

A TWO DIMENSIONAL SPACE TO FRAME PARTICIPATORY INITIATIVES AND PLATFORMS

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ABSTRACT

The economic crisis is arousing social and political turbulence worldwide. In Italy this couples with a deep crisis of democratic legitimacy and an increasing demand for more participation in the public sphere. These dynamics met the opportunities offered by the web-based software tools for gathering ideas, and selecting them in a collaborative way through a more or less structured deliberative process. A significant number of online participation initiatives were therefore launched by different promoters: public institutions, political parties and their candidates during electoral campaigns, emerging social movements. These initiatives either run quite well established software or test new dedicated tools.

This paper proposes a two-dimensional space for classifying these initiatives: one axis represents the “degree” of citizens’ engagement; the other one, the “ownership” of the initiative. This framework has been recently presented in several occasions in Italy, including an invited lecture at a group of Senate officers. Almost always, the audience remarkably appreciated it as it allowed them to recognize similarities and differences among the various initiatives and the various tools. The question we want to discuss at the workshop is whether it holds also a scientific interest and relevance, toward a more rigorous evaluation of online participation.

Author Keywords

Idea gathering; online deliberation; citizens consultation.

ACM Classification Keywords

H.3.5 *Web-based services*; H.5.3 *Collaborative computing and Web-based interaction*; J.1 *Government*

INTRODUCTION

In the years 2011-2013, under the pressure of the worldwide economic crisis, several countries went through a period of social and political turbulence. In the Italian municipal elections in June 2011, a kind of “Italian Spring” took place almost the same time of grassroots movements

such as the so called “Arab Spring” in North Africa and the “indignados” in Spain [3]; in November 2011, the Berlusconi’s Government collapsed, opening the way for new general elections in February 2013. This crisis context fostered:

- the emergence of a renewed and more proactive civil society as a relevant actor in the political and electoral scene;
- the general attention on new form of citizens’ engagement through social media;
- the interest on the possibilities of online consultation and deliberation not only by experts but also by generic citizens and by the wide audience media;
- the general perception of elections – at any administrative level: municipal, regional and national – as a crucial moment for citizens participation in the public life: they not only play out their sovereignty by choosing representatives, but the campaign running up to election day allow them to submit to candidates their problems, complaints, and suggestions.

TOOLS AND INITIATIVES FOR COLLECTING IDEAS FROM THE CITIZENS’ CROWD

This social and political dynamics met the opportunities offered by the web-based software tools for generating and gathering ideas, and then rating and selecting them in a collaborative way, through a more or less structured deliberative process. This coupling of a socio-political request and of a suitable technology gave rise to a number of initiatives of idea gathering, citizens consultation and deliberation, both institutional (top-down, led by public bodies) and grassroots (bottom-up, promoted by social and political movements).

These initiatives either run quite well established software or test newly tools for idea gathering and selection. Without ambition of completeness, we consider here some of these applications, and initiatives which experiment them in real-life field tests.

- **Ideascale**, the well-known software for idea gathering, allow people to comment and to vote pro or cons proposals, deriving from the individual votes their overall rating; a reputation indicator is computed for each participant taking into account the number and the

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relevance of the actions s/he performed. In Italy, it was used immediately after the city of Cagliari 2011 municipal elections by a young professional expert in e-government to provide the newly elected Mayor with citizens' proposal (oratoccaanoi.ideascale.com). It has then be used for running the consultations launched in 2012 by the Italian Ministry for University and Research (MIUR); among them here we will consider the one on the fundamental principles of Internet, which took place in Autumn 2012 (discussionepubblica.ideascale.com). More recently, in December 2012, Nicola Zingaretti, (successful) candidate President of the Lazio Region for the left-coalition, also used Ideascale to collect citizens' ideas for articulating his government plan (immagina.ideascale.com).

