

Chapter 19

Participation Sphere: A Model and a Framework for Fostering Participation in Organizations

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ABSTRACT

In the context of Portuguese teacher unions, the adoption of information and communication technologies is nowadays a reality. This chapter presents a brief analysis of e-participation and e-democracy, proposes a conceptual communication model for digital mediation on teachers' trade unions, and addresses an initiative carried out by the most representative teacher's union of Portugal. This proposal is based on social media principles, designed to gather teachers and unions in a shared deliberative space. The Liberopinion platform enables effective participation in formal and informal decision-making processes via the Internet, with full integration into any Website. It is improved to support Participatory budgeting. The actors were chosen from the National Federation of Teachers due to its representativeness regarding associate teachers and provide an opportunity to assess the platform potential to support participation in a union context.

INTRODUCTION

The Internet has a high potential to contribute to the exercise of citizenship, since it allows for sharing, collaboration and collective action. While the Internet protocol itself remains open, other control points counter the dynamics of the early Internet (Benkler, 2016). Nonetheless, as long as there is Internet, there will always be ways to circumvent any kind of censorship, blockage or prohibition, no matter how smart and powerful they may be. This is the case of the use of Tor to surpass the Great Firewall of China¹ or the Iranian elections², or the so-called Arab Spring, which was boosted by the social networks, and became

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powerful enough to even lead to the downfall of governments; one such discussion is provided by Fari-var (2011) who presents some cases where the Internet provided the means for change. The WikiLeaks embarrassed several states in the world with the disclosure of secret data (Domscheit-Berg & Klopp, 2011). In Europe, Tunisia, Egypt, Brazil, and the United States, citizens' manifestations are organized through social networks, which have become the main communication vehicle for people, increasingly disappointed with politicians and policies undertaken by governments. The spontaneous use of Twitter and Facebook, as well mobile location services, has made them useful for demonstrators and for those who want to protest or just make their own position.

The widespread use of Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) through Public Administration and citizens led to the development of a more immediate relation between the government and civil society, which has also created a new field of social conflict and disputes due to the expansion of citizen's participation, involvement and social control over the government activities. These issues have already been discussed in the context of an information society and a networked society by several authors, as the case of Benkler (2006).

The definition of democracy involves many disagreements between the defenders of direct democracy and representative democracy. The direct democracy defenders are considered optimists whereas the representative democracy defenders are pessimists. For the former, the ICT are responsible for revolutionizing the known democratic models since they allow citizens to participate anywhere, on any subject, thus enabling the direct democracy, a decision-making system about public affairs in which citizens are directly involved (Held, 2006, p.4). For the latter, the representative democracy is the best option, as not everyone can participate, leading to the old and most discussed question of digital divide (Benko, 2008; Robinson et al., 2015).

With the technological revolution, citizens could participate in the public, political and social affairs, and thus, the difficulties inherent in the direct democracy would be overcome. Yet, despite all the technological possibilities that enable an ongoing involvement of citizens in decision making, the direct democracy is hardly adopted by states. The governments insist on not changing their representative structures to revolutionize the use of Internet in the democratic processes, which further increases citizens' disappointment towards the politicians and their policies (Quental & Gouveia, 2014a). As a result, citizens are becoming uninterested in choosing their representatives, as depicted in Figure 1 for the last elections for the Portuguese Presidency of the Republic, European parliament and Portuguese parliament, which interestingly contrasts with the considerable increase in the real schooling rate, shown in Figure 2. Citizens today clearly more educated, are disappointed with politics and politicians, and thus need to be motivated. The ICT can have an important role in public participation, with emphasis on e-participation.

Being aware of the lack of interest, trust, and participation of citizens in democratic politics, politicians are beginning to worry about it. As a result, governments and political institutions around the world are increasingly using the Internet in an attempt to revitalize democracy by adopting petitions (Quental & Gouveia, 2016) and, above all, participatory budgeting platforms such as the *Liberopinion*. Even though these initiatives are to be commended, in our view they are used to have greater control over citizens' opinions, and not provide them with the sufficient empowerment that e-participation allows.

The Web 2.0 and the rise of Social Media have not only created new playing fields for communication and self-expression but also new forms of social behavior. A key factor of both Web 2.0 and Social Media is participation. The e-participation is one of the forms of e-democracy presented in the literature, i.e., the use of ICTs for the citizen's participation in the public administration. It is a form of direct

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