

Chapter 29

Citizen e-Participation in Urban Planning: Achievements and Future Challenges in a Mediterranean City

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ABSTRACT

In recent years, new smart technologies have given citizens' movements and informal groups unprecedented possibilities of communication that allow them to achieve a wider audience, mobilise new activists and negotiate with local institutional actors. Even in the planning field, an extraordinary range of new strategies and practices of participatory e-democracy has been recently emerging, which has been affecting local planning and city governance. Thus, this paper aims at exploring potentialities and critical aspects of citizen's web based movements claiming for a more participatory and sustainable urban planning, through a critical examination of selected case studies in a Mediterranean city, Catania (Italy). The inter(net)connections between urban planning and citizen's e-activism, and consequently between the virtual sphere and public urban spaces, are scrutinized through the analysis of their discourses and narratives in the online documentation as well as interviews with activists.

INTRODUCTION

In the last two decades, the widespread use of Information and Communication Technologies, notably after the advent of Web 2.0 and 3.0, has been modifying collective narratives, public discourses and citizens' strategies which contemporary cities are built upon.

The Web has provided a platform for contesting identities as well as an unprecedented repository of alternative and/or countercultural practices and communication patterns, by acting as catalyst of information for everyone thus becoming foremost significant to small groups, fringe voices, minorities, social movements.

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This paper therefore aims at critically exploring patterns and practices of citizen's web based informal groups claiming a more participatory, democratic and sustainable urban planning, using a selection of case studies in a Southern Italy city, Catania. So, the work is focused on the wide range of narratives and tools of participatory e-democracy aimed at achieving a wider audience, mobilising new activists/volunteers and acting as watchdogs with regard to urban policies.

In particular, the research explores the variegated forms of netizens' engagement in urban activism to evaluate to what extent the Web provides activists with a revitalized repertoire of strategies and actions through an in-depth analysis of their online discourses and narratives. The aim is twofold. On one hand, the paper scrutinizes the capacity of citizens' e-participation to effectively influence urban governance, particularly in terms of mobility, by comparing online strategies with real-world outputs in the field of urban sustainability. On the other hand, it explores the online connections between spaces, places and urban activists in order to understand if online activism has completely replaced the real-world dimension. In so doing, the paper is finalised to contribute to the literature on urban activism and new technologies by providing new theoretical insights.

The article is organized as follows. First of all, the work begins with a literary review on the role of new technologies and social media in reshaping traditional geographic concepts and paradigms. The focus is on the controversial relationship between digital tools and social movements, whose complexity has growingly increased in recent years owing to their internal fragmentation. In so doing, theoretically the article is framed at the convergence among different perspectives of geography: namely the geography of the information society, political urban geography and geography of social movements.

In the second section, after an overview of the variegated landscape of citizens' movements in Catania, particularly those claiming a more sustainable pedestrian/cycling mobility, the work encompasses the analysis of Web-usage by two online informal communities selected as case studies.

As it will be explained in detail in the empirical section, the methodology is twofold. Apart from an in-depth analysis of textual and iconographic contents produced between March and June 2016, it has implied the examination of discursive practices and online/offline strategies, in addition to semi-structured interviews with activists/volunteers who manage Facebook pages.

NEW TECHNOLOGIES AND THE GEOGRAPHY OF ACTIVISM AND PARTICIPATION

The growing centrality of the Internet and the Web has led many scholars to decode their complex architecture and, particularly in the domain of geography, their impacts and relations with spaces and places of the real-world dimension.

The Internet, as a global network of computers (Dodge & Kitchin, 2001), has been regarded as the most comprehensive information system (Kellerman, 2007) exerting a deep impact on the geographical characteristics of spaces (Brunn, 1998).

Thus, pioneering geographical researches were focused on the attempts at "mapping" cyberspace as a new geographical sphere (Dodge, 1999), seen as a (apparently) de-territorialized dimension interfering with traditional geographical spaces (Batty, 1993).

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