SOCIAL BROKERS: LOOKING FOR NEW PLAYERS TO SUPPORT BOTH E-SERVICES AND E-PARTICIPATION?

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Abstract

The use rate of e-services and also of e-government services is not satisfactory. At least in Italy, even though important investments have been dedicated to the modernization of public administrations, traditional ways to interact with them continue to prevail. Nevertheless there are exceptions. The Tax Agency, for example, accepts only tax returns submitted on-line. How is this possible? The role of mediators, here defined as social brokers, is fundamental in this regard. Professional accountants, tax assistance centres, trade associations, banks etc. are the main protagonists of this mediation. Therefore, this draft paper focuses on the characteristics of these mediators. For this proposal, users are considered as members of a network of social relationships rather than as singular individuals. Access points (Giddens, 1990) and trust spreaders (Mutti, 1998) can be seen as nodes of these networks because of their capability to bridge and put into context isolated realities. Trade and cultural associations, sport clubs, charities and parishes can be observed using this perspective and political parties and trade unions are typical examples of this phenomenon.

The main objective of this draft paper is to map access points and trust spreaders of a specific territory in order to detect the different forms in which community interactions take place, to identify those entities that support citizens' opportunities to meet and communicate. This knowledge can help both the adoption of e-participation tools and the use of e-government services as well. In fact, these points can transform themselves into places or one-stop-shops to access electronic services.

1 INTRODUCTION

This research study is composed by three main parts. The first part (Chapter 2 and Chapter 3) is dedicated to the foundations of social research (ontology and epistemology) with the intention emphasize the role of ontology as instrument for throwing new light on what is object of investigation. Particularly, it is supposed that further work is required in order to see if new perspectives of reality will be beneficial to the status of social research. In this regard, it has been suggested a research strategy that try to look upon the role of the stream of life as a factor for enriching the understanding of a specific object of research. This research strategy will be applied for investigating two e-participation projects (see Chapter 7).

The second chapter continuous the discourse on theoretical approaches to research activity and particularly turned to a cognitive approach and to a phenomenological approach. The objective, here, is to see how these two different perspectives succeed to investigate both technology in general and information technology in particular. Suggestions for IT design have been drawn on the basis of this analysis.

After the introductory part in which it has been dealt with the foundations of social research and the study of technology and mainly information technology, let's move to the core of the present work (second part). The concept of social broker (Chapter 4) has been introduced and, in order to examine it more in detail, the concept of access point (Giddens, 1990), trust spreaders (Mutti, 1998), trustworthy clues (Bacharach and Gambetta, 2001), and institutional carriers (Scott, 2001) have been taken into consideration. These series of concepts seem able to address the question to map civil society networks. This mapping is based on node identification that constitutes a point of reference (local branches of political parties or trade unions but also in cultural, voluntary, trade associations, sport clubs, charities, and parishes) for citizens and in this way an apt solution for introducing and spreading both e-participation and e-services applications. The case of telecentres in Latin America and Asia are seen as examples in this regard and it arouses the question if developing countries can be also an example to follow with interest.

The third part focuses, at first (Chapter 5), on e-filing systems in three Italian public bodies (The Tax Agency, the National Institute of Social Insurance and the Chambers of Commerce). These cases gave the opportunity to examine the role of social brokers for supporting the diffusion of electronic means. Data collected shows, rather clearly, that the large part of electronic submissions of tax returns to the Tax Agency or balance sheet to Chambers of Commerce are not performed directly by citizens and companies by intermediaries that share the characteristics of social brokers. On the other, citizens and companies do not tend to use these systems autonomously.

It is presumed that, for they inherent characteristics, social brokers can be beneficial for the development of e-participation as well. In this proposal, chapter 6 has been dedicated to questioning participation and through which modalities it has been experienced after the advent of current democracies. All of this leads to the final chapter in which two e-participation projects have been examined. Differently from the public bodies cases, here, social brokers do not play a relevant role and the use of these electronic applications are promoted addressing directly citizens. These experiments showed positive aspects as far as it concerned interventions elaborated on issues at stake. Nevertheless, data related to use rate shows rather clearly an unsatisfactory level of participation.

Conclusions suggest that turning to social brokers as entities for mediating between citizens and public administrations can be beneficial for the development both of participation and e-participation.

1.1   From Government to e-government

Technology brings about profound capabilities for the development of mankind – and it has always been this way. The impossible becomes possible because of innovations in technology. The printing press, the internal-combustion engine, electricity and, more recently, information technology are just few examples of innovations that have significantly contributed to the development of mankind. Technological innovations, particularly in information technology and the internet have overcome many of the constraints that have impacted our working lives in terms of such criteria as: time, place, actor and constellation (Normann, 2001). Such as, when and where things can be done, who does these things and with whom they can be done. Concerning the reconfiguration of social and economic activities, it is easy to guess the range of opportunities that this kind of technology can put forward. Consolidated processes, procedures, routines can be unbundled. Taking apart those activities which relate to time, place, actor and constellation constitutes a fundamental phenomenon which is enabled by information technology. But this technology characterizes itself not only for the unbundling aspects but also for the rebundling ones. What was difficult to connect because of distance, financial resources, lack of communication etc. can be refixed in several solutions.

The two phenomena of unbundling and rebundling, introduces the question of e-services. E-services can be seen as the final result of unbundling and rebundling. Services provided in traditional ways are completely reshaped because of information technology. The internet allows us to have access to a series of services on-line from our desktop. The constraints of space and time are overcome.

To be more accurate, e-services can be subdivided into two big families: e-commerce and e-government. Even though the meaning of these two terms is quite broad, the objective here is to distinguish those e-services which relate to the private circle and those e-services which relate to the public circle. Of course, e-government is the term used to represent e-services in the public circle and, e-filing and e-participation firmly resides in this circle.

Nevertheless, e-government is a part of government. In simple terms, government can be seen as the sum of public bodies in charge of: 1) providing services to citizens and companies; 2) planning and policy implementation and 3) organizing procedures and human resources in order to put into practice points 1) and 2) (Ciborra, 1993). However, this definition does not take into consideration the fact that new actors are involved in the management of public goods. The term governance (Kooiman, 1999; UNDP, 1997) is used to represent a situation whereby both planning and policy implementation, on the one hand, and service provision, on the other hand, pursue an active role in non public actors. The so-called public-private partnerships serve as examples in this proposal.

Two case studies lead us to investigate modalities that have characterized the governance of e- filing and e-participation systems: the Italian Tax Agency and Partecipa.Net.

There are several reasons for the decision to focus on e-filing in the Italian Tax Agency. First of all, this practice has involved millions of users, both normal citizens and companies. Secondly, documents and long statistical time series relating to the introduction of this application are now available rendering possible an historical reconstruction of the different steps that have led to its complete adoption. Finally, the causes which have enabled the introduction of an important innovation such as the e-filing system were called into question, especially when considering the fact that typical public administrations like the Tax Agency are not normally defined as being innovative. Indeed, they are characterized by the rules, procedures and hierarchies which hamper both the redeployment of labour and organizational interventions.

In Italy, the diffusion of e-democracy is strictly related to a public advice of the Ministry for Technological Innovation that co-funded 56 projects in this field all over Italy and Partecipa.net of the Emilia Romagna has been one of them. Partecipa.net is essentially a methodological and technological kit. These instruments are not dedicated to a specific field of social and political participation but they can be implemented in different contexts. For instance, at an experimental stage, Partecipa.net has

been introduced for the design of new building areas involving citizens and associations, for the definition of the different items of a municipal budget taking into consideration citizens' opinions and for polling high school students on their own city planning.

