

Chapter VIII

The Current State and Future of E-Participation Research

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INTRODUCTION

The past decade has witnessed an increasing trend of information and communication technologies (ICT) exploitation by governments around the world to enhance citizen participation. This is reflected in the emergence of a plethora of terms associated with the phenomenon, such as e-consultation or online consultation (Whyte & Macintosh, 2002), online rule-making (Charlitz & Gunn, 2002), online deliberation (Price & Cappella, 2006), online public engagement (Coleman & Gotze, 2001), and e-participation (Macintosh, 2004). In this chapter, we will use the term “e-participation” initiatives to refer to government’s use of ICT to engage citizens in democratic processes. The term “e-participation” is chosen because it is sufficiently general to encompass all such efforts by governments. Instances of e-participation initiatives can be found globally, such as Denmark’s Nordpol.dk (<http://www.nordpol.dk>), U.S.’s Regulations.gov (<http://www.regulations.gov>), and Singapore’s REACH portal (<http://www.reach.gov.sg>). Table 1 presents a list of e-participation initiatives that are sampled from around the globe.

The emergence of e-participation initiatives can be attributed to governments’ growing awareness of the need to attain more democratic governance (Coleman & Gotze, 2001), coupled with a widespread public interest in the potential of ICT to empower citizens (Hart-Teeter, 2003). It is argued that enhanced citizen participation can lead to policies that are more realistically grounded in citizens’ needs, and improved public support for the policies (Irvin & Stansbury, 2004). Institutionalization of citizen participation programs can be traced back as far as the 1950s (Day, 1997), with the potential of ICT to enhance participation being recognized about two decades later. Eztoni, Laudon, and Lipson (1977) wrote: “The technological means exist through which millions of people can enter into dialogue with one another and with their representatives, and can form the authentic consensus essential for democracy” (p. 64). Today, e-participation initiatives are exploiting the Internet’s capabilities of 24/7 accessibility as well as the mass transmission and reception of information to facilitate citizen participation. The growing interest of governments in e-participation initiatives has been echoed in academic research communities.

BACKGROUND

Current research on e-participation encompasses a diverse array of issues and spans various disciplines such as, political sciences, public administration, planning, and information systems. The number of studies related to e-participation has been increasing rapidly. Notably, at the 2006 Annual International Conference on Digital Government Research, over 20 percent of accepted papers were related to e-participation, a figure double that of the previous year. With the burgeoning of e-participation research, it appears worthwhile to review the relevant literature to assess the current state of e-participation research. Such an effort may serve to provide directions for future research and uncover insights for practitioners engaged in e-participation efforts.

Based on a review of existing literature on e-participation, the foci of research in this area can be broadly classified into five principal topics: systems and tools for e-participation, factors influencing individual's e-participation, effects of ICT features on individual's e-participation, implications of e-participation initiatives, and best practices of e-participation initiatives.

Research under the **systems and tools for e-participation** topic describes the nature and capabilities of a range of ICT currently employed to enhance participation, as well as the emerging systems and tools for this purpose. The use of ICT, however, does not by itself guarantee participation. Therefore, another stream of research investigates the **factors that influence individual's e-participation**. These studies take into account a range of motivational, resource, and efficacy factors that

Table 1. Examples of e-participation initiatives

| Continent: Country | E-Participation Initiative | Description |
|---------------------|--|---|
| Asia: Israel | SHIL (Hebrew acronym for "Citizen Advisory Bureau") (http://shil.shil.info/) | Established by the Welfare Ministry of Israel and the Information Society Research Center in the University of Haifa to provide citizens a new channel to communicate with decision makers in government agencies, and to improve information flow between the public and authorities |
| Asia: Singapore | REACH portal (http://www.reach.gov.sg) | A national level consultation portal that aims to encourage inputs from citizens with regard to policy making |
| Australia | Community Builder (http://www.communitybuilders.nsw.gov.au/) | An interactive electronic clearing house for community level social, economic and environmental renewal. It is used to enable online community consultation, e-petition and to broadcast parliamentary activities |
| Europe: Denmark | Nordpol.dk (http://www.nordpol.dk) | To enhance citizens' interest in and knowledge of politics and to strengthen the dialogue among citizens and politicians |
| Europe: Estonia | TOM (Tana Otsustan Mina/"Today I Decide") (http://tom.riik.ee/) | To enhance citizens' participation in policy making by allowing citizens to comment on draft laws and submit their own ideas for new legislations |
| Europe: Italy | Iperbole (http://www.iperbole.bologna.it/) | An online civic network in Bologna set up to widen the use of ICT, supply information and interactive services to the citizens of Bologna, and create a dialogue between citizens and government |
| Europe: Sweden | Kalix Annual Consultation (http://www.kalix.se) | To engage citizens in a series of efforts to renew town politics, including the remodeling of the city center of Kalix and tax issues |
| Europe: UK | UK Government Consultations (http://www.cabinetoffice.gov.uk/regulation.aspx) | Designed to facilitate public feedback on policy issues, and to offer useful political and civic information to citizens |
| North America: U.S. | Regulations.gov (http://www.regulations.gov) | A cross-agency e-government effort to transform the US's Federal rulemaking process by enhancing public's ability to participate in government's regulatory decision-making |

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