Choosing the Right Medium for Municipal eParticipation Based on Stakeholder Expectations

Marius Rohde Johannessen, Leif Skiftenes Flak, and Øystein Sæbø

University of Agder, Department of Information Systems
Service Box 422, 4604 Kristiansand, Norway

Abstract. This paper examines the expectations and communication needs of relevant stakeholder groups for municipal eParticipation in a small Norwegian municipality. We identified relevant stakeholder groups with the municipality, and asked them about their communication preferences through a combined Delphi study and survey approach. The findings show that information about local issues, information about issues relevant for the individual stakeholder, and dialogue on business' needs and employment are the three most important communication needs. E-mail and the municipal web site are the two preferred modes of communication, with social media ranking third. For dialogue and participation, a face to face meeting is the preferred mode of communication. Our findings show that effective municipal communication requires a number of different media, depending on what is being communicated. We conclude by outlining a framework for media choice in eParticipation.

Keywords: eParticipation, stakeholder theory, social media, media choice.

1   Introduction

Digital media are increasingly used by governments and political parties in their communication with citizens, business and organisations. It has been claimed that digital media "are set to transform political structures and organisations, political campaigning, lobbying strategies and voting patterns" [1]. In Norway, the vision for digital communication is to be among the best in the world on digital citizen dialogue, digital services and efficient eGovernment [2]. Politics as a field is becoming more and more dependent on good media and communication skills [3], but information overload and filtering problems presents government with massive challenges related to media choice [4], and there is often a gap between government choice and citizen expectations [5].

Deliberation in various digital media can increase the political sophistication of citizens [6], and online participation extends the political centre by including more citizens, but may also increase the distance between the ones in the centre and those in the periphery [7], widening the gap between those who are "inside" and "outside" of the public debate. Participants in political deliberation initiatives are rarely representative of the general population, but organising deliberation programs in different settings such as online surveys and discussions, face to face meetings or informal dinners could include citizens with more diverse backgrounds [8]. The fact that today's government is technocratic and relies ever more on expert reports and

opinion further alienates the average citizen, who feels s/he has nothing to contribute to a debate where the focus is on consultancy reports and numbers [9].

To include more citizens in the decision making process, governments have attempted to implement various participatory techniques, but these are often biased towards the socio-cultural background of government officials, and leaves little space for the actual needs of citizens [9]. Thus, our first aim is to discover what various citizen groups actually want to talk to government about, and through which medium they prefer to communicate. We have focused on the municipal level, as this is where the diversity of citizen interaction is largest in Norwegian government.

While political parties have embraced technology, they are yet to embrace the social concepts underlying the technology [10]. A recent study defines both the social and technical concepts of technology for research, and calls for practical applications of the theoretical framework [11]. This leads us to our second objective, which is to aid practitioners in government who are uncertain about which medium they should use for various eParticipation efforts. Thus, our research questions for this study are:

1: Who are the stakeholders in eParticipation at the municipal level?
2: What are their communication needs and media preferences?
3: How can practitioners choose media for various types of communication?

To answer these questions, we conducted a Delphi study of the various citizen stakeholder groups, and distributed a survey to capture the opinions of stakeholders who did not want to take part in the Delphi study. Finally, based on the findings from the Delphi study and survey we applied the theoretical framework of Johannessen and Munkvold [11], and synthesised several existing frameworks for technology choice and communication to create a tool that could help practitioners in government in choosing the right technologies for different communication needs.

2   Theoretical Premises: Technology Evaluation through Genres

While our study identifies citizen preferences for eParticipation, there is still the need to transfer this knowledge to governments' technological choice so that government can decide which tools to use for which purpose. Existing literature has several examples of this, but mostly focuses on either communication or technology. A synthesis between these studies could lead us towards a more holistic solution.

The eParticipation tool assessment [12] combines the analysis of technical functionality with several other factors such as the level of participation it can address and the stages in the decision making process that are supported. Existing frameworks address the technological requirements of eParticipation well, but it is made from the perspective of government, and does not take into account the varying needs of different citizen groups, or the socio-technical nature of technology. However, to succeed, it is important to take citizens' needs into account [13], and to address technology from a socio-technical perspective [11].