1.2 The proliferation of the internet in Italy

In order to examine the difficulties for a country such as Italy to introduce systems like e-participation and e-filing, it is useful to include data to outline the scale of internet use among citizens.

Citizens and in particular families have been the object of a specific survey (ISTAT, 2006). Despite 46.1% of families owning a personal computer, only 35.6% are connected to the internet and more than half of families have a narrowband connection (dial-up and Isdn). The same survey points out that more than 60% of families have no connection to the internet, almost 40% of them consider it to be redundant or of no interest. Furthermore, 30% do not have a sufficient digital literacy, 12% have access from alternative sources, and 9% judge this service too expensive. The remainder relate to issues of disability, privacy and dangerous content.

Despite this data, in 2006, 98% of the population who lived in urban areas (more than 500 inhabitants per km square) had broadband connection (DSL, cable and fibre optic) available but this percentage rose to 84% in suburban areas (from 100 to 500 inhabitants per km square) and to only 46% in rural areas (less than 100 inhabitants per km square). Data at a national level is 88% (Osservatorio Banda Larga – Between, 2006). This situation shows a significant gap between accessing a broadband connection and its actual use. Of course, the use of e-filing and e-participation systems is affected by various circumstances, for example the exchange of document greatly benefits from the availability of a broadband connection. Further data confirms this fact. In 2006, if we consider people who had access to the internet, at least once in a period of three months, 38,8% of them required information from a public administration Website. 27,2% downloaded forms and only 13,3% had not only downloaded forms but had also sent them back electronically (ISTAT, 2006). Regarding the reasons for preventing citizens taking advantage of e-government services, more than half of them preferred to have a relationship in-person with public administrations. Indeed, about 17% maintained that the range of services provided was insufficient and not user-friendly. A similar percentage worried about security and privacy issues, 14.9% considered services not user-friendly and only 3.1% mentioned the cost question to have access to e-government services (ISTAT, 2006).

The scenario outlined by this survey illustrates the series of factors that thwart the proliferation of e-government systems among citizens. In particular, it emerges that it is not only a technical problem related to the quality of communication infrastructures or the inadequacies of public administration Websites, but also a problem that involves several factors, such as the level of digital literacy, habits and established practices and how they interact with local governments, and questions of security and privacy.

Data related specifically to the use of e-participation systems are not available. However, significant insights can be collated which relate to the use of more general e-government services that, in Italy, at least, is unsatisfactory. Therefore, it is possible to presume that the use of particular systems such as e-participation will be equally unsatisfactory once they have been widely introduced throughout the country. The reasons for other e-government systems are, presumably, valid even in this case and it is not possible to exclude their accentuation due to the characteristics of a social and political participation via electronic means.

1.3 "Good governance" and e-government

To define governance as "good governance" (UNDP, 1997) is particularly useful for the purpose of this work, as it underlines the role played by an environment in which the social, political and economic priorities are shared to a large extent by that of society.

The focus, now, is to see how the introduction of information and communication technology (ICT) has modified this discourse. In other words, has the e-government phenomenon been influenced by new forms of governance and by "good governance"?

Focusing on governance and mainly on "good governance" implies a diverse approach for developing e-government. In this case, public administration is just one player, albeit the most important one, to the introduction of ICT and the managerial perspective is integrated by other perspectives that take into consideration such elements as legitimacy, accountability, justice and participation.

This new trend has emerged in recent years, and issues raised by "good governance" have been objects of interest in the field of e-government. In particular, the introduction of ICT has been considered promising for improving the exercise of democratic processes and political participation. However, it seems to view citizens as indistinct subjects, and offers them a tool with which to have access to e-government services or to participate in social and political activities. There is the impression that the main issue is to design devices which are able to support participation or service provision and that citizens will naturally take advantage of them. Nevertheless, this is not always the case. The potential of ICT to favour these activities is unquestionable. Nevertheless, mainly participation is organized primarily in a collective way and not by individuals. Political parties and trade unions are the typical examples of organizations through which participation takes place in the political arena. From this perspective, the objective is to consider citizens as members of a network of social relationships rather than as individuals. This requires seeing citizens as potential players not only in organizations like political parties or trade unions but also in cultural, voluntary ,trade associations, sport clubs, charities, and parishes etc. In this way, the focus shifts from citizens towards organizations and institutions which give form to the so called civil society.

2 MAPPING THE NETWORK OF CIVIL SOCIETY

The objective is to see how the social and political life of a specific territory is organized. In other words, to detect the different forms through which community activities take place identifying those entities which citizens use to meet and interact. Entities are places that represent a point of reference for citizens and are considered appropriated for pressing social needs, for example. Therefore, the focus is to map out such places, to outline the crossings that constitute the backbone of the social and political life of a specific community.

At the basis of this mapping process there is the idea that these entities can act as mediators between citizens and social, political and administrative systems. So, it is necessary, now, to outline these mediators and their characteristics. Boissevain's work (1974) is helpful in this proposal. Mediators do not have at their disposal first order resources (land, funds, specialized knowledge etc.) but second order resources (strategic contacts with people who control first order resources). They are social brokers and as such are experts in networking. They bridge the gaps in relationships between people, groups, structures and even cultures favouring the exchanges of information and services among them. Social brokers are points of reference for a specific network because of several factors such as expertise, knowledge, and charismatic influence but also fortuitous circumstances. For example, they exist in places where people stop, talk, pass on information and meet regularly. In this respect, café-owners are a good example.

Even though the availability of first order resources is not crucial, this contributes to determining a power position that facilitates brokers' operations. Reputation is another factor that characterizes social brokers. It takes time to acquire this status and it is based on continuous effort to act in a reliable, credible, trustworthy and responsible way.

A social broker can be an individual but also a supra-individual entity (group or organization) and three main kinds can be identified: 'advisor', 'guarantor' and 'entrepreneur' (Coleman, 1990). Actually, Coleman does not refer specifically to social brokers but to intermediaries in trust. Nevertheless, an overlapping of meanings between these two concepts is significant and this

classification can be considered valid, even for investigating social brokers. The 'advisor' bases its mediation on judgment. That is to say, mediation takes place because the judgment of a third part is sufficient for establishing a relationship between the two separated parts. In the case of the 'guarantor', the object of mediation between these two separated parts is not related to each other, but it is the third part that is answerable to the content and the nature of the established connection. The same is valid for the 'entrepreneur', even though, in this case, its role is also to rearrange the nature and the content of the mediation. Political parties and trade unions are 'entrepreneurs', for example, as they mediate between citizens and workers, on the one side, and the institutional system and employers' association, on the other side.

Nevertheless, in this paper, mediators do not act in the same way as political parties and trade unions. As it has been mentioned before, political parties are just an example as, usually, they are responsible for transferring issues from society to the political arena but also for revising and imbuing them with values. On the one hand parties adopt a specific perspective on the issue at stake, on the other hand, brokers are mostly seen as neutral on this point and perceived only as facilitators for supporting citizens entering into the political system. This means that not only 'entrepreneurs' but also 'advisors' can be helpful for mapping out those junctures through which community activities take place.

To identify such junctures as branches of political parties belonging to a specific community is relatively easy, but this form of political activity is considered to be in crisis leading to the transformation of mass parties into professional-electoral parties. These parties characterize themselves because of not being settled diffusely on the territory (Panebianco, 1988). Therefore, in order to outline the social and political life of a specific community, it is necessary to turn to a diverse kind of mediator, mediators that are not only dedicated to political representation as branches of parties but also constitute points of aggregation for those citizens who are able to develop connections to the political and institutional system.

At this point it is necessary to introduce a series of instruments to map out those actors that can play the role of mediation between citizens and the political and institutional system through the support of ICT.

