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Conference Object, Published version

This version is available at <https://doi.org/10.14279/depositonce-6764>



Suggested Citation

Schröder, Carolin: Some Reflections on Possible Uses of E-Participation for the Local Level. - In: Parycek, P.; Edelmann, N.: Proceedings of the international conference for E-democracy and open government 2014 : CeDEM14. - Krems: Donau-Universität, 2014. - ISBN: 978-3-902505-35-4. - pp. 535-539.

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Some Reflections on Possible Uses of E-Participation for the Local Level

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Abstract: *This contribution reflects on assumptions that E-Participation is (1) Based on (political discussions), experiences and research results from face-to-face participation, is (2) Influenced by technical & design development (online & mobile) and is (3) Influenced by specific patterns of communication in social networks and draws conclusion regarding the uses of E-Participation at the local level.*

Keywords: *urban development, local level, relating social, political and technical aspects.*

While offline participation has become something like a standard in Western/ Northern urban development, the number of implementation cases at the local level (from street level via neighborhoods to whole cities) is still much larger than those at regional, national or global level. For political and legal reasons, the introduction of new or innovative forms of participation is much easier at the local level. Often assumed is that members of civil society can relate easier to the smaller scales and thus come up with more adequate ideas and solutions.

The professional conception and understanding of E-Participation is, for one, closely related to those offline experiences, for another, it goes beyond that – even more so when it comes to technical and social aspects. In the following, I would like to reflect on assumptions that E-Participation is (1) Based on (political discussions), experiences and research results from face-to-face participation, is (2) Influenced by technical & design development (online & mobile) and is (3) Influenced by specific patterns of communication in social networks. This again, has consequences of possible uses of E-Participation at the local level.

Conceptions of E-Participation are Based on (Political) Discussions, Experiences with Methods and Processes as Well as on Research Results for Offline Participation

E-Participation or e-democracy is defined as “the use of ICT to support ... democratic decision-making processes” (Macintosh 2004). Narrowing this definition further down, one could add that e-participation refers to the goal-oriented interaction of civil society & administrators/ politicians via Internet, mobile devices such as Smartphone, Tablet, via different software and app. With this, e-participation can be delineated from either “Online Participation”, a term often used in educational contexts and referring to the use of internet only or can be distinguished from “E-

Government”, a term that is often used in administrative contexts and refers to the improvement of municipal services and feedback.

First experiments with offline participation were made in the late 1960s resp. early 1970s in the Western world, e-participation was introduced in the mid- resp. late 1990s. And understandably, the number of cases and implementation for e-participation is still smaller. In consequence, criteria for describing or analyzing e-participation rely heavily on the practical experiences and theoretic reflections on offline participation. Below is a list of criteria for both offline and e-participation; while assessing the level of participation, the stage in decision-making processes, to consider the context and high accessibility is necessary for each offline or E-Participation process, topics such as skills and resources needed, usability, and transparency/ privacy/ control are for one to be dealt with considerably different in E-Participation processes, and for another they reflect back on discussions about offline participation and advance professional discourses on participation in general.

Table 1: Criteria for describing resp. analyzing offline participation and e-participation (Cp. Macintosh 2004: 6; http://eparticipation.eu/wp-content/uploads/2012/10/eCitizeni_manuaal_A4_ENGLISH-1.pdf, http://pb21.de/files/2012/01/bpb-Expertise_Partizipation_im_Social_Web_Kurzfassung.pdf, Schröder 2013).

Criteria	Description
Level of participation	What level of detail, which degree of participation and decision-making (how much influence for citizens)?
Stage in decision-making	When to engage (early enough, at the right time), for what period of time?
Context sensitivity	Political, legal, cultural, economic, technological factors at the respective level
Accessibility	Who should be engaged, and by whom, how many, from where?
Skills & Resources needed	Who needs which (media interaction) skills/ resources in order to participate? How may s/he get them? Which options are there?
Usability	Which Methods and Technologies are being used? How do they relate to the target groups? How and with what to engage citizens, with which objective(s)?
Transparency/ Privacy/ Control	Which information is given, what are limits and restrictions, what personal information will be needed/collected, will there be an evaluation, how to find out about outcomes/ results, costs?

Conceptions of E-Participation are Influenced by Technical Development

The range of possibilities for implementing E-Participation has been influenced heavily by technical developments as the devices being used range from PCs to Laptops, to Smartphones, and Tablets with different operating systems. In addition, markets for such devices are rapidly growing throughout all age and social groups, commercial and non-commercial tools resp. software or platforms for discussions, dialogues, petitions, citizen budgets and decision-making have been developed. In principle, this range of technologies allows for multiple forms and methods of E-Participation, for combinations of methods, for stand-alone solutions, for interactivity and playfulness, and for a greater diversification of services and tools.