- Interest on **LiquidFeedback** (LQFB) has recently grown remarkably in Italy. Originally conceived and designed for proposition development and decision making within the German Pirate Party, it embeds a deliberative process through which proposals are not only voted, but supported, debated and written in a collaborative way; in case of alternative options, proposals can be chosen using the Schultze method, a revised version of the Condorcet's one [11]. LQFB provides a further innovative feature, the transitive proxy voting: participants can delegate (and then revoke) other members to make proposals and vote on their behalf in specific thematic areas and/or issues in which they are particularly keen on and trustworthy. The first Italian localization of LQFB is due to the Italian Pirate Party, but its widespread popularity on national media is related with its use by several local groups of the MoVimento 5 Stelle (5 Stars Movement, M5S in the following), the political movement created in 2009 by the comic actor Beppe Grillo through an intense use of the web and social network. A kind of indirect competition with the M5S stimulated curiosity and attention over this software. The first trial open to generic citizens took place in September 2012 in occasion of the Sicilian regional elections by a small party of the left coalition: the goal of "Libera Sicilia" was to collect citizen ideas for articulating its political program. Shortly later, the popular TV show "Servizio Pubblico" (Public Service) launched a much broader initiative, called "Liquid Party", but the goal of experimenting LQFB was not clear: was it to involve its audience in some editorial choice, or to gather proposals to submit to the Government through the show? More recently, Umberto Ambrosoli, candidate President of the Lombardy Region for the left-coalition, used LQFB pretty similarly to Zingaretti and "Libera Sicilia", i.e., to gather citizens ideas for articulating his government plan (proposte.ambrosolilombardia2013.it) [7].
- **Problems&Proposals** (P&P) is a tool within the openDCN e-participation platform (openDCN.org); it allows citizens to report the problems which affect the city (in general a territory) and propose solutions to

solve them. Other citizens can discuss problems and proposals in different ways: by simple (dis)agreement (thumbs up or down), by explicit support, or providing pro and cons arguments. P&P was used in occasion of the Milan municipal elections in Spring 2011, to set up the online space ComunaliMilano2011, now reachable at partecipami.it/CM2011/problemi-proposte: its outcomes are discussed in [6]. The same tools has been used in occasion of the Municipal election in Genoa in 2012 (ComunaliGenova2012.it) and in Camogli in 2013 (PattorPerCamogli.it). For the purpose of this paper, it is worth noting that in the first two cases the initiative was taken by the university (in the case of Milan through its operational branch, the RCM Foundation), to provide the city with a neutral public space for civic public dialogue; in the third one, the website is owned by a civic list which presents its candidate Mayor and managed, under a private contract, by the RCM Foundation.

- **BiPart** is a software developed to support participatory budgeting initiatives, a practice of public deliberation on budget issues introduced in Porto Alegre in 1989, and now spread in thousand of cities worldwide [12]. Recently, smaller municipalities and larger public bodies in Italy have promoted participatory budgeting for involving their citizenry in deciding how to allocate a more or less significant part of the budget. BiPart has been developed to provide these initiatives with an appropriate online support: it allows the collaborative identification of intervention priorities, the submission by individual or groups of citizens, of project proposals, and then calls citizens to choose which one(s) has to be implemented. It has been tested in the cities of Cascina, in the region of Tuscany, (cascina-partecipa.org) and Cernusco L. (Lombardy) and by the Province of Pesaro-Urbino (piucultura.org) in the center of Italy, for distributing the budget for cultural initiatives. In all these cases, the software is managed by the Centro Studi Democrazia Partecipativa (Center for Studies of Participatory Democracy), an independent association charged by the public body (the municipality or the province) to facilitate the process [13].