The concept of social capital (Putnam 1993 among others) and trust (Fukuyama 1995 among others) can be useful for detecting the nature of these communities according to the mapping of places for social and political participation. However, other possibilities to pursue this objective come from the concepts of access points (Giddens, 1990), trust spreaders (Mutti, 1998b), trustworthy cues (Bacharach and Gambetta, 2001), and institutional carriers (Scott, 2001).

2.1 Access points

The concepts of 'differentiation' and 'functional specialization' have been used in order to point out the passage from the pre-modern traditional world and modernity. Modern times have been exemplified by evolutionary processes toward fragmented societies where actors play specific and distinct roles. Nevertheless, Giddens (1990) proposed a further concept: disembedding. The fact that interactions circumscribed to a local context have been ousted by those in which time and space borders typical of pre-modern societies have been crossed significantly is not represented properly by concepts that presume an evolutionary process and a functionalist perspective. The disembedding concept suggests an idea of modernity in which space and time are aligned in a more diverse way than before rather than in continuity. Velocity and instability characterize it and this concept in some way emphasizes this situation. A situation in which symbolic tokens and expert systems acquires a relevant role as disembedding mechanisms. Among symbolic tokens, means through which transactions and interactions take place without requiring any particular acquaintance between involved actors, money is fundamental. It enlarges the space and time span as credits and debits enable transactions otherwise not possible. Even expert systems contribute to enlarge the space and time span and then disembedding. These systems can be represented by knowledge related to a specific social or material

environment. Giddens (1990) suggests that even when we sit down on our sofa in front of the TV we are surrounded by a series of expert systems that are related to the operability of the electric system, the statics of the house etc. Laymen are usually slightly aware of the characteristics of these systems even though they are continuously plugged into them and modernity is based on the proliferation of these systems. Therefore, access points to these are crucial if a person decides to lead a normal life in the society. Access points are entities which are in charge of expert systems and, at the same time, constitute the interface with the so-called laymen. Relationships between access points and laymen can be characterized by standardization and formality but also by friendship and personal connection. Nevertheless, what really matters is the possibility to reassure layman about both the competence of access points, knowledge and expertise present into related expert systems. This is the reason why these points are tense places, where a sense of reassurance is vulnerable and negative experiences dealing with access points could lead to an expert system crisis.

Political and institutional systems are, without any doubt, expert systems. Therefore, the point, here, is to see, if a concept like access point can be helpful for outlining, in a specific community, those junctures which are able to favour active participation in political and social life.

2.2 Trust Spreaders

The analysis of the concept of trust spreaders or trust propagators (Mutti, 1998b; Mutti, 2003) requires the introduction of the concept of trust. However, it is not an objective of this paper to study in detail a much debated concept such as this. The aim here is to sketch the discourse that leads to the concept of trust spreaders.

Trust can be defined as an expectation of positive experiences lived by actors in a situation of uncertainty. This is due to an emotive and cognitive lift that permits to overcome the threshold of the simple hope (Mutti, 1998a). If the addresses of expectations based on trust are individuals we face the so-called interpersonal trust, on the other hand, if the addresses are institutions, we face a so-called institutional trust. Moreover, according to the range of addresses, trust is either focused or general in nature. The former (focused trust) is dedicated to specific individuals and institutions. The latter (general trust) is dedicated to the strict circle of social links reaching unrelated people and distant institutional systems.

According to Inglehart (1997), modern times characterize themselves by the imposing of anti-authoritarian post-modern values based on individuals' self-fulfilling and the pursuit of quality of life. All of this leads to an increase of mistrust toward hierarchical institutions and traditional forms of authority. In this scenario, the level of general trust is subject to contrasting forces and the widespread decline of focused trust towards a wide range of institutions.

In order to remedy this situation, Mutti (1998b; 2003) proposes an indirect path. That is, to think about the chains of focused and interpersonal trust, through the mediation of trust spreaders, in order to build a presupposition for large scale forms of cooperation. In this discourse, the crucial element is represented by trust spreaders and on their capability to multiply trust. Trust spreaders are individuals (relatives, friends, acquaintances and experts etc.) and public and private institutions (professional associations, independent authorities and local agencies etc.) that already enjoy trust and, because of this, can certify the trustworthiness of other individual and institutions. This is due to the fact that cognitive and emotional uncertainty concerning the latter is reduced favouring relationships based on the trust of other actors.

If we now turn to the classification of social brokers proposed by Coleman (1990), trust spreaders seem to share characteristics of 'advisors' rather than of 'guarantors' or 'entrepreneurs'. They certify to new actors the good reputation acquired elsewhere of trustful individuals and institutions through the circulation of existing information and the strengthening of the acquired trustworthiness.

Moreover, Mutti (1998b) introduces a trust spreaders classification. At first there are individuals that propagate interpersonal trust. Experts, friends, relatives, lovers and charismatic leaders are examples

in this case. Experts certify the status of actors on the basis of cognitive elements (competence, reputation and accountability etc.) whereas the status of actors concerning friends and relatives are certified primarily on the basis of emotional elements (morality, discretion and sensibility etc.). Then, there are individuals that propagate institutional trust. Giddens's access points can be seen from this perspective. They are experts who (in this case we consider access point individuals rather than institutions) favour the access to expert systems and their well functioning. Moving from individuals to institutions, there are those that support interpersonal trust. Big and prestigious companies, for example, render their personnel trust to customers and suppliers. Professional associations play the same role concerning their members. Finally, there are institutions that propagate institutional trust. These are the cases of independent authorities such as the World Bank and agencies like Moody and Standard and Poor which provide expert knowledge about currencies, markets, financial products and even entire countries.

Even though this classification is useful to investigate the characteristics of the political and social life of a specific community, an analysis of trust spreaders requires a case by case examination of what are their trust basis and the conditions through which the multiplication of trust takes place.

2.3 Trustworthy cues

Always in the circle of trust, there is another concept that can be helpful for investigating the junctures of the social and political life of a specific community: the concept of trustworthy cues.

According to Gambetta and Hamill (2005) trust judgments are based on signs that mark these properties, and trustworthy cues are intended as these signs emitted, consciously or otherwise, by potential trustees and, in this discourse, by social brokers. Sztompka (1999) listed six types of trustworthy cues: performance, appearance, reputation, accountability, pre-commitment, and trust-inducing. Nevertheless, the point is now to focus on the aspects of communication. That is, the capacity to transmit trustworthy cues whatever they are. In fact, trust relationships can be built on a large numbers of elements even though factors like visibility, comprehensibility and salience contribute to creating an environment that favours their transmission (Smith, 2007).

These cues can be subdivided into direct and indirect (Kumlin, 2004). Direct ones are based on the fact that individuals experience personally their communication whereas in the case of indirect cues communication is mediated as it is derived from secondary sources. At this point, it is necessary to consider social brokers as indirect trustworthy cues. They can be seen as junctures which are able to make known information related to the credibility of cues of other entities. Therefore, to sum up, the analysis of the concept of trustworthy cues provide a further step in the study of social brokers and their role played in a community.

2.4 Institutional carriers

Institutional carriers introduce another concept which has been greatly debated in the last few decades: the concept of the institution. Even in this case, only a few points are dedicated to this concept and to institutional carriers as helpful elements for investigating the nature of social brokers.

Scott (2003) is taken as a point of reference in order to outline both the discussion on institution and institutional carriers. "Institutions are social structures that have attained a high degree of resilience. They are composed of cultural-cognitive, normative, and regulative elements that, together with associated activities and resources, provide stability and meaning to social life (Scott, 2001:48)". The stability of social life is mainly based on three main 'pillars': regulative elements, normative elements and cultural-cognitive elements. Regulative elements stress the institutions' capacity to establish rules, surveillance mechanisms and sanctions. Normative elements emphasize the creation of expectations related to specific behaviours. That is, the emerging of norms and roles that constitute morally governed and internalized social obligations. In the case of the cultural-cognitive pillar, the focus is

posed on the taken-for-granted. In other words, on beliefs, shared concepts and the logics of action that underlie social order. It is rare to find institutions based only on a specific type of element whereas, normally, a combination of types prevails even though it is not excluded that some elements are dominant.