To extend the framework to include the socio-technical perspective so it can more easily be used to identify the communication needs of citizens, we used elements from genre theory. A genre is defined as "a typified communicative action which is invoked in response to a recurring situation" [14]. Genres that are routinely enacted,

such as questions to politicians, reports on potholes or specific types of input to the decision making process can be seen as a genre repertoire [15] of eParticipation. Genres are identified through similar form and function [14], as well as technical functionality [16], and can be analysed through the 5W1H framework, where you ask *Why* are we communicating, *What* is the content , *Who* are the participants, *Where* should the communication take place, *When* and *How* should we communicate. The framework helps uncover how and when the genre is enacted, in what situations it is used, who the participants are and why the genre is used [17]. Genre theory has been used in several previous studies of eParticipation [18-21].

There are some examples of genre based methods for systems planning and development in government. Päivärinta et.al. [22] present a method for Information Systems Planning based on genre theory, where the communication genres are the deciding factor for the technological choice. The framework includes a stakeholder analysis of who the producer and the user of the information is, as well as genre and metadata analyses. Others have built upon this framework to create a method for development of eGovernment portals, where the genre perspective is extended through the inclusion of life-events in the planning stage [23]. In another example, genre theory have been used to help structure and plan discussion forums for local eParticipation through the 5W1H method [18].

While both the assessment tools and the genre approaches are good, none of them address both the technological and communicative aspects of eParticipation. Combining the two into a genre *and* technological choice framework could aid practitioners in choosing the appropriate media for different eParticipation activities. In section five, we begin to sketch the outlines of such a framework, which combines the genre and technology analyses referenced in this section.

3   Research Method

The findings reported in this paper are part of an on-going collaboration between the university and a municipality in southern Norway. The municipality has 8000 inhabitants, and relies heavily on agriculture. Three large fjords have led to a scattered population, with about half of the inhabitants living in the centre, and the rest spread out across the municipality.

As our objective was both to identify stakeholder groups and their preferences, we chose multiple research methods. By a multiple approach different aspects of reality may be explored to gain richer understanding of the research topics investigated [24]. Our first objective was to identify relevant stakeholder groups through a stakeholder analysis. Stakeholder theory was originally a set of tools and methods to identify relevant stakeholders [25], and stakeholder theory has been adapted to the eGovernment field [26, 27]. Our stakeholder analysis was conducted in collaboration with politicians and government officials in the municipality, and we came up with a total of 23 local stakeholder groups. Stakeholders with similar characteristics were then grouped into 10 panels for the Delphi study, which provided us with a list of stakeholders from politics, government administration and civil society.

Data collection took place between April and November 2011. We collected our data using the Delphi method [28, 29]. The Delphi method is well suited for studies

where "judgmental information is indispensable", and has been used for concept and framework development in Information Systems studies [28] and public policy development [30]. The method consists of three phases: Brainstorming of issues, consolidation, where the list is narrowed down, and finally the ranking phase, where the participants attempt to reach consensus on which of the identified issues are most important [28, 29]. The respondents were asked to provide a qualitative answer to the question *what do you want to communicate with government about, and which media would you prefer to use?* In addition, there was a short text explaining the purpose of the study.

The municipality recruited participants based on our stakeholder analysis, and these were invited to take part in the Delphi survey. The survey was distributed to 80 participants, of which 22 chose to participate. In addition to this, we distributed a regular survey to the municipality's inhabitants, which resulted in 36 additional respondents.

We were not able to reach consensus, as the participants lost interest in the study after the first round of ranking. This is a common problem with the Delphi method, but fortunately the amount of data from initial rounds is often rich enough that we can draw some conclusions, as shown by Päivärinta & Dertz [31]. In our case, both the brainstorming and first ranking phases provided insights into the communication preferences for the different stakeholder groups, as well as their preferred communication technologies for each form of communication.

The brainstorming phase identified 31 different communication categories, which were narrowed down to ten in the consolidation phase. Eight of these were ranked by more than 50 per cent of the participants, and thus considered to be at least moderately important for a majority of the respondents. The survey data confirmed these as the most important issues. Finally, we asked the respondents to report which communication technology they preferred for each of the communication categories, and found that more than 70 per cent prefer some form of digital communication.

Treating the communication categories as genres of communication [14], we combined the technological framework of Tambouris et. al. [12] and the genre based frameworks [18, 22, 23] to create an overview of which technologies are suited to which communication genre.

4   Results

4.1   Who Are the Stakeholders?

Stakeholder groups were identified in collaboration with representatives from the municipality. The objective was to include every government and civil society group that has a need to communicate with the municipality.