The above mentioned tools are all centered around the gathering of ideas, proposals, projects or solutions: all these terms are somehow synonyms but suggest a different role within a participatory process. "Ideas" can be used as the generic term as specific terms are more coherent with a specific tool: ideas in the case of Ideascale, proposals in LQFB and P&P, projects in BiPart. Figure 1 suggests that ideas can be collected as an undistinguished set, may be "colored" according to some classification criteria (e.g., in relation to relevant policy areas, such as transportation, health, education, etc.). These tools may have a different upstream and downstream covering: being related to problems or being input for a deliberation step which let some of them emerge from the bunch, make ideas

productive. The Figure also shows that the openDCN platform includes other tools to widen P&P extent: one allows submitted proposals to be selected through a *brainstorming* process. The *Agenda* tool combines different tools to support richer deliberative processes such as participatory budgeting or Agenda21. However, they are represented with a dotted line as they have never been tested in a real-life context.

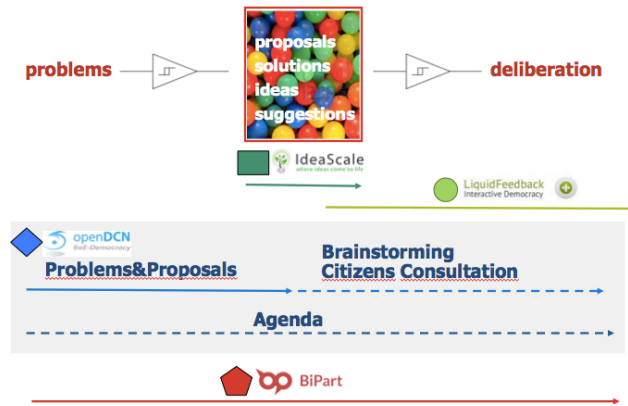


Figure 1. Tools for (productive) idea gathering.

THE TWO-DIMENSIONAL SPACE

To compare these tools, we could use the framework for the analysis of community technology proposed in [14]. It identifies four levels: configuration of technology, platforms, tools and features. We could therefore list a set of features each tool provides (e.g., make, comment, support, vote ideas; suggest, support, vote alternative ideas; delegate; etc.) and assess to which extent each tool provides each feature. However, this comparison does not help understanding the differences among different initiatives powered by the same tool. Actually, each single initiative consists of a specific configuration of a tool embedded in a given social structure [5], and takes place in a specific political scenario. It also fits to (and perhaps is the consequence of) a different democratic approach. As a result, participation differs from one initiative to another, disclosing unexpected social dynamics, such as ideas competition and lobbying strategies.

This variety makes it difficult to apply quantitative methods for comparing different initiatives and assessing participation outcomes in a quite rigorous way. Relevant data — the number of registered users (with respect to a target population), the number of active users (those who did specific actions including the reading activities that are anyhow relevant for participation), relationships between participants and relevant actions, etc. — are seldom available. And their comparative analysis, even when possible, would require resources, that are not always available in a crisis environment and time, which is also scarce in a turbulent context.

We felt the need of a more qualitative way to catch substantial differences among different initiatives powered by the same tool, and recognizing similarities among initiatives using different tools. We arrived to develop a framework which places each single initiative in a two-dimensional space, whose axes represent the “ownership” of the initiative and the “level” of citizen’ engagement.

The ownership concerns who promotes, and then “owns”, the online participation initiative. It is worth recalling that the ownership of the initiative usually induces the right to access the gathered data with administrator rights. This is a huge, often disregarded, power that should be charged to trusted bodies. From the above mentioned cases, we abstract the following possibilities:

- initiative promoted by a *political actor* for fostering *inside* participation, i.e., to involve its own members. This is for instance the case of the use of LQFB by the Pirate Party or by the M5S;
- initiative promoted by a *political actor* for fostering *outside* participation. Typical cases are the initiatives launched by candidates and their supporting parties or coalitions for involving citizens as electors;
- initiative promoted by *public bodies* to involve citizens in a more or less demanding, more or less structured, participation process;
- finally, the ownership can be upon a *trusted third party* acting as an intermediary between the citizenry and a political or institutional actors [2], [9]. In [5] we discussed the role that charities as My Society in the UK and the RCM Foundation in Italy play as guarantors of the mutual commitment between citizens and public bodies in online participation initiatives. However, it is worth mentioning that the need for a trusted third party recently arose in deliberation initiatives launched within the M5S itself.