To focus on institutional changes means to throw light on elements that lead to innovation and variations on institutional processes rather than on behavioural conformity and structural isomorphism. Moreover, one cannot ignore the role of carriers that transport these elements. Therefore, institutional carriers can be defined as those vehicles that enable institutional elements to move from place to place and from time to time.

According to Scott (2003), these carriers can be classified as follows: symbolic systems, relational systems, routines, and artefacts. Symbolic systems represent those schemes through which information is coded and conveyed. Relational systems include both interpersonal and inter-organizational linkages. Routines refer to patterned actions that, embedding tacit knowledge, can be, all the same, conveyed by actors and artefacts consist in material culture produced by humans to support task performance.

The point, now, is to see if social brokers can be interpreted through the lenses of institutional carriers. In this discourse, Scott (2003) examined, in particular, symbolic systems and relational systems. Among symbolic systems, interpretation seems apt to represent the social brokers' activities. In fact, interpretation consists of the process of decoding and encoding of ideas but also taking into consideration 'frames'. 'Frames' (Goffman, 1974) are interpretative schemas that simplify and condense the "world out there". This means that the 'frames' of the sender and of the recipient cannot coincide. Therefore, a successful transmission of ideas involves a frame alignment and one of the tasks of social brokers is to support communication between diverse entities. Following on from the ideas of Latour (1986), Czarniawska and Joerges (1996) maintain that the flow of ideas needs to be 'translated' rather than 'transmitted' underling another aspect of the role played by carriers. Moreover, information technologies can play a crucial role in this translation process because of the possibility of storage, reproduction, and the dissemination of information.

Concerning relational systems as institutional carrier, Scott (2003) underlines the role of intermediaries. That is, go-betweens that neither are producers nor users of ideas but transmit and market them. It is evident to consider social brokers as intermediaries even though they are not seen as neutral but active factors shaping and reconstructing ideas.

To conclude, this has been a tentative analysis in order to see if social brokers can be interpreted according to the perspective proposed by the concept of the institutional carrier. Nevertheless, a series of questions have not been taken into consideration. For example, what sort of institutional elements (regulative elements, normative elements and cultural-cognitive elements) can social brokers carry? Can participation or e-services be affected negatively if, as suggested by Scott's work, social brokers, for various reasons, are not neutral? From this perspective, what will be the role of information technology? And, finally, can social brokers effectively establish suitable and legitimate relationships between communities and political, institutional and administrative systems?

3   SOCIAL BROKERS AND E-FILING AT THE ITALIAN TAX AGENCY

In Italy, companies are obliged to submit tax returns in such instances of profit and loss. However, it is not the same for citizens. In cases of incomes lower than 3,000 euros, for example, citizens are wavered from paying tax submissions, and other tax exemptions exist. Here, the employer is in charge of the employee's tax return submission. Moreover, employees and retired people (the self-employed and entrepreneurs are excluded) can submit to a simplified tax return to the Tax Agency when revenue sources are not only related to employment income. As it is analyzed in detail below, these two

categories can take advantage of specific tax assistance centres in order to draw up and submit tax returns.

All of this process is governed by the Italian Tax Agency. Prior to reforms that took place in 1997, this agency characterized itself by the (EU, 2006):

• 12 tax-return handling centres swamped with a backlog of 20,000,000 cases to administer (it took 5 years to check tax returns);

• 44,000,000 paper forms to be managed;

• 3,200,000 tax litigation pending cases.

Reforms which pertained two different perspectives. The legal one consisted of the introduction of tax return forms that unified some of the tax duties and, because of it, the number of income tax returns have been reduced. The organizational perspective concerned the reorganization of the Ministry of Finance. Tax Agencies, subdivided into revenue, customs, territory and state property, were constituted enjoying a relative organizational, financial and managerial autonomy. Finally, information technology was introduced. The so called Fisco Telematico groups together with information infrastructures and applications were adopted, and within this, the e-filing system plays an important role.

The e-filing system at the Italian Tax Agency is subdivided into Fisco Online, Entratel and Siatel. Fisco On-line is the web site zone dedicated to citizens. This zone offers a series of on-line services that consent to complete large part of the paperwork of this Agency. Entratel, on the other hand, is dedicated to intermediaries (professional accountants, tax assistance centres, trade associations, banks etc) and, concerning services, it does not differentiate itself significantly from Fisco Online even though there are more formalities in order to acquire access to it. Finally, Siatel is reserved for public administrations (communes, provinces, health agencies, hospitals, judicial offices, universities etc.) for having access to the tax register.

Different phases characterize the development of Fisco Telematico. From 1998 onwards, tax assistance centres took advantage of this e-filing system for delivering tax returns, while professionals and big companies started using this system from 1999. In 2000, even citizens and small to medium sized enterprises can have access to this system through the internet (Fisco Online) whereas in the previous cases data transfer is based on a dedicated extranet (Entratel). From 2002, even tax payment is available through this system.

The impact of the introduction of Fisco Telematico can be summarised as follows (EU, 2006):

• 10 tax return handling centres have been closed since 2001, and the remaining 2 have been restructured releasing 400,000 square meters of accommodation;

• the elimination of data acquisition costs and backlog since 2000;

• the on-going reduction of 6,000 human resources (at present the total workforce amounts to 36,000 employees).

The investment required for reaching these results has been conspicuous and amounts to 93.5 million euros subdivided into 51.5 million in technology costs (hardware, software, telecommunications etc.), 17 millions in reorganization costs (mainly external consulting services), 14 million in labour costs (incentives for staff involved in paper backlog elimination and compensations for staff who are transferred to other offices because of the closure of tax return handling centres) and 11 million in human resources training.

On the other hand, cost savings have been calculated in a similar measure amounting to 90 million euros based on the closure of 10 tax return handling centres (20 million), the elimination of data acquisition costs (30 million) and a reduction in the workforce of 6,000 employees (40 million).

The subdivision of an e-filing system into Fisco Online, Entratel and Siatel has facilitated access to diverse categories of users. In addition, this Agency has been flexible opting for the compulsory method for submitting tax returns and other documents, always after a significant period of time, only for intermediaries (Entratel) and some public administrations (Siatel). On the other hand, some incentives, like the postponement of return submissions for example, were introduced for encouraging the paperless mode instead of the traditional method based on paper.

The completion of an on-line return is not the same as the completion of traditional modalities. Of course, it is possible to take advantage of automatic calculation controls or help procedures. Moreover, the risk of incurring mistakes is reduced, and in a very short space of time, it is possible to know if the completed tax return has been successful. Nevertheless, it is necessary to follow specific courses of action in order to manage files properly for permitting their electronic mailing. This means that the nature and form of interaction models are changing, leading to an increase of complexity. However, this is true only if we consider the tax payers' perspective. As it was mentioned above, the introduction of Fisco Telematico was to the determinant of reducing human resources and assets dedicated to tax return management, this signalled a reduction of the complexity dimension, concerning the Tax Agency. Besides, positive side effects are not only restricted to the tax return management but are also felt in other areas. Formal controls were reduced sharply, the workforce could be transferred to sectors where it is more needed, and the prompt availability of data concerning the amount of tax collection can be used for fine tuning tax policies or even macroeconomic policies at a national level. These are just few examples for outlining the range of results obtained due to the introduction of the e-filing system.

