' ratings) and unstructured data (e.g. citizens' postings in textual form) that will be created in these social media.

- Also, new processes should be established for the integration of the results and conclusions of the analysis of the above structured and unstructured eParticipation data in the decision and policy-making processes of government agencies.

- The human resources of these new units must have a particular culture (which is quite different culture from the dominant 'law enforcement' culture of government agencies) and specialised skills for managing efficiently the new electronic modes of communication. In general, government agencies should get accustomed to the style and language of interaction in the web 2.0 social media, and the whole culture around them, characteristics that are quite different compared with the official eParticipation spaces.

- At a technological level, the analysis of the large quantities of unstructured data (in textual form) that will be collected from the above channels (e.g. hundreds or thousands of postings) will require highly sophisticated ICT-based tools for text analysis and opinion mining methods. These tools will have to be integrated into the technological infrastructures of the above channels. Also, the use of these tools is not easy, and requires extensive adaptations and language resources, such as lexicons of polar words, synonyms and antonym.

# 6. Extending the approach

The approach presented in the previous sections constitutes a kind of 'stimulated/guided crowdsourcing', in which government seeks citizens' knowledge and feedback on a public policy issue through relevant stimulation/guidance it provides to citizens by publishing policy-related content to various social media. Therefore, a natural extension is to proceed towards the concept of the 'non-moderated crowdsourcing', in which the government does not provide such stimulation/guidance. It can be based on the search by government agencies for content on a public policy under formulation (e.g. concerning health, education, crime), which has been created by citizens in numerous web 2.0 sources (e.g. blogs and microblogs, news sharing sites, online forums, etc.) freely, without any initiation, stimulation or moderation through government postings; this content then can undergo various forms of advanced processing in order to extract from it arguments, opinions, issues and proposals on the particular policy, identify their sentiments (positive or negative), and finally summarize and visualize them (Charalabidis et al., 2012). This can extend the approach presented in the previous sections towards earlier stages of the policy life cycle (e.g. early agenda setting),

while it also allows the exploitation of the vast amount of user-generated content that is created in numerous web 2.0 social media, in order to support governments to understand better the needs, wishes and beliefs of citizens, and create better and more socially rooted policies for addressing them. It leads to an extended approach to the exploitation of social media by government agencies in their policy-making processes. It enables the policy-makers (in a wider sense, e.g. government organisations, members of parliament, politicians) to effectively LISTEN and monitor what citizens say in social media, ANALYSE those conversations and get the main stakeholders positions and opinions, RECEIVE all responses and data properly processes and displayed for an effective use and exploitation, and finally ACT on this information by proceeding to a more active crowdsourcing through postings to various social media.

Therefore this extended approach consists of the following four stages:

i.  Listen: This phase includes listening to and monitoring what people say on a specific domain of government activity under discussion (e.g. based on its vocabulary or ontology of it), and what their needs, their opinions and their proposals are. For this purpose, an advanced web crawler can be used, i.e. a program, which browses the Web and collects relevant content from many sources of information:

- Micro-blogging sites, such as Twitter;

- Blogs including Blogger, WordPress, Typepad & LiveJournal;

- Video sites including YouTube, Vimeo, Metacafe, Bliptv;

- Social networks such as Facebook and MySpace;

- Discussion forums;

- News sites, whether international, national or regional;

- Images sites such as Flickr;

- Corporate sites.

ii. Analyse: This phase includes analysing the content, in order to identify issues, opinions, arguments and proposals concerning a particular policy domain, which are hidden within the text of the citizens electronic conversations, and creating a semantically rich, accurate stream of data that can be leveraged in the next phases. In particular, each web page found by the crawler can go through a series of automated analysis processes:

- Language detection;

- Opinion and Argument Extraction;

- Sentiment Analysis;

- Argument Summarisation.

iii. Receive: In this phase, a Position Map of the extracted argument clusters will be constructed, built upon the relevance, the visibility and the sentiment (either positive or negative) of the data collected from the above web hosted conversations. With the use of visual analytics all related data will be presented into a visible form that highlights important features, including commonalities and/or discrepancies. In this context, all the data that comes from sources as diverse as blogs, online opinion polls and government reports are properly displayed in a synthetic manner that allows policy-makers to draw conclusions.

iv. Act: Once the policy-maker finds out about the existing opinions of his constituency regarding a particular domain of government activity, based on the argument extraction and visualisation outcomes, the draft-policy agenda can be formulated accordingly. This can then be tested against social opinion. Using the platform described in the previous sections three and four, it is possible to:

- Publish this draft-policy agenda in multiple appropriate social media;

- Collect citizens' feedback on this agenda;

- Analyse it using the decision support tools described in section four;

- Make the required modifications to the above policy agenda, based on the conclusions of this analysis.

This extended approach is currently investigated, elaborated and evaluated as part of the NOMAD project (mentioned in the introduction). As part of this project, the focus was placed on the three countries - Greece, Austria and the UK - where pilots are going to be organised, and possible sources of political and policy-related content were searched. In all these three countries the core of these sources were numerous political blogs, where extensive political discussion and content generation takes place. Therefore, for each country an initial selection of sources of political discussion was made, based on the rankings of the ALEXA system, since it is the only open source method, which provides a relatively accurate system of website popularity metrics and audience demographics. In particular, all websites with political content which are ranked up to 500th position on ALEXA were initially selected and examined. This analysis revealed that in all three countries there is a considerable number of sources of political content with good popularity (ranked up to 500th position on ALEXA), hence the above extended approach seems to have a considerable content basis.

