


Digital Participatory Platforms for Civic Engagement: A New Way of Participating in Society?

Analysis of Case Studies in Four EU Countries

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ABSTRACT

The article is focused on the digital participatory platforms (DPPs) as a tool to enhance civic engagement through dialogue and interaction with the Public Administration and to reduce Digital Divide. To this end, the article presents the objectives and the outcomes of “My Smart Quartier,” a project funded within the ERASMUS + 2017 Program, in which the Department of Architecture and Design (DAD) of the Politecnico di Torino participates with a consortium of European partners. The aim of this project is the setting up and testing strategies and actions to reduce digital illiteracy and increase citizen participation. Best practices from the project partner countries (France, Italy, Spain, Portugal) are selected and analyzed in order to understand if they can constitute innovative ways of participation and civic engagement. Specifically, the article identifies some parameters and indicators that can be used to bring out key success factors of digital participatory platforms.

KEYWORDS

Citizen Participation, Digital Divide, Erasmus+, Social Inclusion, Social Innovation

INTRODUCTION

The recent digital revolution, underway since the second half of the twentieth century, has rapidly changed habits in life at work, in school, in relationship between people and in participation in social activities. The processes at an economic, social and cultural level, led by the fast development of information and communication technologies (ICT), have significantly accelerated the transmission and use of information, bringing us suddenly into the Digital Age.

The fact that in such a short time communication and information technologies (ICT) have managed to connect most of the planet becoming increasingly influential and, often, irreplaceable in most human activities, is undoubtedly one of the positive aspects of this revolution, as well as the increase in the opportunity of citizens' participation in public life (Kleinhans et al., 2015). On the other hand, however, their speed of diffusion has created obvious differences in terms of access and use.

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The gap between those who have and have not access—for a variety of reasons—to these technologies is known as Digital Divide. The complex nature of the Digital Divide (infrastructural, cultural, etc.) is indicative of how difficult it is to break down this barrier. Several factors feed this division: personal, socio-economic, educational, cultural and linguistic. The Digital Divide therefore creates a new social divide that separates those who have the opportunity to grasp the benefits that these new technologies carry intrinsically with themselves, from those who are excluded. At the same time, the Digital Divide, an issue that the new innovative practice in this field have to face with, affects the civic participation.

One of the factors that contribute to the exclusion from the use of technology is certainly the digital illiteracy, considered as a lack of digital skills and therefore an inability to know how to use with confidence and a critical spirit the ICT for work, leisure and communication. Therefore the digital illiteracy influence how to use them to find, evaluate, store, produce, present and exchange information as well as to communicate and participate in collaborative networks via the Internet (European Union, Recommendation of the European Parliament and of the Council on key competences for lifelong learning, 2006/962 / EC).

Given the important role of technology in contemporary life, digital exclusion is a subtle but dangerous form of social, economic, political and cultural exclusion.

In this scenario fits the “My Smart Quartier” project (<https://mysmartquartier.eu/>), funded within the ERASMUS + 2017 Program, in which the Department of Architecture and Design (DAD) of the Politecnico di Torino participates with a consortium of European partners, with the aim of setting up and testing strategies and actions to reduce digital illiteracy and increase citizen participation.

The aim of the paper is to select some best practices of Digital Participatory Platforms (DPPs) investigated in the “My Smart Quartier” project, in order to understand if they can constitute innovative ways of participation and civic engagement.

BACKGROUND

The topic of Digital Participatory Platforms for Civic Engagement is closely linked to the use of new technologies to support social inclusion actions (Silva, 2010, 2012; Saad-Sulonen, 2012). The relevance of this issue is demonstrated by the attention given by international organizations over the last 20 years. Below is a quick overview of the policy and the regulatory framework of reference at European level in which the use of DPP is placed.

One of the first important documents is represented by the conclusions of the 2000 Lisbon European Council, which specifies the importance of promoting different means of access to prevent the exclusion of information. The technologies of the information in fact, can be used to reset urban and regional development and promote technologies compatible with environmental protection. It is necessary for Public Administrations to make effective efforts at all levels to make use of new technologies as a means to ensure that the information is as accessible as possible. The above is also included in the Recommendations of the European Parliament and of the Council in 2006, in which the key competences necessary for personal fulfillment, active citizenship, social cohesion and employability in a knowledge society are defined. Among these skills, the digital one is also included and consists of knowing how to use the technologies of the information society (IST) for work, leisure and communication with confidence and a critical spirit. It is supported by basic ICT skills: the use of computers to find, evaluate, store, produce, present and exchange information as well as to communicate and participate in collaborative networks via the Internet.

On June 1, 2005, the European Commission launched the “i2010 - A European Information Society for Growth and Employment” action plan, which provided a strategic framework to drive sustainable economic growth and inclusion through ICT addressing the main challenges and developments of the information society until 2010.

Following this initiative, the e-Government Action Plan was established in 2010, to empower the e-Government services, ensuring a wider and more transparent access to public information, and

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