Even though the increasing complexity depicts a scenario characterised by some obstacles for the transition from the traditional method of operating to the on-line one, this shifting has been considerable as indicated by table n. 2 and table n. 3. In a few years, the totality of returns have been filed electronically even though data shows clearly that the large majority of them have been managed by mediators through Entratel. Data issued by the Tax Agency in 2005 show that only 149,738 taxpayers took advantage of Fisco Online (the system dedicated to citizens and Small and Medium Enterprises) for filing individual tax returns. The remainder have been sent by tax agency offices spread all over the country which account for a total of 958,726 tax returns. This data is not dissimilar to the 2004 data in table n. 2 in which submissions totalled to 919,199. However, this data requires more elaboration. In fact, taxpayers who use simplified tax returns (see above) do not have at their disposal the on-line modality (Fisconline) which is available exclusively to normal tax returns. In this case, they have to turn to mediators either for tax return control and its electronic transmission (free of charge) or for the drawing up and complete electronic transmission (fee-paying). The simplified version of returns provides advantages for the submission of documents, tax calculation and the possibility of tax reimbursements directly from the employer or the social insurance system, as in the case of pensions. Regarding table n.2 and table n.3, they are characterized by the columns "Entries" and "Effectively Reached". The former indicates the number of transmissions executed by the Tax Agency, whereas the latter indicates those transmissions that are effectively reached. In the table n.3 the number of entries is considerably lower due to the fact that each entry corresponds to a large number of returns, as the senders perform the role of mediators in these instances. Other data issued in 2005 indicates that 2,393,814 are returns sent by banks and post offices. These returns were hand written by tax payers and then digitalised by organisations as the Tax Agency accepts only on-line completion. Of course, banks and post offices are remunerated because of the execution of this task.

All of this is a clear indicator of the difficulties faced by tax payers to take advantage in-person of the electronic filing system because of the burdens placed on tax payers such as the collection of tax documents, the calculation of the amount to pay to the tax agency plus the complexity for managing electronic files. The final result is that the large majority of returns are filed by mediators and the rest by taxpayers by the traditional method or by the support of the revenue agency offices.

Type of document	Entries	Effectively Reached 2001	Entries	Effectively Reached 2004
Individual income tax return	398,683	370,921	883,197	858,445
Partnership income tax return	5,290	4,940	13,279	12,724
Joint-stock income tax return	6,272	5,894	11,380	11,065
Non-profit income tax return	1,414	1,072	1,714	1,620

Table n. 1: Returns sent to the Tax Agency in 2001 and 2004 through Fisco Online (Source: Italian Tax Agency)

Type of document	Entries	Effectively Reached 1998	Entries	Effectively Reached 2004
Simplified individual income tax return	3,812	6,545,194	16,262	15,130,893
Individual income tax return	1,064	1,057,905	1,187,785	10,470,146
Partnership income tax return	569	14,150	274,599	1,070,891
Joint-stock income tax return	89	1,856	365,779	1,005,015
Non-profit organization income tax return	33	117	82,477	161,738

Table n. 2: Returns sent to the Tax Agency in 1998 and 2004 through Entratel (Source: Italian Tax Agency)

The Tax Agency can be considered a typical organization in which hierarchical governing prevails. In fact, it is a public body connected to the Ministry of Economy and Finance and established according to a specific law. Its functioning is based on legal and administrative instruments and even relationships with taxpayers are based on these principles. The introduction of the e-filing system has followed the same rules. As it can be seen above, intermediaries and other public administrations, even after a significant period of time, have been forced to use the on-line modality.

The point, now, is to investigate the mode that determined a situation in which taxpayers and companies turn to mediators to file returns. Let's start from the latter. Companies, because of their size (the Italian economic system is based on Small and Medium Enterprises) tend to externalise tax duties to professionals. Normally, only big companies have offices that complete all obligations concerning accountancy and tax obligations.

Turning our attention back to the structural level, self-governing is the mode that generally rules interactions between companies and professionals for filing tax returns. The former buys this service on the market and, generally, the match between supply and demand fixes the price of this service. In the case of citizens, the same is valid for individual tax returns but not for simplified individual tax returns, as taxpayers do not buy this service on a market in which the match between supply and demand fix prices. What happens is that the Tax Agency, in some sense, supports the market providing incentives to intermediaries for advising taxpayers, offering about 14 euros for the drawing up and filing of any simplified tax return. This fee does not cover the service provided, however, it contributes to minimise the taxpayers' burden. This means that a pure self-governing mode is not the mode that governs the drawing up and filing of simplified individual tax returns because of the presence of this incentive.

Moreover mediators are in charge of the validation of returns so tax payers run less of a risk to submit incomplete or incorrect returns, and the Tax Agency acquires accurate documentation on-line rendering more efficient back office operations, as can be seen above. Concerning the on-line submissions, this agency acknowledges to the intermediaries a further small fee of 0,5 euro.

Concerning relationships between the Tax Agency and mediators they are regulated by the self-governing mode. In fact, intermediaries are free to enter into this market even though is not only

governed solely by market forces because of the support provided by the Tax Agency for simplified individual tax returns.

The Tax Agency has become a collection centre for taxes and contributions. Taxpayers, through this agency, do not only pay taxes but also a series of other contributions payable to the National Institute of Social Insurance and Communes for example. Then, electronically, the Tax Agency transfers sums to the respective remittees. This contributes to simplifying the taxpayers' responsibilities.

So far, it has been used as the generic term of mediators and professionals for defining actors in charge of filing tax returns on behalf of taxpayers. The objective, now, is to elaborate further on the characteristics of these mediators. A simple classification can distinguish traditional figures like professional accountants, and lawyers, and trade associations that do bookkeeping and tax advising on behalf of their members, tax assistance centres and finally banks and post offices. Banks and post offices are only in charge of the digitalisation of tax returns submitted on paper, whereas the role played by tax assistance centres requires more specifications.

Only trade associations and trade unions can establish these centres, because of a specific law. The reason for this is that the spirit of this law was to find agencies that are equipped to manage simplified tax returns and the introduction of e-filing, on the one hand, and to open up the market to tax advice, on the other hand. In this way, established organisations like trade associations and trade unions could form specific centres for supporting their members and also for competing in this market.

The effect of the introduction of this law suggests that it is possible to define these centres as access points (Giddens, 1990) or trust spreaders (Mutti, 1998), for example. Trade associations and trade unions have played a role in the access points or trust spreaders through the establishment of tax assistance centres. Taxpayers who were not used to requiring services provided by traditional professions have new opportunities to have access to this kind of service because of their proximity to institutions like trade unions and trade associations. In a situation like this the introduction of an e-filing system is favoured. The Tax Agency, on the basis of the role played by these centres, was in a situation to introduce on-line modality with a reasonable expectation of success, which effectively happened. In some sense, the categories of employees and retired people, experience many difficulties in managing taxation issues, and have often been directed to tax assistance centres for support, on the one hand, and to facilitate the process of e-filing, on the other hand.

The so called meta-governance (Kooiman, 1999) concerns levels of social acceptability and legitimacy leading us to reflect on the social costs inherent to the introduction of this electronic system.

Data presented at the beginning of this paragraph show important results obtained by the Tax Agency due to the introduction of the e-filing system and other interventions. However, meta-governance puts into question if these impressive results have been obtained with no costs bore by other actors involved in this system.

Actually, the introduction of the e-filing system provoked a decrease of this dimension regarding the Tax Agency but it was not the same for taxpayers. The latter, on the contrary, suffered an increase in complexity as it was subjected to the on-line modality and it is possible to assume the same for mediators as their task is not only to draw up returns but also to file them on-line to the Tax Agency.