At the same time, this analysis revealed an important difference among the blogospheres of these three countries. In Austria and the UK there is a much stronger consolidation and concentration, with a small number of political blogs being among the top 500 country websites (38 for Austria and 55 for the UK); on the contrary, in Greece there is a high fragmentation in this area, with a much bigger number of political blogs (100) being among the top 500 country websites. This indicates that the content basis for this extended approach can vary significantly among countries.

## 7. Conclusions

Governments have started using the rapidly emerged web 2.0 social media for achieving a wider interaction with the citizens, however they have not developed advanced practices for this purpose, so they currently limit themselves to isolated, fragmented and non-coordinated uses of some Web 2.0 social media. Therefore, it is necessary to build up knowledge on how social media can be used more rationally and effectively by government agencies in order to promote and enhance participative public policy-making. This research attempts to contribute to the following direction: towards the rationalization of social media exploitation by government agencies in their policy-making processes.

In the previous sections, an advanced form of exploiting web 2.0 social media by government agencies for achieving a stronger interaction with more and diverse groups of citizens has been explored. It is based on a central platform, which allows i) publishing content and deploying micro web applications to multiple web 2.0 social media simultaneously, ii) retrieving users' interactions with this content and applications (e.g. views, comments, ratings) in all these social media, in an efficient systematic

and centrally managed automated manner using their API, and iii) performing various levels of advanced processing of these interaction data (calculation of various analytics, opinion mining and simulation modelling). Also, an extension of this approach has been presented, which is based on 'non-moderated crowdsourcing', through the collection of citizen-generated content on a particular domain of government activity from multiple social media. This content then undergoes advanced processing in order to extract from it arguments, opinions, issues and proposals on the particular policy, identify their sentiments (positive or negative), and finally summarise and visualise them.

The proposed approaches allow for a stronger and better interaction of government agencies with the various stakeholders of the public policies they design and implement, in a rational manner and at a low cost. They offer the possibility of centralised and efficient management of many electronic channels of communication with citizens: they allow publishing policy-related content from one single point to multiple social media, which results in time and cost efficiencies, and also in homogeneity of presence in all these social media. Also, they allow collecting citizens' interactions and feedback from all targeted social media in a single point and performing a synthesis and - at the same time - a comparison across many different groups of citizens. They enable government agencies to apply crowdsourcing ideas efficiently, both in a 'stimulated/guided' and a 'non-moderated' manner, in all stages of the policy lifecycle. In this way more valuable 'tacit knowledge' on important social problems and needs, and policy options for addressing them, which is possessed by large numbers of citizens, can be transformed into 'explicit (codified) knowledge' that can be used by government for designing better and more socially rooted policies. Furthermore, the proposed approaches facilitate the formulation of a shared definition of the problem and the objectives to be achieved, resulting in better and more socially-rooted and balanced public policies. For the above reasons they can provide significant advantages over the existing practices of government agencies in this area, which consist mainly in isolated, fragmented and non-coordinated uses of some Web 2.0 social media. They can offer to government agencies foundations for rationalizing the ways and processes of exploiting social media.

However, it should be noted that the practical application of these approaches constitutes a radical change of the current government agencies' approach to eParticipation, which will be gradually replaced by a multi-channel one, using a series of interconnected eParticipation channels (the official eParticipation space, plus a number of appropriate social media), having quite different characteristics, structure, language, style and target groups. This new approach will require significant interventions/changes in government agencies at the structural, processes, human resources and technological levels: a new organisational unit for managing the presence in these multiple channels, new processes for integrating the new information they provide in the existing decision and policy-making processes of government agencies, human resources with appropriate skills and culture, and also new ICT tools.

Further research is required for the elaboration, validation and evaluation (at the technological, organisational and political levels) of the proposed approaches. This is already in progress as part of the PADGETS research project based on a number of pilots in real life conditions. These pilots will include the use of web 2.0 social media for achieving a wide discussion on important policies of three government organisations participating as partners in this project (the Observatory for the Greek Information Society, the Centre for e-Governance Development, in Slovenia, and the Regione Piemonte, in Italy). Furthermore, the elaboration, validation and evaluation of the proposed extension based on 'non-moderated crowdsourcing' has been planned to be conducted through further pilots (in Greece, Austria and the UK) as part of the NOMAD project.

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# eParticipation and online social networks: The case of the European Institutions

The advent of online social networks and their influence on Internet users has recently generated an interest in governments worldwide, as to their capabilities for enhancing social capital, triggering debate and deliberation, as well as keeping governance transparent and open. European Institutions have embraced these networks to disseminate a wide array of political information regarding Common Market policies and to stimulate awareness on the activities of the institutions. It therefore appears that the European Institutions are starting to connect with horizontal networks. Based on this development the paper discusses the result of a related survey that seeks to elucidate the use of online social networks by European Institutions in the context of eParticipation.

