

Chapter 16

Kenya E-Participation Ecologies and the Theory of Games

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ABSTRACT

An e-Participation ecology is composed of five elements—actors, contents, traditional culture of participation, existing media skills and practices, and discourses in conflicts (establishment vs. antagonists)—and three macro-dimensions—cultural/traditional, political, and socio-technological—with which the five elements are interacting (Cavallo, 2010). Game theory can be used to understand how a certain actor or a group of actors can develop a successful strategy in/for each one of the three dimensions. Therefore, the concept of Nash equilibrium (Nash Jr., 1950), developed in physics and successfully applied in economy and other fields of study, can be borrowed also by e-Participation analysts/project managers to develop “Win-Win” scenarios in order to increase e-Participation projects’ chances of success and consequently reduce e-Participation’s “risk of failures,” especially in developing countries where they usually occur more frequently (Heeks, 2002). The Kenyan e-Participation platform, Ushahidi, generated a techno-discourse about the rise of African Cyberdemocracy and the power of crowd-sourcing that is probably more relevant than the real impact that these e-Participation platforms had or will have on the lives of normal citizens and media activists.

INTRODUCTION

In this chapter we will explore the possible applications of game theory to the field of e-Participation in Kenya. The term e-Participation is used to define a specific field of study that attempts to investigate how ICTs can be applied to improve

citizen/community participation and consequently their capacity to influence government decision-making processes. In this respect, e-Participation projects are considered strategies to influence power in a specific direction.

It is important to specify that in the context of this chapter, e-Participation is not considered a neutral space in which different actors communicate amongst themselves.

DOI: 10.4018/978-1-4666-3640-8.ch016

Game theory should be applied only to specific concepts of e-Participation: those that imply the existence of opposite and complementary interests of actors, fighting and collaborating between each other to reach their objectives. In this context e-Participation can be defined as: the electronic space/dimension in which different actors are competing or cooperating to support a specific or different “discourse/s” (to: gain, expand or to maintain their power) (Cavallo, 2010).

Furthermore, in this chapter we will investigate e-Participation in relation to international development and the history of “North-South” relations in Sub-Saharan Africa from colonialism up to now.

BACKGROUND

Citizen participatory deliberation systems imply devolution of power for the government. Why would bureaucrats - and in most cases also politicians - be open and willing to delegate part of their power to the people? While in some cases politicians are ready to do so, in order to increase their consensus among voters, often even if they open the doors to participation and participatory deliberation, it does not mean that they will keep them open forever. Furthermore, bureaucratic power is based on knowledge of institutional mechanisms. If citizens gain access to this type of information and understand these mechanisms, bureaucrats will swiftly begin to lose their power. As a result, bureaucrats need to keep the different “information spheres” separate from each other in order to maintain their sphere of influence (Meyrowitz, 1985).

Communication can generally be understood as an act of power. Power, understood in this case as the capacity to influence other people’s decisions to support the values, the interests and the will of the people who hold power (Castells, 2009).

In the field of e-Participation, researchers have not always been able or willing to focus on power dynamics. This may occur because in some cases

it is difficult to develop specific frameworks to do so and in others because they decide to avoid the topic deliberately, in order to prevent conflicts or please their funders/donors - who in most cases, are the same institutions that are financing the project that they should be assessing or researching.

In this context power dynamics are not ignored but represent instead the core of the enquiry to demonstrate how it is possible to develop frameworks, strategies and actions based on the analysis of opposite and complementary power relationships.

These power dynamics have a direct or indirect impact on e-Participation studies and therefore should not be ignored by researchers. Instead, they should become one of the most important subjects/elements of any scientific analysis of e-Participation, in both the so-called developing and developed countries.

MAIN FOCUS OF THE CHAPTER

Power Dynamics and Analytical Frameworks

The emancipation of a social actor cannot be separated from its capacity to gain power over other actors unless we want to accept a naïve image of a reconciled human community, a normative utopia, that historical observation debunks. (Castells 2009, p. 5)

The main focus of this chapter is on e-Participation’s power dynamics and how to analyse them to support the development of an e-Participation project strategy in either a developing or a developed country. These dynamics can be classified as follows:

- **Discourse-Influence:** The system of thoughts composed by ideas, attitudes, courses of action, beliefs and practices, that systematically construct the subjects

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