In this understanding, it is possible to presume that this cost is transferred to taxpayers. However, it is not always like this. In the case of the simplified individual tax returns, the Tax Agency intervenes to reimburse to mediators a specific sum for each return submitted.

To sum up, benefits obtained by the Tax Agency due to the introduction of the e-filing system have been only partially transferred to taxpayers who, individually, have to bear the large part of the cost of its introduction.

4   E-PARTICIPATION: THE PARTECIPA.NET CASE

In Italy, the diffusion of e-democracy is strictly related to a public advice of the Italian Ministry for Technological Innovation that co-funded 56 projects in this field all over Italy. E-participation, here, is considered an aspect of e-democracy and represents the whole of technological and methodological instruments turned to provide a further factor for rendering possible citizens' participation. In this regard, the internet and other innovative channels constitute a possibility for transforming institutional and political communication. In fact, two-way communication becomes possible in order to support decision making processes and inquire about public life, for instance.

Partecipa.net is a direct result of this initiative of the Italian government. It is an e-participation kit envisaged by a consortium led by the Emilia Romagna Region in order to spread e-participation practices on its territory. It comes to light in 2005 because of the above mentioned funds and of the Ministry of Innovation, the coordination and evaluation role played by Cnipa (National Centre for ICT in the Public Administrations) and the support of 21 local governments and 9 social associations. At the basis of this e-participation kit there are two software applications: UNOX1 and Demos. UNOX1, a communication multi-channel system, has been developed by the municipality of Modena whereas Demos, an electronic discussion forum, by the municipality of Bologna. These two main applications are integrated by methods and guidelines for enabling citizens' participation.

To investigate further in detail Partecipa.net kit, it is useful to subdivide it into electronic identification, back office and front office (Rossi, 2007). Partecipa.Base is the software module dedicated to the system access and username and password are required to login. So, every user has to register his/her name (also a nickname is allowed) to the Partecipa.net portal indicating also an email address in order to complete the registration procedure. Once the registration procedure is ended, accesses to Partecipa.net functionalities are available.

These functionalities are based on back office technologies. A data base of users' profiles constitutes an important element among them. It enables the provision of services according to users' selected options. The FAQ (Frequently Asked Questions) engine is another back office element and a CMS (Content Management System) makes possible the organization of contents of a variety of formats (doc, txt, pdf, ppt, jpg etc.) both by back end and front end users. A GPL (General Public License) characterizes all Partecipa.Net kit software programs in order to allow code reuse to other public administrations.

Borders between electronic identification, front office, back office are becoming continuously more uncertain. Partecipa.base for example, managing users' profiles, makes possible the organization of thematic newsletters. Newsletters of interest selected during the registration phase are then forwarded regularly to subscribers. The FAQ function goes over back office borders as well. Users have at disposal instrument in order to inquire contents available and Partecipa.Ask is the module dedicated to this function. It consists in the possibility to submit specific questions to experts in a specific field. Partecipa.poll is a further module. It is a system devised to do survey about issues at stake supporting a sort of e-voting procedure. Electronic forum and open debate activities are enabled by the Partecipa.Forum module. Other than interactions and discussion among enrolled citizens, this module allows moderator' interventions and content full-text researches. In order to facilitate discussion activities, a virtual multimedia library is available. Partecipa.Biblio is the module dedicated to this function. To sum up, the Partecipa.net kit is composed by Partecipa.Base, Partecipa.Ask, Partecipa.Poll, Partecipa.Forum and Partecipa.Biblio.

The Partecipa.net kit is the final result of a project that had at its basis funds available from the public advice of the Italian Ministry for Technological Innovation. This is the spark that puts into motion the entire process. At this point, the Emilia Romagna Region summons up local governments (municipalities and provinces) that could be interested in the e-democracy field. At first, the Regional Assembly, three municipalities, an association of municipalities and two provinces answered yes (only later the number of local governments reached 21). The reasons that lead these institutions to be part of the Partecipa.Net project are diverse. In some cases there is the motivation to upgrade software applications already available; in other cases the spur came from the provision of a regional law that calls upon a wider involvement of citizenship in democratic processes or personal interests of local governors to experiment e-democracy solutions. All these actors gathered in a working group that developed the project. The constitution of this group has been considered a success not only because it succeeded to accomplish the Partecipa.Net project deliverables but also because it transform itself in a platform for developing other projects. In other words, the division of labour established among different actors involved, the nature of their relationships and the characteristics of knowledge shared lead to an entity ready to be used in other similar projects.

4.1 Partecipa.Net: an assemblage?

The question now is to see if the dynamics that characterized the Partecipa.Net project can be conceptualized. In other words, may a concept represent the series of events that lead to the establishment of Partecipa.Net? The notion of assemblage is considered useful in this proposal. Even though it has been introduced by several authors (Cooper, 1998; Ciborra, 2005; Ong and Collier, 2005), Lanzara's definition (2009) is taken into account. "Assemblages result from the encounter and the multiple mediations between large ICT systems and the existing institutional frameworks and codes of the society. They are made up of heterogeneous components displaying multiple logics which cannot be easily reduced to one another. Hence, assemblages are not 'hybrid' entities, but rather 'composites' – collection of components which tend to maintain their specificities (Lanzara, 2009 pp. 13-14). It is supposed that these few lines succeed to illustrate rather well what effectively happened in the Participat.Net project. UNOX1 and Demos are the two ICT systems at the basis of this project, the Ministry for Technological Innovation, CNIPA, the Emilia Romagna Region, and other local governments represents the institutional framework and the necessity to improve the quality of social and political participation can be seen an aspect in the code of the society. What is emphasized by the concept of assemblage is that all these elements do not transform themselves into a new entity. On the contrary, UNOX1 and Demos are still there as other public bodies involved in the project. Therefore, assemblages are loosely structured and its components, even though evolve continuously, maintain their autonomy in a situation in which boundaries and linkages tend to shift and drift. This means that assemblages are always ad hoc and changes continuously. Changes take place at different speed according to the different elements involved given that each component has its own time of evolution. In these conditions, equilibriums are always unstable.

Lanzara (2009) identifies a series of features that characterize assemblages. 1) The presence of multiple actors and authority structures of which none of them exercises full control on the project whereas each is in charge only of a part of it (i.e. CNIPA, Emilia Romagna Region and other local governments). 2) Institutional sponsors and project champions emerge. That is, some actors acquire a leading role promoting innovation and taking responsibility of coordination (i.e. Emilia Romagna Region). 3) Episodes, discontinuous activities and situated

interventions are seen as further characteristics of assemblages. In other words, activities are not regular (the business as usual of the different components has to go on) but based on specific agreements among actors involved in a specific commitment (i.e. in Partecipa.Net, working groups were autonomous and slightly coordinated by the Emilia Romagna Region). 4) Adapting, repairing and redesign available components consist of the fact that design activities tends to be focused on components already in place that need to be adapted to a new context. At the basis of this way of doing, there are the following questions: what is possible to do with what is already available? What functionalities can be added to present systems in order to pursue our objectives? What kind of simplifications can be introduced in order to streamline existing procedures? (i.e. UNOX1 and Demos). 5) Converting, linking and plumbing. They are related to the conversion and the following connection of components at place in order to build a more complex assemblage (i.e. UNOX1 and Demos have been readapted and connected each other). 6) Redesigning administrative routines, interfaces and jurisdictions are enabled by the different systems that now are connected to each other. Procedures involved in separated domains are now linked leading to new way of doing things (i.e. it is the combination of UNOX1 (a system for informing citizens about social and institutional life of the Municipality of Modena) and Demos (an electronic forum) at the basis of participation activities electronically supported). 7) Characteristics of the installed based (pre-existing technical and institutional materials) can be more or less obtrusive or enabling. The possibility to introduce gateways, the level of re-combinability and the degree of modularity contribute to the taking shape to new assemblages (i.e. UNOX1 faces technical problems in its adoption and Demos functionalities support a specific decision making process that can be in contrast with normal procedures in off line situations).