In eGovernment we usually discuss three main stakeholder groups: Politicians, administration and the civil society [32]. For the municipality, it was important to solicit opinions from these as separate stakeholders. The relation between politicians and the administration was mentioned as very important, due to the different responsibilities of these groups.

Defining civil society stakeholder groups is more difficult, as they can be divided in several ways, such as age, education, ethnicity, business owners and associations.

We attempted to include as many groups as possible, and came up with eight civil society stakeholders: Business, Service users, associations, expats, immigrants, youth, senior citizens and finally a group for the "silent majority" of citizens with no organizational membership. The identified stakeholder groups are listed in Table 1.

Table 1. Municipal stakeholder groups

Sphere		Stakeholder groups
Political		Municipal executive board
Government		Administration officials from city hall
Administration		Municipal employees from health and education
Civil Society	Business	Business association, Tourism, Primary industry
	Organizations/	Service users: PTA, Health care patients
	citizen groups	Associations: Residents, religious groups, sports
		Expats
		Immigrants and new residents
		Youth (15-25 years old)
		Senior citizens (65+)
		Citizens with no organizational attachment

4.2   What Are the Communication Needs?

The reported communication needs from the initial brainstorming session are listed in table 2. It is worth noticing that some of the reported needs are available today if you know what you are looking for, but these are reported to be either hard to find, of poor quality, or in a language which is not easily understood by ordinary citizens.

Table 2. Communication needs

Communication needs	Description
Report problems	Report problems with physical infrastructure
Information: Nature	Information about local areas for hiking and fishing
Tourist information	Information about what happens, where to sleep and what to do
Municipal news	News about what happens in the municipality
Website links	Links to local web sites
Planning information	Information on construction, road works
Inform on political decisions	Information about decisions made by the municipal council
Debate urban planning	Create a forum for debate
Citizen surveys	Conduct surveys on big and important issues
Feedback	Receive feedback from municipality after making contact
Referral to laws	case correspondence from the municipality should include references to relevant law
After hours contact	The municipality should be available after 4PM
Accessible information	Policy documents are difficult to understand, and should be made more accessible to ordinary citizens.
Geographic information	Citizens should be informed on issues in their neighbourhood.
Rapid feedback	When contacting the municipality, receive feedback and case status.
Comment services	Comment and provide feedback on municipal services

Table 2. (*Continued*)

Urban planning dialogue	Dialogue between business and municipality
Information on business services	Information on services for business
Dialogue on land use	Dialogue between business and municipality
Dialogue on the harbour	Dialogue between business and municipality
Dialogue on apprentice recruitment	Dialogue between business and municipality
Dialogue with immigrants	Establish a forum for politicians, locals and immigrants to meet
Information: geriatric	Information about plans to cope with an aging population
Information: the church	Information about religious activities
Information: political objectives	Information about the long term ideas and thoughts of politicians
Information flow politicians/administration	Introduce routines for information flow between administration and politicians
Discussion forum	Create a forum for discussion on long-term political issues.
Electronic case handling	Case documents digitized for easier access
Information: services	Inform citizens about the municipality's services.
Information: Courses	Inform citizens about available short educational courses.
Patient evaluation	Patients in health care should be able to evaluate their treatment

The 31 communication needs of the initial brainstorming were reduced to ten in the consolidation phase, and the consolidated list was presented to and approved by the participants. The ten remaining factors were grouped in the categories *information dissemination*, *public services* and *public dialogue*, as the qualitative data from the first phase revealed that these were the three main concerns for the participants.

Table 3. Consolidated list of communication needs, grouped by category

Information dissemination	Public services	Dialogue
Generic information	Service dialogue	Forum for debate
Information tailored to individual needs	Evaluation of existing services	Business dialogue
Local information	Report problems with services	Municipal surveys
	Report problems with infrastructure	

Table 4 shows the communication needs that were important to the different stakeholder groups. We were not able to solicit answers from all of the civil society groups identified by our stakeholder analysis. Hence, some of the groups from table 1 are excluded from table 4. None of the stakeholder groups ranked *report problems with services* as important. *Tailored* and *local information* are important to almost all of the stakeholder groups, and the qualitative data shows that these are even more important than the table suggests:

"*Calling them does not work at all. It would be a lot more efficient if there was one person responsible for one area. We are located on an island where it can take one year for a light bulb to be changed, just because the right people aren't told about the problem*" (Associations respondent 1).