Table 2: Basic quantitative indicators for E-Participation processes in Berlin (Sources: <https://radsicherheit.berlin.de/>, <https://buergerhaushalt.wordpress.com/>, <http://www.buergerhaushalt-lichtenberg.de/>).

	Residents	Site Visits	Registrations	Ideas	Comments	Votes
Berlin - Online Dialogue on Biking security	3,400,000	30,963	?	4,254	3,144	2,700
Leith Decides 2012/13, Edinburgh/ UK	480,000	?	724	43	?	?
Berlin - Marzahn Online Citizen Budget	201,000	?	1,964	213	326	4,075
Berlin - Lichtenberg Online Citizen Budget	34,960	?	3,194	667	4,100	?
Geraldton/ Australia, 2029 and Beyond	31.350	5,700	?	294	355	?

In consequence, it is often assumed that E-Participation allows for reaching larger numbers of people than many offline participation processes (cp. below). But it is just as time-consuming and delicate to deal with. Many E-Participation processes try to limit the personal information needed from the participants in order to protect their privacy (and not to do what is technically possible). Unfortunately, this also leaves facilitators or organizers without any knowledge about social characteristics of the participants. In addition, availability of and accessibility to up-to-date devices may be distributed unevenly throughout cities, regions and population groups. Table 2 gives an overview on the differences of actual residents, site visits, registrations, and contributions to five different cases.¹ It can be seen that some figures are missing and that the ratio of e.g.

¹ Doing several unstructured web researches on evaluations of e-participation processes, it seems as if there are not many evaluations of e-participation to be found on the internet at all. Those above are those with most detailed information on the topic (e.g. Blakey 2009; case studies on <http://www.participatorybudgeting.org.uk/>;

number of residents and contributions may differ considerably from case to case. While this lack of data is probably the consequence of self-restriction of people in charge (respecting privacy), technical challenges to E-Participation lie foremost in the fact that, due to (limits of) technical development all E-Participation is informal as there haven't been invented any mechanisms to introduce formal voting that would make decisions by administrators or politicians redundant.

Conceptions of E-Participation are Influenced by Specific Patterns of Communication in Social Networks

Another significant influence on E-Participation are specific patterns of social (online and mobile) communication and interaction such as social networks, short texts, instant feedbacks, with pictures and videos, ratings to name just a few. But it seems that the variety of forms and methods for e-participation is much more limited than in "offline" participation or in "unpolitical" discussions: In contrast to offline participation, where objectives – and therefore methods and target groups - vary widely, many E-Participation approaches are a combination of posting ideas, discussions, and informal voting as e.g. in many online citizen budgets, and municipal online dialogues.

Assumptions that e-participation may allow for more and new participants (ref.), and more contributions are not easy to verify as participation again relies heavily on individual access to the information about such an E-Participation process. In addition, those figures would not give any hints on the quality of the contributions and the process. While communication and interaction in E-Participation processes definitely ask for specific technical and social skills, e-participation is being considered a bigger challenge for members of local governments than for members of civil society. But with a new generation of administrators (those who learned about participation in schools and universities and those who grew into using computers and mobile phones) feedback and interaction are somehow a normality.

Conclusions

While there are lots of common grounds between offline and E-Participation, one should also ask whether this close relation also creates some problems: One question to be answered is whether all participation is suitable for all levels as e.g. E-Participation processes are not as small-scale (yet) as many offline processes. Thinking further, one could ask what consequences this has for the use of ICT in local decision-making processes and what are the relationships between social and technical aspects of ICT and democracy. Being far from replacing offline participation with E-Participation, the exclusive relocation of public discourses that deal with real spaces and real people into the internet realm may not be too much a vision to long for. In practice today, we often find a complementary mix of offline, online, and mobile solutions, even more so the smaller the scale to deal with gets (e.g. streets, small parks of only local significance, neighbourhoods).

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About the Author

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Carolin Schröder works as Head of the Participation Research Unit at the Centre for Technology and Society, Technische Universität Berlin/Germany. Before and after her doctorate in urban planning/architecture at RWTH Aachen/Germany, she worked as a freelance facilitator for participatory processes in urban and regional development, and taught at several universities. Her research focuses on both offline and online participation, on sustainable urban development, and on inter- and transdisciplinary research. One of her current projects is: FlashPoll - Developing a municipal decision-making App, www.Flashpoll.eu.