To conclude, Lanzara (2009) suggests that assemblages can be evaluated according to three main perspectives: technical compatibility, functional compatibility and institutional compatibility. Technical compatibility refers to standards, modularity, interfaces, protocols etc. At present, Partecipa.Net technical compatibility is still at stake. Several pilot projects have already been put into practice and two of them will be taken into consideration in the following sections. Nevertheless, Partecipa.Forum is considered too rigid and outdated from a technical point of view, interoperability issues have continued to emerge among the different components and security standards of Partecipa.Net do not match Emilia Romagna Region requirements, for example. Concerning functional compatibility, the question related to the consonance between technological components and social and institutional components (i.e. is Partecipa.Net effectively supportive of social-political participation?) has been raised as well. Is Partecipa.Forum exactly the more appropriate tool as it is based on a specific method of participation named Delphi that is considered too complex to be implemented? Only institutional compatibility (satisfactory forms of collaborations among agencies and organizations involved in assemblages due to a shared language, mutual understanding and accountability) does not seem to be put into question. All of this means that the future of Partecipa.Net is uncertain and it is not excluded that it will be discharged even though, most probably, as an assemblage, it will continue to transform itself taking other shapes.

4.2   The meaning of participation in two Partecipa.Net cases.

The point now is to examine the introduction of the Partecipa.Net kit in two specific contexts: "gli orari della città" and "per via Gallucci". In the "gli orari della città" case, the objective was that one to involve citizens of the Municipality of Modena in order to reorganize opening hours of bars, shops, public offices and also public transportations timetables and, in this way, to render more welcoming the city. "per via Gallucci" represents an attempt to put under

control conflicts aroused between via Gallucci residents, on the one hand, and customers and barkeepers of the same street, on the other hand, as Via Gallucci is one of the more famous streets for its night spots in Modena.

The methodology used to investigate these two e-participation projects is in the circle of the case study research (Yin, 2003). The research question at stake here is related to the meanings and the interpretations of participation emerged in the two cases under examination. In order to follow this objective, Partecipa.Net facilitators have been interviewed. In fact, the functioning of this e-participation tool requires a figure in charge both of possible technical problems occurred to users and of possible misunderstandings and conflicts aroused among participants in the use of Partecipa.Forum. Even though the perspective of facilitators is partial as users and public administrators would have provided probably a different point of view of these experimentations, their role is central. Facilitators have on a string the complete situation concerning what is going on and in some sense they are the thermometer of the participation activity in course. This is the reason why the attention as been posed on this role. Study propositions or issue sub-questions are helpful in order to enrich the research question at stake enlightening more in detail the directions that this study pursued. Three sub-questions seem to be significant in this regard: the style of mediation or facilitation, the characteristics of participation and the atmosphere experienced by users.

A further step in this research design is represented by units of analysis. Units of analysis in this case are "gli orari della città" and "per via Gallucci" facilitators. As it has been mentioned above, it is through their role that the research question and, of course, even sub-questions, have been examined. However, this role has been interpreted turning to the three "worlds" proposed by Heidegger (2004) and already mentioned in the first chapter of this work: the 'surrounding world' (milieu), the 'communal world' and the 'self world'. Actually, the units of analysis are based on the overlapping of these three "worlds".

The final step concerns the interpretation of findings and then modalities that lead to meanings and understandings related to participation in "gli orari della città" and "per via Gallucci". Even in this case, Heidegger's perspective proposed in the first chapter has been taken as point of reference. This means that the investigation of sense of 'content', sense of 'relation' and sense of 'actualization' or 'enactment' constitute the main factors to examine the "rationale" (verbum internum) of the introduction of Partecipa.Net kit in these two cases. Case similarities (users coming from the same context, a same technological kit and similar subject of application) lead not to analyse each of them in its singularity but altogether.

4.2.1   The style of mediation: meanings and interpretations

The mission of the facilitator was not that one to be directly involved in what was going on in the forum or in other activities that supported participation. Rather, it was in his/her responsibility to supervise activities in a detached way without influencing the substance of what was object of discussion. Nevertheless, it was fundamental to play an active role leading debates and exchanges of ideas in what was considered relevant for the issues at stake. This was the reason why facilitators were trained, even though not in an exhaustive way, both in order to avoid problems of etiquette and to guide discussions to support the creation of the so called collective intelligence as it has been emphasized by one of the facilitators. Collective intelligence consists in identifying viable solutions in order to deal with issues at stake and this requires a series of activities related not only to the management of interactions but also to the support of appropriate information, contents, statistical data etc. All these considerations emphasize sense of 'content' of mediation. Now, let's move to sense of 'relation'.

Sense of 'content' refers to entities present in a situation as objects, people, technology, values and cultures. Differently, sense of 'relation' refers to the network of meanings and references emerged from relationships established by these entities. Therefore, the point now is to analyse the nature of connections that took place at the level of mediation. Technical problems, substantially, did not occur. In some cases, it has been necessary to support users at the authentication stage but this was all. A more active role played by mediators was required when discussions turned to be useless, not creative or not containing a proposal. This was mainly the case when objects of debate were not closed to participants' needs. In those situations, it was necessary to revitalise interactions even though, in some cases, the role of leadership put at stake was not considered sufficient. Probably, it would have been necessary to be more incisive in order to bring into question relevant issues that could not get into the debate only by interventions of the forum users.

The objective, at this point, is to examine sense of 'actualization' or 'enactment' experienced in the course of mediation. That is, to wonder how 'content' and 'relation' have been made active and in the stream of life by facilitators. The role of the facilitator has been lived in a rather distant and aloof way. The professional character prevailed rather than an approach more closed to existing debates. Users considered facilitators as a sort of gatekeeper that supervised forum activities and a gentlemen agreement imposed itself. Partecipa.Net was provided by the Municipality of Modena and this was not neutral on the characteristics of interactions. The institutional role played by this local government brought about a kind of fear and also suspicious to users influencing the nature of the discussion in course. Probably, it was inevitable that the involvement of a public authority causes this kind of attitude. Besides, the point was if effectively this form of participation activity would lead to specific results and if, once they will be reached, they would be taken into consideration for the policy making. These aspects were not very clear and this, of course, contributed to establish citizens' approach to this e-participation tool.

4.2.2   The characteristics of participation: meanings and interpretations

Even in this case, the analysis of the characteristics of participation begins from the sense of 'content'. In this proposal, the themes object of debate in the electronic forum have been considered important. If they were not really closed to citizens, the level of interaction risk to be sterile, fruitless and unable to attract a considerable number of participants. The fact that themes have been decided by the Municipality and not by citizens themselves has been considered an aspect that, in some way, influenced negatively the development of "gli orari della città" and "per via Gallucci" projects. In addition, a traditional advertising campaign for explaining in detail the terms of the issues at stake to be faced through deliberative procedures was considered fundamental. On the other hand, information spread across existing electronic means as the Municipality mailing lists or to the UNOX1 services was judged sufficient. It is not an easy task to inform citizens about the possibility to participate actively in a decision making process through the internet. Besides, budget constraints that Italian local governments are suffering in these years rendered difficult the possibility to introduce appropriately a tool like Partecipa.Net to Modena citizens. Another factor that contributed to outline participation in the two cases under examination concerns Municipality attitude in respect of this tool. It is lacked a clear support to it. All potentialities have not been taken into consideration and the planning stage was not considered sufficient.

