

Chapter 26

Debate on E-Debate: Between Acceptance and Refusal

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ABSTRACT

The French State has been investing in the development of the information society, which has become an important frame of reference for local institutions. At the local level, municipalities are the leading actors constructing the information society. In some French municipalities, the introduction of the e-participation tool is still an ongoing process which generates debate. This chapter, based on a case study, discusses not only the factors that contribute towards the acceptance of the e-participation tools by local government actors but also why e-participation is rejected. The analysis shows that the attitudes towards e-participation by local councilors are mainly influenced by the degree of control they have over the device, and the vision of local democracy.

INTRODUCTION

In France, the Deffere law on decentralization (1982) and the Vaillant law on the democracy of the proximity (2002), made the local municipalities the leading actors of ICT deployment. However, many projects of municipalities are stimulated by external actors, such as the State which supports some of initiatives standardized at the national level (e.g. foundation of the public digital spaces as a tool to diminish the digital divide). Also, each year, a best practices ranking of municipalities is published. The municipalities with the highest

score of ICT deployment get the prestigious title of *Ville Internet 5@*. The ranking takes under consideration the municipal web sites, the e-services and the devices facilitating citizen participation. The ICT deployment became part of what Pierre Muller (1995) calls “the transformation of French society on behalf of an overall modernization” (p. 33).

Consequently some French municipalities called by Loiseau (2000) the *paragons of virtue* are well known for their successful involvement in ICT implementation. Just to mention a notable example, Issy-les-Moulineaux has been leading a proactive policy in this domain for the last 20 years. The municipality has its own local social

DOI: 10.4018/978-1-4666-0116-1.ch026

network, films town council meetings and upload them on the internet. The paragons of virtue have already been studied by many French scholars, for example Maigret et Monnoyer (2000) analyzed the experimental use of cameras during the town council meetings in Issy-les-Moulineaux. However, the cases of local councilors who do not take advantage of the potential to enhance web-enabled governance through online citizen participation have not been studied yet. This research aims at filling this gap by analyzing both the reasons for acceptance and refusal of online participation tools by local councilors.

1. This study answers the following question: What are the main reasons for local councilors to refuse e-participation tools and what are the factors that contribute towards their acceptance? The hypothesis of this study is that the decision of local officials to involve citizens in the policy process via the Internet depends not only on the rational balance between gains and costs, but also on the beliefs of the local councilors.
2. The study is focused on the municipalities which follow the best practices model for ICT implementation for citizen participation but, for some reason are less successful. Why does the idea of online participation have difficulty prevailing even when the local councilors seem to accept it? This chapter answers this question using the concept of *référentiel* defined by Muller, (2008), as representation, an image of the reality in which the policy-makers want to intervene. Regarding this *référentiel* the policy makers organize their perception of the problem and define their solutions. According to Muller (1995) the prevailing *référentiel* in French society is the modernisation. In the case of ICT, the predominant representation of reality is composed by many beliefs, for example the necessity of fighting the digital divide, developing e-governance, designing

the e-participation of citizens, according to everybody the right to be connected to the Internet etc. This *référentiel* has its mediators in the municipalities. The challenge of this study is to put in evidence what are the beliefs that make the local councilors and the local administration staff promote or refuse it.

The unit of analysis is a local project *Les Etats Généraux de la Ville Numérique* (States-General of the Digital City) conducted in a French municipality of over 50,000 residents. This exploratory research determines the strategies of the local government stakeholders who adopt, or refuse to adopt, the tools of e-participation. The opening premise is similar to the observation of Muller (1995) and other scholars: the cognitive approach to public policies is not only providing solutions to problems but also to the construct a framework for interpreting them. What are the conflicts and tensions around the new local public policies concerning e-participation?

This article focuses on the discourse of actors responsible for the project, which shows the conflict between the old *référentiel* (representative democracy) and the new one (citizen participation and e-participation). These two models of government, both founded on the principle of elected individuals representing the people, envisage different level of citizens' involvement. Obviously, the stakeholders' beliefs are not the only factor determining acceptance or refusal of the e-participation tools. From a macro sociological viewpoint one could say that the sociopolitical characteristics of the municipality, or the experience of other municipalities in the field of e-participation, are also important factors and must be taken under consideration. However, in this section of our research, the macrosociological explanation has not been formulated yet and for this moment we are exploring the microsociological hypothesis.

This chapter is organized along three lines. In the first part a background of the research and

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