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eParticipation, social networks, European Institutions, social capital

" A relevant survey on the use of online social networks by European Institutions reveals that Twitter is the preferred method of communication with the European public, followed by Facebook. Communication media, such as YouTube and Vimeo also attract European Institutions. "

# 1. Introduction

The impact of Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) on politics has been a subject of academic scrutiny during the last decade. An important manifestation is eParticipation, which can help reinforce good governance, allow citizens to voice their views, form communities and participate in the decision-making process (Dalakiouridou et al., 2011).

The diffusion of the Internet, mobile communication, digital media and a variety of tools of social software have spurred the formulation of networks of interactive communication that connect people over distance and time (Castells, 2005), thus facilitating the rise of the networked society. A wide array of technologically-enabled services (SMS, blogs, podcasts, wikis, file sharing, etc.) have had an impact on the *modus operandi* of public administration and politics and have formulated the grounds for more openness, transparency and dialogue in public bodies. Online social networks are organised around users, enabling social relationships and information exchange, whilst online interactions have positive effects on community interaction, involvement and social capital.

At the same time, online social networks have been gaining in popularity, especially among young adults with their unprecedented capabilities for connection, interaction and formulation of networks that span across the Internet. According to Eurostat (2010), eight in ten young Internet users in the EU post messages to chat sites, blogs or social networking sites. This percentage is about 40 % in the age group 25-54 and less than 20 % in the age group 55-74. These trends reflect an increasing opportunity on how information and knowledge are exchanged, especially for social ends.

With the number of new profiles increasing exponentially in social networks, the growing interest by political organisations comes as no surprise. The popularity of social networks lies in the enabling potential to maintain a number of social ties without substantial cost or effort and to create larger networks out of which resources can be drawn (boyd, 2008). In response to the wide use of digital technologies and social networks, governments are starting to capitalise on these tools to communicate with the public, build digital communities and form communities (Mandarano et al., 2010).

The issue of eParticipation in European Institutions has been previously explored by the authors (Dalakiouridou et al., 2008, 2011; Smith 2009). In specific, a theoretical framework was created to assess eParticipation-related documents and initiatives. The general finding of more recent work was that the EU extensively used hierarchical governance modes and some emerging network elements so as to prepare the ground for informed public deliberation within the EU as the basis for further participation (Dalakiouridou et al., 2011). In practical terms, the EU targets citizens mostly by channelling information and demands vertically and in more weak manifestations by connecting networks horizontally.

The use of social networks can help us further conceptualise how online networks affect this previous categorisation by exploring the actual use of online social networks by European Institutions. It is not within the intention of this paper to further the work on equal grounds, but enhance our understanding of the use of social networks by political institutions. The notion of social networks is explored in more detail by reviewing existent work in terms of online social networks and eParticipation or citizen participation and by presenting the results of a survey targeted at mapping the use of social media by European Institutions.

The remaining of this paper is organised as follows: The second section presents the survey methodology while the third covers key theoretical aspects of social networks. The fourth section shortly discusses previous work in terms of participatory dynamics of social networks and the fifth

presents key findings of the survey. The last section summarises the findings and poses additional challenges for future research.

# 2. Methodology

In order to identify relevant eParticipation settings, the authors have accessed the central page of the 'take part' page of the European Union portal ([http://europa.eu/take-part/index_en.htm](http://europa.eu/take-part/index_en.htm)), which lists the means through which citizens can participate in an online debate or a consultation. The link included a list of the EU presence on social networking sites, which the authors used as a primary source of information. As the list was not exhaustive, the authors identified additional profiles through the list of followers (Twitter), list of fans/friends (Facebook) and related videos (YouTube). The specific stage of research does not envisage content analysis of social media profiles; nevertheless, an analysis of some characteristics is performed as follows:

- Twitter: number of followers, number of tweets/posts, frequency of tweets, number of retweets and replies.

- Facebook: number of fans, frequency of new/original posts, number of comments/replies to posts, number of posts from other users (where applicable), short screening of deliberation patterns.

- YouTube: number of views, number of relevant comments/replies.

Parameters such as the deliberation patterns, number of replies to posts, number of retweets and replies/comments were not directly used in the presentation of the results in the relevant figures and tables but still underline the discussion of the results.

The survey took place from June until December 2011; therefore, it is estimated that there will be a range of differences in the metrics employed and the number of profiles at present due to the pervasive nature and the dynamics of social media.

It is also noted that the specific survey solely focuses on the use of social media. Therefore, it does not endeavour a full coverage of the existing range of eParticipation offerings on behalf of the European Institutions where citizen participation is envisaged on different levels: participation in public consultations, petitioning, participation in surveys and online debates.

Whilst the article attempts to provide an overview of relevant theory and the empirical evidence generated by the survey, the authors would like to note that the survey is only a preliminary investigation of the modes of social network use by institutions. Therefore, the survey is not directly linked to the parameters arising from the theory, as this would require first developing a robust theoretical framework linking eParticipation use with social network theory. This however can spur further research in such a vibrant domain.

# 3. Understanding Social Networks

Social networking sites can be defined as "web-based services that allow individuals to construct profiles, articulate lists of other users with whom they share connections and view/transverse a list of connections" (boyd, 2007: 211; boyd, 2010: 42). With the advent of the participative web, where user empowerment leads to developing, collaborating and customising applications (OECD, 2007), new services have surfaced that link user participation, data and mass intelligence. This is acknowledged as bearing significant social and economic implications, such as lower barriers to entry, distribution costs of information, etc.