Concerning sense of 'relation', in both cases under examination it was possible to detect a learning process. That is, the modalities and also the quality of discussions improved considerably as time passed by. Users developed a reciprocal understanding, evaluations on

the objects of debate became continuously more accurate and constructive proposals emerged deeming the several aspects of the discussions in course. Nevertheless, it was not possible to say that at the end of the process a sort of community took shape. Or, better, an interesting phenomenon happened at least in one case. Members of a local council, represented of specific interests debated through Partecipa.Net, decided to join the forum. However, even though their activities contributed significantly to enrich the level of interactions, their specific position was overrepresented biasing the terms of the debate. As it has been mentioned in the previous chapter, this is one of the negative side effects enabled by e-participation tools. Nevertheless, it has to be mentioned also a positive side effect. The trend of the on line debates brought about the Municipality to introduce also off line aspects to enlarge in this way the level of discussions.

Sense of 'actualization' or 'enactment' is investigated focusing both on Municipality and citizens' attitudes in respect of "gli orari della città" and "per via Gallucci" projects. Citizens who decided to be involved in these two projects saw e-participation as a further instrument to have a say in the city government. Frustrations and also hostility toward the Municipality was perceptible due mainly to problems aroused in Via Gallucci. Dissatisfactions that usually had no chance to be expressed found a new way to be channelled. The wonder was if this new opportunity allowed a more incisive protest and also the possibility to make some proposals. Actually, some results have been reached and suggestions came out in the forum have been taken into consideration. Besides, as time passed by, the hostile attitude reduced significantly and the level of discussion turned to be more fruitful. The Municipality of Modena is not alien to this situation. Tools like Partecipa.Net were seen as something new, a little strange, marginal and not as a solution to be prioritised. Therefore, there has been the impression that the decision to adopt these tools was to pretend to be innovative and up to date. Nevertheless, there was not sufficient knowledge of these instruments and then the risk of not being in control of the situation perceived by politicians. At the end, traditional ways to stimulate participation like local assemblies seemed still preferred.

4.2.3   The atmosphere experienced by users: meanings and interpretations

In order to take into consideration sense of 'content' related to users, let's start from the their features. There were not only young people. On the contrary, the majority was between the 30 and 50 years old. The language style used suggested that many of them were professionals or highly educated and with a significant computer literacy. This means that the young and the old range of the population were not importantly represented. In addition, participation was not anonymous, as it has been already mentioned users' registration was required, even though it was possible to use a nick name rather than the real one. Besides, some areas of the Municipality were not connected by ADSL rendering the use of the Partecipa.Net kit more difficult.

Concerning sense of 'relation', it has to be mentioned that discussions have also reached a high levels. It is not appropriated to define them as a sort of chat. Rather, there has been the impression that participants have been motivated and committed to their own points of view. It was shared the awareness that what was going on was important and worthwhile. Tits for tats have not been missed. Nevertheless, they did not compromise the entire discourse. At least in one of the two cases, two categories of participants could be detected. On the one hand, those ones connected to the local council and the rest. The former tended to focus only on the subject of direct interest whereas the latter taught a far larger range of issues.

These two categories influenced also sense of 'actualization' or 'enactment'. A sense of solidarity emerged in the local council group. The proverb "united we stand, divided we fall"

well represents the atmosphere shared by this group of people. The rest of the participants expressed a different attitude. The attitude of gentlemen/gentlewomen that cordially even though firmly exchanges ideas on subjects at stake.

4.3   Some data and final conclusions

So far, differently from the chapter dedicated to e-filing in three Italian public bodies, any data related to the proliferation of e-participation in the two cases under examination have not been presented. The idea at the basis of this decision was to deal with this topic at the end of the work trying a sort of comparison between the use rate in these two fields.

Data of "gli orari della città" and "per via Gallucci" are not well comparable each others, nevertheless, it is believed that they are, all the same, rather significant. Data of Table 1 requires further specification. With mailing list users (43.500) are intended individuals registered to UNOX1 services. Nevertheless, residents outside the Municipality of Modena were not been informed about "gli orari della città" project as they were not directly involved. Besides, it has to be taken into consideration, as it has already mentioned above, that a traditional advertising campaign of the project has been done as well. This contributes to have a picture about citizens who could come to know about it. Web pages surfed indicate the number of hits that the Partecipa.Net kit recorded. They amount to 11.258 that differentiates itself considerably in respect of the 1.216 hits of the forum. Nevertheless, and despite of these hits, only 88 were comments on the forum and 117 questionnaires always related to the forum (questionnaires are related to the Partecipa.Poll and are used to select which subject will be discussed later into the forum).

Mailing list users	43.500
Web pages surfed	11.258
Individuals who surfed the forum	1.216
Number of the comments on the forum	88
Number of questionnaires filled up	117

Table n. 6: Data of the "gli orari della città" project at the Modena Municipality (Source: Comune di Modena)

Concerning "per via Gallucci", data related to the forum is not available but there is data related to questionnaires that have been completed only by few decades of citizens. In this proposal, it is important to mention that the number of citizens informed about this project should be similar to the "gli orari della città" project.

It is rather clear that this data are not satisfactory. It is hard to discourse about e-participation when only a narrow slice of the population effectively takes part actively to an issue of public interest like in the cases of "per via Gallucci" or "gli orari della città". In addition, this is not only a problem of the Municipality of Modena. Data concerning other realities (i.e. the Municipality of Ferrara, see table n. 7), always involved in the introduction of Partecipa.Net kit, does not indicate a different trend.

Web pages surfed (informative material)	5.126
Number of contacts on the forum	4.403
Number of comments on the forum	261
Number of individuals who participated to the forum	36

Table 7 Data related to Forum Agorà (10 forums on main priorities of Ferrara citizens)(Source: Comune di Ferrara)

Nevertheless, the evaluation of these projects should not be seen only according to a negative perspective. New ideas emerged and inputs from participants led to interventions that effectively were put into practice. Local administrators started to be more familiars with tools like Partecipa.Net appraising its potentialities. Quarrels and other unfortunate misunderstandings, substantially, did not take place and even more hostile attitudes vanished as time passed by. This is noticeable considering that off line practices of participation are usually characterised by an high level of contentiousness.

On the other hand, the point that should be emphasized is the different approach used by the Municipality of Modena and public bodies like the Tax Agency, the National Institute of Social Insurance and Chambers of Commerce. It has to be mentioned that in the case of Partecipa.Net projects we still at an experimental stage and it took time to the three public bodies before to obtain significant results. Nevertheless, willy nilly, the latter, in its strategy of development, took into consideration the role of mediators that, in this work, have been denominated as social brokers. They are the main players using e-filing systems as it has already been mentioned above. Fisco Online,the Tax Agency e-filing system dedicated to citizens for submitting tax returns autonomously, did not experience the same results that, on the contrary, are not promising.

In "per via Gallucci" or "gli orari della città" cases, the idea was to solicit directly citizens both through the UNOX1 system and through a traditional advertising campaign. For sure, these instruments were important as it is supposed that if someone is registered in one of the mailing lists of the Municipality and is familiar with IT, he/she will consider to be involved actively in the government of the city. Nevertheless, this was only an auspice and a presumption that citizens would take advantage of e-participation tools.

In this regard, it is considered interesting the role of the local council that regrouped a significant number of participants to the two cases of e-participation under examination. Was it only by chance that this group of people decided to take advantage of these tools in order to be more incisive on matter at stake? So, can this local council be considered a social broker? Which other players can play a similar role without biasing the level of participation? Can municipalities stimulate the social, political and institutional context in order to constitute a number of players able to make participation effective and fruitful even through electronic means?

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