Except for the administration, all the stakeholder groups wanted to report problems with the physical infrastructure, such as potholes, missing streetlights, poor road maintenance in winter etc. Again, this is a very important issue also in the qualitative

data set from the brainstorming phase: "*My main communication need is to comment on municipal services such as* [problems with] *garbage disposal and snow clearing*" (Associations respondent 5).

Table 4. Stakeholder groups' communication needs

	Adm.	Politicians	Seniors	Business	Youth	Associations
Generic information		X		X	X	X
Local information	X	X	X		X	X
Tailored information	X	X	X	X	X	X
Service dialogue	X	X			X	X
Evaluation of services	X					
Report problems w/infrastructure		X	X	X	X	X
Forum for debate	X	X	X			X
Business dialogue	X	X	X	X		X
Municipal surveys				X		X

Respondents were asked to pick the most important issues, and to rank them from least to most important. Table 5 shows how many of the participants who included each item in their list of most important issues. While democratic dialogue is an important issue for eParticipation, a majority of our respondents call for information tailored to individual needs, dialogue on the needs of business, a way to report problems with the physical infrastructure or information about things happening in their local area, such as planned construction and power outages. The ranking confirms these as the most important issues.

Table 5. Ranking of communication needs, all stakeholders

Communication need	Percentage
Tailored information	100.0%
Business dialogue	77%
Report problems with physical infrastructure	69%
Local information	62%
Generic information	46%
Service dialogue	46%
Forum for debate	31%
Evaluation of services	15%
Municipal surveys	15%

4.3 How Can Practitioners Choose Media for Various Types of Communication?

In addition to asking about the communication needs of the stakeholder groups, we also asked them which communication media they preferred to use for each category. The findings are summarized in table 6. There were no notable differences between the stakeholder groups' preferences, so we do not report the results of the individual groups. The participants were able to choose more than one media preference for each communication need. Based on the input from the brainstorming phase, we grouped the media preferences into six categories. Four based on technology, and two physical contact points.

Internet, as in the municipality's web site or other web sites is by far the most popular medium overall, along with e-mail whereas social media and mobile phones are less popular. Age does not seem to play an important role as the distribution between age groups is fairly similar. In terms of dialogue, social media scored higher, which is consistent with the idea of social media as a two-way medium, and an indication that governments' social media presence should include some form of feedback option. Another interesting observation is that public meetings also received a high score. This indicates that, at least in small communities, physical contact is deemed important for dialogue. Even so, the trend is clear. In most cases, some form of digital communication is the preferred option, while physical contact is still in some cases seen as important.

Table 6. Media preference for each communication category

Preferred medium	Percentage for each communication need								
	Generic information	Local information	Tailored information	Service dialogue	Evaluation of services	Report problems w/infrastructure	Forum for debate	Business dialogue	Municipal surveys
E-mail	66	60	75	47	47	74	39	38	63
Internet	78	62	58	56	61	53	61	62	69
Social media	22	24	14	22	17	15	42	44	20
Mobile devices	16	19	25	14	9	35	6	18	14
Service bureau	8	16	14	14	12	32	12	18	6
Public meetings	8	5	6	19	12	6	46	41	9

5   Discussion: Towards a Framework for Media Choice

Knowing the communication needs and media preferences of the stakeholder groups in our case municipality, we are now able to move on towards the next phase, choosing the appropriate technologies for each communication need. The reported communication needs are translated into genres in our proposed framework, based on the phases from [22] and expanded with the technological framework [12].

Identify stakeholders and producers and users of information. A stakeholder analysis, such as the one presented in table 1, tells us who should participate in the communication. The next step is to identify producers and users of information (PUI entities), so that we know who should initiate and who should respond. See [22] for more on PUI entities.

Identify communication genres. For eParticipation, the first step has too often been based on the needs of government. Our identification of the communication needs of various external and internal stakeholder groups (tables 2-5), allows us to create genres that are grounded in citizen and other stakeholder needs. Identifying genres based on these communication needs can be done through the 5W1H method, as shown by [18]. *Who/m* is excluded from 5W1H, as it is addressed in the stakeholder analysis.