Furthermore, technological enablers, such as broadband penetration, rise of Internet services, eSkills etc., and social parameters such as desire for connectivity and sharing, have spurred the proliferation of social networking sites (OECD, 2007). Due to the social networks' possibilities for enhancing relational social ties, these sites have captured the attention of eParticipation stakeholders. Social networks can serve as platforms for increasing participation, engaging the public, exchanging views, stimulating political debates and sharing information on key political developments (OECD, 2007; boyd, 2008). These functions are mainly performed by reaching more people and keeping them updated through regular posts to build more sustainable social relationships, by creating a cross-dissemination and awareness space. Correspondingly, social networking sites enable users to be informed on various initiatives through one central access point, notwithstanding previous eParticipation initiatives that were fragmented, unconnected and existent in isolated URLs.

Social network theories are deeply ingrained in social theory and theories of social capital. Social capital theories (Putman, 2000; Kenny, 1992) focus on social capital as the network of relationships aimed at establishing or reproducing social relationships; therefore, relationships, trust and norms are the elements pertaining to social capital. Social capital that facilitates citizen engagement is generated in personal social networks and the theory purports that the amount of politically relevant social capital determines the citizen's decision to be politically active, along with amount of expertise and frequency of political interactions (Lake & Huckfeldt, 1998; Coleman, 1988). Hence, social capital encourages citizen engagement notwithstanding some additional factors of individual traits and organisational involvement. Although social network theories do not focus on the use of technology, they do recognise technological parameters in that they might increase mass communication and provide the kernel for debate and discussions. Social capital is also deemed an important outcome of collective action as well as a prerequisite to its success in leading to conflict resolution, effective decision making, efficient coordination and increased capacity to respond to future challenges.

From a social theory point of view, it has been correspondingly found that the interaction in social networks increases the propensity to participate in politics through increased opportunities for information gathering and through exposure to information pertaining to politics and through exposure to information that might bear some relation to deciding whether or not to participate (McClurg, 2003; Kenny, 1992). In similar terms, some authors find that the effect of social interaction on participation depends on the amount and quality of social relationships and political debates occurring in social networks (McClurg, 2003; Mench, 2006). It is also postulated by the social network model that people "become politically active if they accrue social resources" (McClurg, 2003: 451). Nevertheless, social network effects have not been adequately investigated due to the absence of a theoretical framework connecting social networks and political involvement and a model with ample exploratory power to recognise social diversity, inequality and other parameters (McClurg, 2003; boyd, 2010).

Notwithstanding the robustness of these theories, another strand of research occupies itself with both technological and political processes. It has been claimed that both systems (technological and political) can maximise their impact on public engagement, so the Internet is perceived as a medium that can assist engagement processes (Shah et al., 2005; Mandarano et al., 2010). In other words, it is found that the Internet can mobilise political participation, while survey-based studies assert that the Internet normalises participation (Hirzalla et al., 2010). However, this paper does not plan to further touch upon these theories, as they trigger issues and elements related to the network society (Castells, 2005) and other theoretical considerations that cannot be practically separated from social network analysis.

Another aspect of social networks that needs to draw further attention is the relationship between social networks and the public sphere, as social networks cannot be perceived as a panacea for forging and sustaining social relationships, harnessing social capital and formulating a public discourse arena known as the public sphere. The public sphere is perceived by the leading theorist Jürgen Habermas (1992) as the sphere that mediates between the domains of the family, the workplace and the state which consists of social spaces, where individuals discuss common public affairs. It is equally perceived as consisting of a ''space that, not only enables autonomous opinion formation but also empowers the citizens to influence the decision makers'' (Eriksen & Fossum, 2004: 351) and a "common space for free communication secured by rights of freedom of expression, where problems are discovered and formed into opinions and wills that formal decision-making agencies act upon" (Eriksen & Fossum, 2002: 403). It was previously acknowledged (Smith, 2009) that the EU wished to base its communication strategy on the existence of a genuine European Public Sphere. For instance, the European Communication policy (European Commission, 2006) attempts to stimulate the formation of such a public sphere through ICT. However, despite increasing resources towards a common communicative space, it is more possible that segmented publics began to emerge around policy networks in certain policy areas rather than a single European public sphere (Eriksen & Fossum, 2002). Social media can thus trigger new dynamics by virtue of the formulation of the public sphere, which is a prerequisite to political action.

However, there are inherent counter arguments to the democratising effects of online social media. Social networks are often referred to as a new generation Internet democracy, which has distinctive effects in displacing the public sphere with a networked citizen-centred model of social relationship (boyd, 2010). According to the literature, online social media have a great potential to shape social relations but they can also trigger scepticism over "networked individualism" (Castells, 2005), fragmented social spaces, negative campaigning, populist extremism, chaotic participation, small level of inclusiveness, partisan politics, which are all exacerbating factors to rational deliberation and critical discussion (boyd, 2010; Iosifidis, 2011). Some arguments even point to the risk of domination which claims that only participants that are loud and opinionated can survive in social networks (Keen, 2007). In short, there are inherent structural differences between social spaces on the Internet and the traditional "offline" ones in that asymmetries of power and other discursive deliberative criteria are not taken into heed, and thus structured conversation cannot arise between similar deliberative groups. This risk needs to be carefully analysed in future research to enhance our understanding of the contemporary online political environment.