The second dimension takes inspiration from the three levels — being informed, being heard, and taking part in decisions — identified in [4]. We disregard the first one, which is more pertaining to issues such as open access to public data, and refine the remaining as follows:

- **idea gathering:** citizens are involved as idea providers; the promoter commits to use citizens’ proposals as input in their own activities, e.g., policy definition;
- **consultation:** citizens gather and refine ideas, rate and select them; the promoter commits to provide feedback to selected ideas;
- **deliberation:** citizens gather, refine, rate and select ideas in a structured process which ends with an actual decision, e.g., funds allocation; the promoter commits to implement the decision.

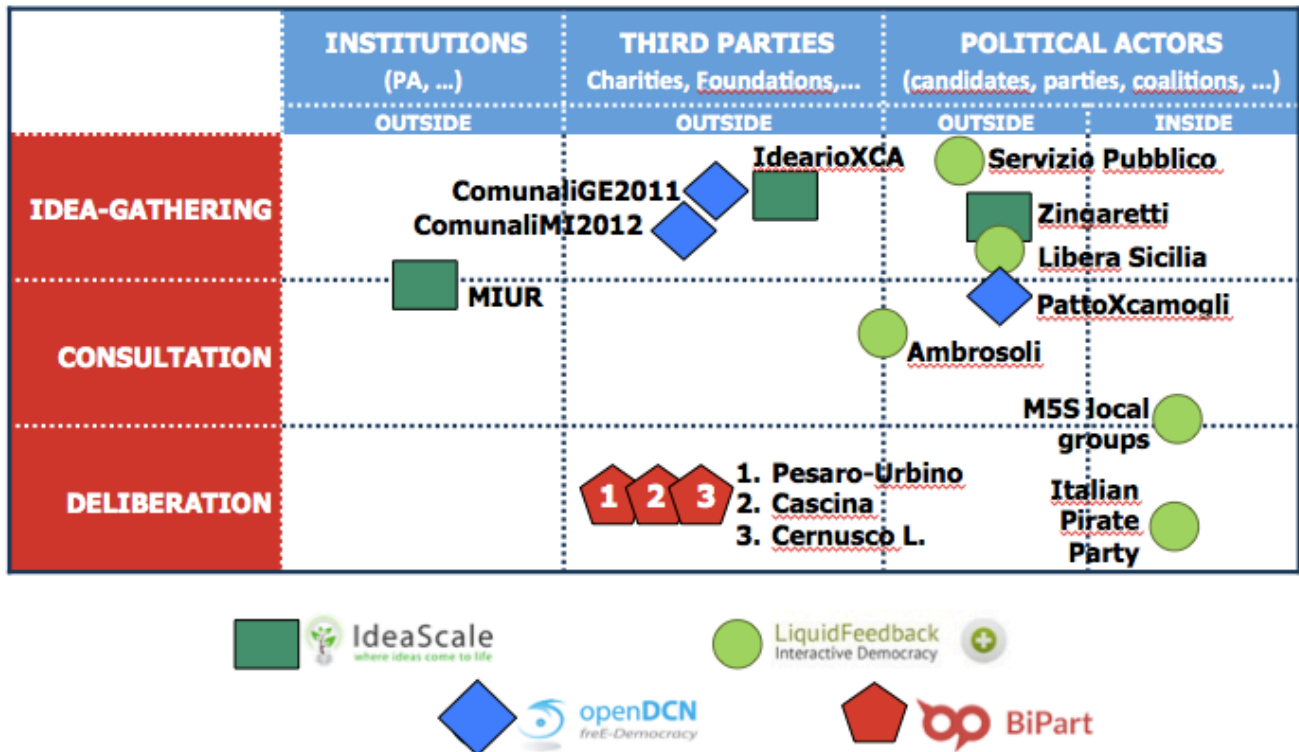


Figure 2: The two-dimensional space

Figure 2 shows the placement of the above mentioned initiatives in this two-dimensional space. Some examples should support its reading.