Define and gather metadata about the various genres. This should be done in collaboration with the stakeholders. Typical metadata varies depending on the type of communication, but could include preferred medium (see table 6), response time, reference number, and for government, issues such as archiving and access might also be necessary for compliance. This step overlaps with the technological analysis. These steps are shown in Table 7, with an example of a finished analysis in Table 8.

Table 7. Genre analysis

Genre :	[name]	
Stakeholders	Producers	Who is the one producing information/ the sender
	Users	Who is the receiver of information?
Genre properties	Why	What is the purpose and expected outcome of the genre?
	What	What is the information content and level of participation addressed?
	When	In what time-period, and where in the decision making process should the genre be enacted?
	Where	What is the reported preferred technology for the genre?
	How	What are the technological needs, how should the genre be produced? What activities are involved?
Genre metadata	Meta 1	Metadata is collected through user input
	Meta 2	Metadata can also be related to compliance issues such as archiving laws

Table 8. Example of a genre analysis

Genre :	**Report problems with infrastructure**	
Stakeholders	Producers	Citizen group members, business
	Users	Government administration (road and transportation office)
Genre properties	Why	Report issues such as potholes, broken streetlights, so they can be fixed. Expected outcomes: civic engagement
	What	Geographic location, type of issue, other relevant information. Level of participation: collaboration
	When	On-going when problems are observed. Stage in decision making process: Monitoring
	Where	e-mail to municipality, internet (municipal web site), mobile
	How	Web-site front end where information is stored in Database. Accessible through mobile app + mobile-friendly municipal web site. Activities: consultation.
metadata	Case no	Generate case number for each report
	Feedback	Provide feedback when problem is fixed. Linked to case number.

Analyse available technologies. The last step is shown in Table 9, with an example analysis in Table 10. Based on Tambouris et.al. [12], we analysed the communication media the stakeholders prefer to use for the specific genre. The technology evaluation includes the technical functionality, the level of participation and stage in decision

making process (based on OECD recommendations) the medium can accommodate, and actors. Activities and outcomes are other important factors in eParticipation [33], and these have been added to the original technological analysis to provide a more holistic picture. While our example includes only one technology, in most cases there would probably be many suitable systems, consistent with a multichannel strategy [5].

Table 9. Technology evaluation

Name of medium	<insert name of medium>
Functionality	Technical functionality, such as forms, video, feedback options
Level of participation	Information/two-way consultation/involvement in the political process/collaboration/power transfer to citizens
Stage in decision making process	Agenda setting, Analysis, policy creation, Implementation, Monitoring
Actors	Who has access to the technology?
Activities	Voting, discourse form, decision making, activism, consultation, petitions
Expected outcomes	Civic engagement, deliberative effects, democratic effects

Table 10. Example of a finished technology evaluation table

Name of medium	Facebook
Functionality	Personalised front page, Profiles, Groups, Networks, "Wall" for message posting, Photo uploads, Notes/links, status updates, events, Video, Chat, 3rd party applications, internal private messaging system, Search, Sharing of content, Mobile app for smartphones.
Level of participation	Information, two-way consultation collaboration
Stage in decision making process	Agenda setting, Analysis
Actors	Everyone with a Facebook account. Requires participants to register, may exclude privacy conscious people
Activities	Information, activism, consultation, petitions
Expected outcomes	Civic engagement

Based on tables 8 and 10, our example genre and example technology are not well-matched if the reported metadata item "case number" is seen as very important. Using a Facebook page or group would not generate case numbers, does not allow reported cases to be stored in a database, and privacy issues related to ownership of data could also be an obstacle for this particular genre. This short example shows the importance of addressing both the technology and the users' preferences for communication before starting on an eParticipation project, and we believe our framework could serve as a guide in this sense.

6   Limitations and Future Research

While this study provides insights into the communication needs and media preferences of various stakeholder groups, there are some limitations that need to be addressed. As we were not able to reach consensus in the Delphi study, we were unable to create a definite list of communication needs to be addressed. However, we were still able to identify some needs, and through the survey that was distributed

later, we also got data to verify the findings from the Delphi study. Our findings should however be read mainly as qualitative and interpretive, and within the contextual limitations of a small Norwegian municipality, rather than quantitative.

Our combination of the eParticipation technology framework and genre frameworks is mainly based on theory and inspired by the findings on communication preferences. A logical next step in this research would be to verify the framework through testing it in government. Specifically, validation of a common list of communication needs and the appropriate technology to support each communication need is considered to be an important contribution to further practical development.

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