With an average of more than 200 000 people registering on Facebook daily, organisations and governments have expanded to encompass social networks in their operations. Public relations-oriented blogs and trade organisations have promoted these sites as relationship building tools. Non-profit organisations also use social media to interact with external stakeholders, to educate and to stimulate awareness. According to Waters (2011), the crucial element of social networking site profiles lies in the information that is being distributed. The most common forms of message dissemination include posting links to external news items about the organisation or its causes; posting photographs, video, or audio files from the organisation and its supporters; and using the message board or discussion wall to post-announcements and answer questions.

## 4. Relevant Work

An emerging question is the degree of existing evidence that may contribute to our understanding of online social networks in terms of political involvement.

Baumgartner (2010) examined the political uses of social networking sites by young adults in the frame of the US 2008 presidential primary season. The findings do not advocate democratic engagement, participation, greater political knowledge or stimulated political interest. In particular, he found that the news collected had a minor effect to inform or add to political discourse in young adults. Nevertheless, social networks are indeed recognised by young adults as one of several possible sources of political news, and that many receive at least some of their news from these sites. Still, it is debatable whether news can contribute to democratic discourse for an individual with no propensity or inclination to follow political-related news.

Roberts (2004) finds that representative democracy is being encouraged with new ICT and user-generated content to the extent that online trends may be reproducing or mirroring more general offline trends in the focus of political parties to their constituents. As concerns the results on the communicative patterns dominating the social networks, Waters (2011) performed a content analysis on non-profit organisations' profiles on Facebook and found the most often used strategy was disclosure of information and less dissemination and involvement. Sæbø (2011) investigates tweets of Norwegian parliamentary representatives and finds five communication purposes: to provide links to information sources for other Twitter users; to inform about the representative's ongoing activities; to express views on topical issues; to introduce non-political (private) content; and to participate in online discussions with other parliamentary representatives. Other less frequent communication patterns include tweets attracting attention to the representative's own blogs, requests for input from readers and ultimately discussions with citizens. In addition, it was shown that the tweets did not contribute to deliberation as they are dominated by politicians. Thus, it was concluded that Twitter's use was much closer linked to the liberal democracy model (i.e. linked to provision of information). Similarly, Panagiotopoulos (2012) examines about 296 000 tweets from 1 897 local government authorities and reports positive patterns of Twitter uses since accounts appear to generate interest and activity on a number of topics and to engage in debates, to respond to public queries etc.

Golbeck et al. (2010) established the use of Twitter by members of the US Congress as mainly to promote links to their blogs or articles about themselves, instead of attempting to provide the public with new insights about legislative processes. Waters et al. (2011) analysed 1 800 tweets posted by 60 USA governmental accounts and concluded that increased interactivity with the public cannot be a realistic goal, as actors seek to preserve the traditional *locus* of control in public communications.

On the other hand, social networks such as Twitter, Facebook, MySpace, LinkedIn and other online platforms can provide extremely high levels of networking and exposure to political information. According to a recent research (Pasek et al., 2009; boyd, 2008; Breindl, 2008), social capital and the online use of social networks can facilitate civic engagement. Despite the increased popularity of these networks there is a need for empirical research to assess the extent such practices are improving government transparency, accountability, responsiveness and interaction with their citizens. At this time, impact assessment of digital public participation on social capital is scarce and the immediate question of how social networks are correlated with political engagement received little attention.

# 5. Overview of Initiatives

In the survey conducted, 124 profiles from five social networks have been identified. About half of the profiles have been found on Twitter and one third on Facebook. The rest of networks referred to is Hyves, YouTube, Flickr and Vimeo. Concerning the classification of types of profiles created, formal Institutions dominate, as they create profiles relevant to their formal names, followed by policies

(Directorate-Generals or thematic policies) and persons that act as figures for the European Union (e.g. President of the Commission, Commissioners, President of the Parliament etc)[1]. Six profiles which did not correspond to any of the categories in Table 1 were placed under 'various'. We note once again that in this stage of the research, no content analysis takes place. However, some basic metrics have helped to outline the main modes of use of social networks. Table 1 below presents an overview of the use of social networks by social media and by profile type.

Table 1: Use of social networks by European Institutions

| SOCIAL MEDIA | TOTAL COUNT (N) | PERSONS | POLICIES | INSTITUTIONS | VARIOUS |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| You Tube | 19 | 5 | 2 | 12 | |
| Facebook | 36 | 3 | 18 | 15 | |
| Twitter | 59 | 10 | 18 | 26 | 5 |
| Hyves | 1 | 1 | | | |
| Flickr & Vimeo photostreams | 9 | 4 | 2 | 2 | 1 |
| **Total** | **124** | **23** | **40** | **55** | **6** |