The consultation on the Principle of Internet was promoted by the Italian Ministry for University and Research (MIUR). It published a document presenting its vision, and asked citizens suggestions for improvement. The MIUR committed to include the most frequent and relevant ideas in a revised version of the document to be presented at the Internet Global Forum in Baku in November 2012. The structure of the document was used to organize idea gathering. We place this initiative in between idea gathering and consultation since three months after the ending of the consultation, and after the holding of the Baku meeting, the Ministry had not yet published the revised version of the document.

It was a more actual consultation the one performed by Umberto Ambrosoli, candidate President of the Lombardy Region for the left-coalition in the recent regional elections. He asked citizens to provide specific proposals in order to refine and detail his (already published) political program, whose organization in thematic areas was reflected into the LQFB structure in sections and areas. Despite the very short time of the campaign and its critical political context (Ambrosoli actually did not win the election), 25 of the 92 proposals, published after the selection through the LQFB

deliberative process got a feedback and were accepted as specification of the program. This is to say that the consultation commitment was at least partly fulfilled by the candidate. The similar initiatives launched by candidate Presidents in other regions (Zingaretti in Lazio and Libera Sicilia) were more likely to be just idea gathering since the commitment by the promoters was weaker and contributors did not get any public feedback,

By looking at the placement in the two-dimensional space of the initiatives powered by the same tool, at a glance Ideascale and BiPart seem to shape the character of the initiative. On the contrary, LQFB has been used in a variety of ways: the social structure build around the tool determines the participants' actual engagement. At one extreme, the Pirate Party adopts LQFB as its unique deliberative structure; at the other extreme, the staff of Servizio Pubblico assigned such a weak value to the proposals suggested and selected with LQFB, that it was reduced to a mere idea gathering tool.

This can be seen as a case of social shaping of technology [8]: tools "embed" a specific degree of participation, namely, the one represented in Fig.1, but the owner can significantly shape their use.

CONCLUSION

Participation is becoming a buzzword in the (Italian) political scene: to contrast the loss of legitimacy, governments and politicians, traditional parties and new social movements launch many initiatives to involve generic citizens and/or their rank and file. This chaotic but at the same time creative period solicits conceptual tools to drive people understanding of what is going on and to establish the ground for further assessment of these initiatives.

The proposed framework proved to be simple enough to be in the reach of different audiences: generic citizens, public officers, software developers. At the same time, it is rich enough to catch substantial differences among different initiatives powered by the same tool, and recognizing similarities among initiatives running different tools.

It supported people learning “by examples” and stimulated alive discussions that produced a richer understanding. It helps promoters in realizing “where” they want to place their initiative, and hopefully to understand that it is not just matter of opening a website “on the fly” (as many would like to do in these days), but requires some design attention and resource. Moreover, they could also understand why their initiatives were not as successful as the others were.

It helps computer professionals to learn the socio-political impact of their work: on the one hand, it may drive the choice of a tool appropriate to a certain participation process; on the other hand, it increases the awareness that the design of such websites is not only matter of choosing a software a tool, but involves the design of an online social structure rooted in a target offline social structure.

Concerning the choice of the appropriate tool, let us conclude with two more considerations:

- *usability and simplicity* are often used for driving the choice of a tool. However, Norman [10] points out that they should be considered in relation to the complexity of process to be supported. If the process is complex — as involving a large number of citizens in public consultation and deliberation is — the simplest tool is not necessarily the best tool. Indeed, if there is a clear rewarding of the effort done, people can be available to make some effort to use more complex, but more adequate, tools. The outcomes of the Umberto Ambrosoli’s experience are quite clear in this respect [7].
- *openness and transparency* are of fundamental relevance, because all these initiatives have impact on the real world socio-political context. This is true not only when public bodies are involved, but also when consultation and deliberation occur within a party or a political movement. Openness applies to: the source code; the collected data; the access statistics of each single initiative; and to the transparency of the socio-technical structure which manages it as well.

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