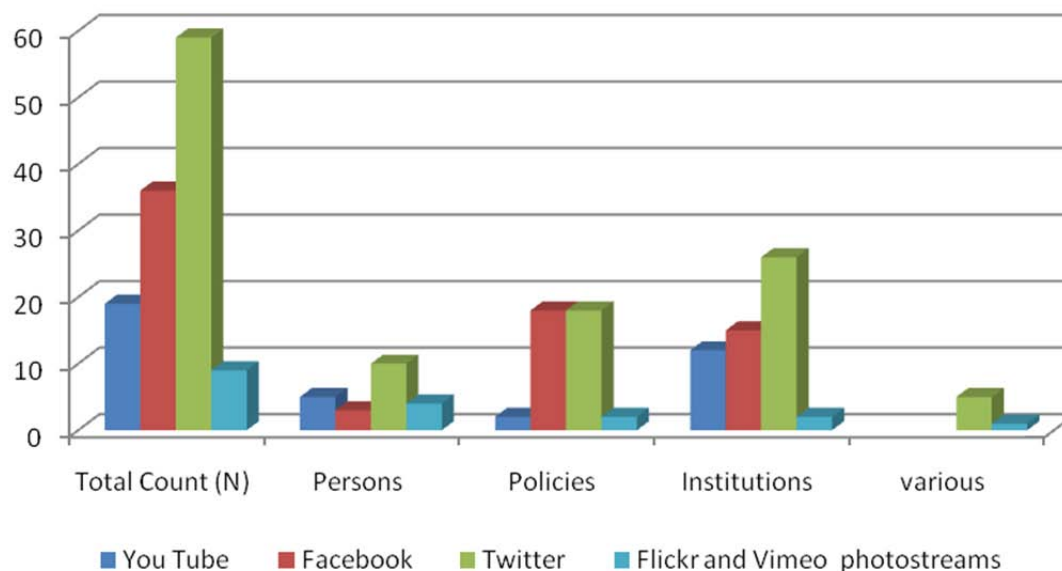The Figure 1 below presents the allocation of accounts per social media.



Figure 1: Allocation of accounts per social media

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1    It should be clarified that the classification (Persons/Policies/Institutions/Various) reflects the authors' perception. In the 'Take part' link, the generic classification is different (e.g. persons are included in the Institutions).

Twitter appears to be the most widely used social platform as the majority of the profiles can be found on Twitter. Specifically, the following types of profiles have been identified in detail:

- Profiles by Institutions (e.g. European Parliament, European Aviation Safety Agency, European Economic and Social Committee, European Central Bank) that are actually the majority;

- Profiles by specific Common Market Policies[2] (EU internal market, Innovation Union, EU regional policy, Enterprise and Industry, EU consumer affairs etc.);

- Profiles by specific persons (Commissioner for Climate Action, Commissioner for Digital Agenda, President of the Parliament, etc.).

As noted above, some Twitter profiles were classified under 'various' as they could not be categorised due to their specific nature (e.g. Europarltv.eu links and specific events).

The most popular profiles are shown in Table 2. With no intention to normalise conclusions or generalise the norms of profile use, there are some common genres of communication that tend to characterise most of the accounts:

- Profiles are characterised by almost daily tweets and a large number of followers;

- Tweets by Institutions regard up-to-date EU issues, such as events, decisions, etc.;

- Tweets and retweets provide links to other social media, chats and live sessions;

- Retweets are mainly made from other related profiles, EU sources or officials.

Table 2: Most popular social media pages/accounts

| YOUTUBE[3] | | FACEBOOK | | | TWITTER[4] | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Profile | No of views | Profile | Number of fans | Average frequency of posts[5] | Profile | Number of followers | Average number of tweets[6] |
| EUTube | 19 770 625 | European Parliament | 168 800 | 50 | Digital Agenda | 24 727 | 30 |
| President of the European Commission | 17 136 227 | Social Europe | 21 800 | 20 | European Commission | 19 986 | 80 |
| European Space Agency | 3 000 453 | European Commission | 15 478 | 20-30 | President of the European Parliament | 9 644 | 30 |

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2 It has to be noted in some cases the distinction between Institutions and Policies can be blurred, as Policies might emerge from their name (e.g. Social Europe, Environment) or by their relevant DG. In the latter case, the count is included as institutions.
3 Based solely on the number of views.
4 Based on profiles with more than 1 000 tweets and 1 000 followers in total.
5 On a per month basis.
6 On a per month basis.

| | | | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| European Parliament YouTube channel | 87 651 | Youth on the Move | 9 167 | 5-6 | External Action Service | 5 467 | 80 |
| European Environmental Agency Channel | 99 845 | Humanitarian Aid-ECHO | 8 374 | | Innovation Union | 3 214 | 50 |
| | | Innovation Union | 5 587 | 20 | European Patent Office | 3 233 | 50-60 |
| | | Council of the European Union | 3 666 | 60 | Commissioner for Inter. Cooperation, Humanitarian Aid and Crisis Response | 2 824 | 30 |
| | | European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights | 3 155 | 9-10 | Enterprise and Industry | 1 732 | 80 |
| | | Eurobarometer | 2 766 | 10 | European Commission Audiovisual service | 1 603 | 10-15 |
| | | President of the Council | 2 116 | 3-4 | European Parliament | 1 392 | 50 |
| | | Environment | 1 443 | 5-10 | | | |
| | | Digital Agenda | 692 | 4-5 | Europe by Satellite | 1 024 | 20 |
| | | MEP's on Facebook | (cannot be estimated) | 20-25 | European Training Foundation | 920 | 45-50 |
| | | European Commission Liaison Office to Kosovo | 3 544 | 20 | CORDIS Funding News | 1 112 | 5-6 |

Twitter is mostly used to provide updates on major European issues and the activities of the Institutions. Tweets tend to reach a substantial number of the public and to act as a dissemination base for the information provided through retweets by followers. A secondary communication norm is to diffuse personal feelings and ideas, which is especially true for personal profiles (figureheads of the EU). In the specific cases, the number of retweets by followers increases in cases where figures tend to express personal feelings or ideas on mainly two themes: the economic downturn and the future of Europe. However, the pronounced success of this medium can be exacerbated when considering that about one-fifth of the accounts are characterised by a low number of tweets (2-3 per month) and a low number of followers. This however might be contingent upon the 'communication profile' and the mandate of specific institutions (such as the European Central Bank), which focus on 'technical' tweets, as for instance announcing results, call for events or new legislation.

Facebook is the second most popular social media with about 36 accounts identified[7]; half of the accounts represent policies, while less than half represent Institutions. Facebook's communication norms are summarised as follows:

- Profiles mostly upload information on decisions made, activities and initiatives, updates on legislation etc. encouraging some kind of deliberation and discussion on the posts;

- Dissemination of invitations, questions and new initiatives is performed through posts and cross-links;

- Profiles quite often create short polls and receive comments in the forms of petitioning;

- Facebook serves as a space for hosting re-tweets and re-posts from other social media, especially for existing personal profiles;

- Profiles cross-post information by users in some policy cases.

Some discussions in profiles/walls of major Institutions such as the Commission and the Parliament are carefully moderated, with frequent requests made to users to respect certain rules, as domination and intolerance were noted.

As Facebook is not utilised to its full potential, it appears that in some cases political matters become an arena for personal ideologies rather than deliberation. From a general screening of some discussions taking place on profiles, users are in some cases irrelevant to the subject of discussions or engage in irreverent and disrespectful comments. Policy-related profiles attract a large number of fans and an active administration on behalf of profile owners; however deliberation is discouraged despite the fact that in some cases, deliberation is purposely triggered on behalf of profile owners. Some pages dedicated to liaisoning (e.g. European Commission Liaison Office and Delegations) are only restricted to providing basic information. In addition, a large fraction of the accounts are cross-posting information from other social media, especially Twitter. This is especially true for personal profiles. Hence, Facebook tends to focus on information sharing and act as a 'cross-dissemination' space in conjunction with Twitter.

YouTube dedicated channels are widely used by the European Institutions for uploading speeches and promotional videos. This medium is characterised by a very low level of deliberativeness, as in most of the cases, comments are deactivated and the channels focus only on one-way communication with the public (transmission of videos, speeches, plenary sessions, etc.). In other cases, question and answer sessions or short polls might be incorporated. A notable exception might be the European Space Agency YouTube Channel where due to its mandate and rich audiovisual material, the interaction between the Agency and the public is facilitated. The YouTube service is less attractive to personal accounts, but key EU figures (President of the Council of the EU, President of the European Commission) maintain personal channels. Photo-sharing facilities are frequently used by personal profiles to disseminate specific information or events but no eParticipation elements can be clearly identified.

YouTube Channels and multimedia platforms were extremely popular within the European Institutions from the advent of their eParticipation settings, such as EUTube, EuroParlTv.eu and the European Parliament's audiovisual services (Smith, 2009). These endeavours gained in popularity due to the depth of information they could provide on European policies (European Commission, COM(2006) 35, European Commission, COM(2007) 568, European Commission, SEC(2007) 1742, European Commission

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7    During the research period, it was noted that a sharp proliferation of Facebook profiles took place. The number thus might have changed.

SEC(2008) 506/2), as well as the impact and simple learning curve of such media. According to these documents, "better use of the audiovisual media should aim at supplying information in a form that is attractive to users, promotes, active European citizenship and contributes to the development of a European public sphere" (European Commission SEC(2008) 506/2: 3).

Figure 2 provides a schematic visualisation of how social networks are used by the European Institutions. This only represents a 'bottom-up' personal estimation of the pronounced mode of use of social media and does not intent to incorporate a framework of analysis. As shown in the figure, Twitter is used for sharing links and cross dissemination, while Facebook is firstly used for providing news, links, updates, cross-dissemination and to a lesser extent, deliberation. The flow of information among the networks is continuous and in some cases automatic (use of other platforms to automatically update a specific one) specifying enhanced connectivity between the networks.
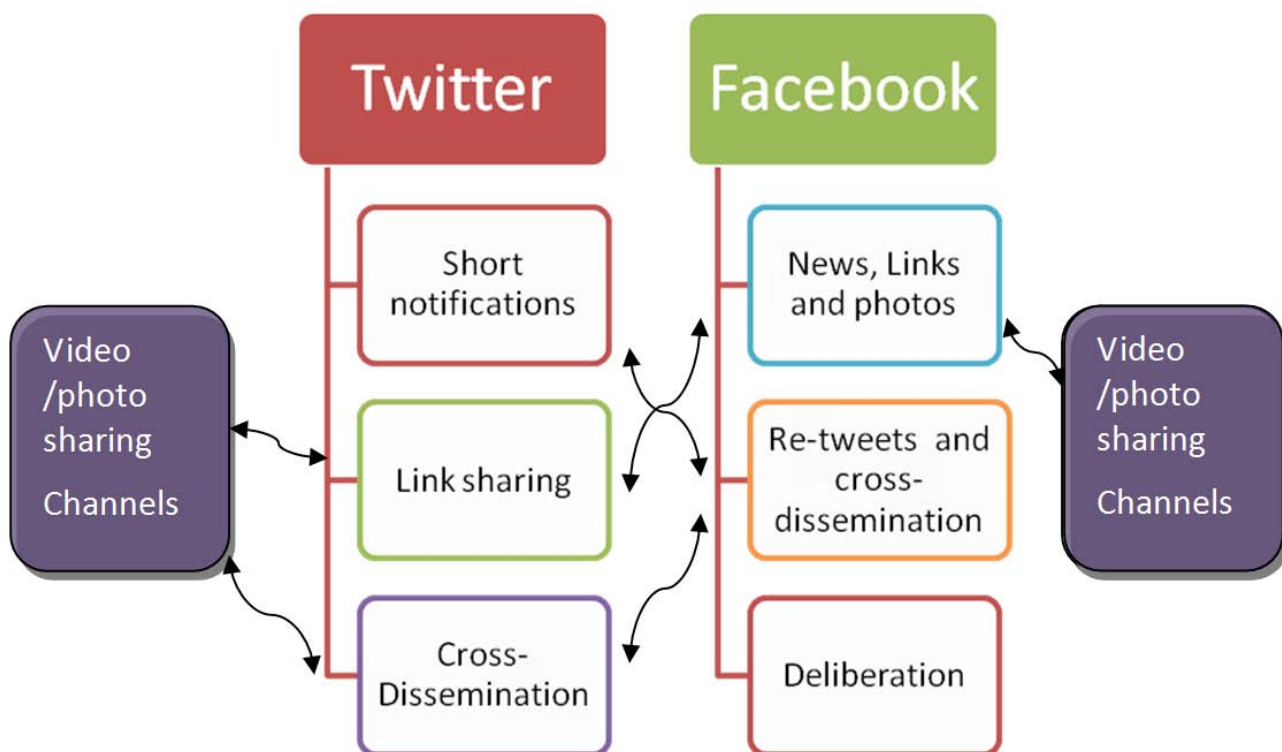


Figure 2: Overview of social media use

Although the deliberation and problem-solving rationale were not the priorities, the formulation of a public sphere and the dynamics of communication to the crystallisation of citizenship should not be undermined in the case of social media. It is extremely difficult to isolate the rhetorical endorsement of social media use since there are no documents to date that capture communication policy in terms of social media. A working hypothesis might surface for some of the profiles (Facebook) written intentions which are summarised as "pages aimed to provide a broad platform for diverse opinions and discussions, host debates and voice opinions under the condition that contributions are related to the subject". In the case of social media, citizenship and the formulation of public sphere might be the 'hidden' objective. Instead, multimedia services are viewed as innovative offers that can facilitate information provision in political and other issues. For instance, dedicated parliamentary channels can provide political knowledge or on demand news and information programmes ensure a closer relationship with the audience, especially for young people. However, it has been found that the democratising potential of media efforts can be limited as it does not mirror an opportunity for citizens to voice demands (Vaccari, 2011).

# 6. Conclusions

Social networks are being investigated through mainly three different lenses: social network theories, social capital theories and technological theories/surveys which postulate that the social networks can indeed create social capital, although political engagement is contingent on other factors as well. Social networks increase the tendency to participate through exposure to information. Nevertheless, there are inherent structural differences between social spaces on the Internet and the traditional 'offline' social spaces. Other characteristics need to be taken into consideration such as power domination, empathy, inclusiveness and other discursive deliberative criteria. Thus, theoretical and empirical research could further focus on a framework that allows the assessment of social networks and civic engagement and address how usage can contribute to democratic discourse and participation.

A relevant survey on the use of online social networks by European Institutions reveals that Twitter is the preferred method of communication with the European public, followed by Facebook. Communication media, such as YouTube and Vimeo also attract the European Institutions. The Institutions do not have a unified presence in all networks but different DG's, Institutions or persons/Commissioners use their preferred means for communicating with the public. Distinct policies (environment, regional policy, innovation) have equally attracted a large number of profiles. Online social media are mainly used as a 'cross-dissemination and awareness space'. Short notifications via tweets, link sharing, news and updates are the most common modes of communication with social networks, while deliberation is exclusively performed via Facebook and only in limited cases.

Some questions arise from this preliminary screening of initiatives, including: are the issues disseminated of particular salience to users? Do these spaces exert a strong influence on political participation or awareness? Do users feel more inclined to participate in discussions that take place in social networks?

Lastly, is the information sharing rationale of social networks sacrificing deliberation and true eParticipation or is it a preliminary stage of awareness raising in the complex institutional and cultural settings of European politics? As it has been also proposed beforehand, future research could focus on delivering a robust theoretical framework linking eParticipation use of online social networks with social network and social capital theory, so as to allow the testing of empirical evidence under a theoretical endorsement.

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