

Online participation empowers citizens vis-à-vis politics, it stimulates political engagement, it contributes to a more participatory democracy. **Does it not?**

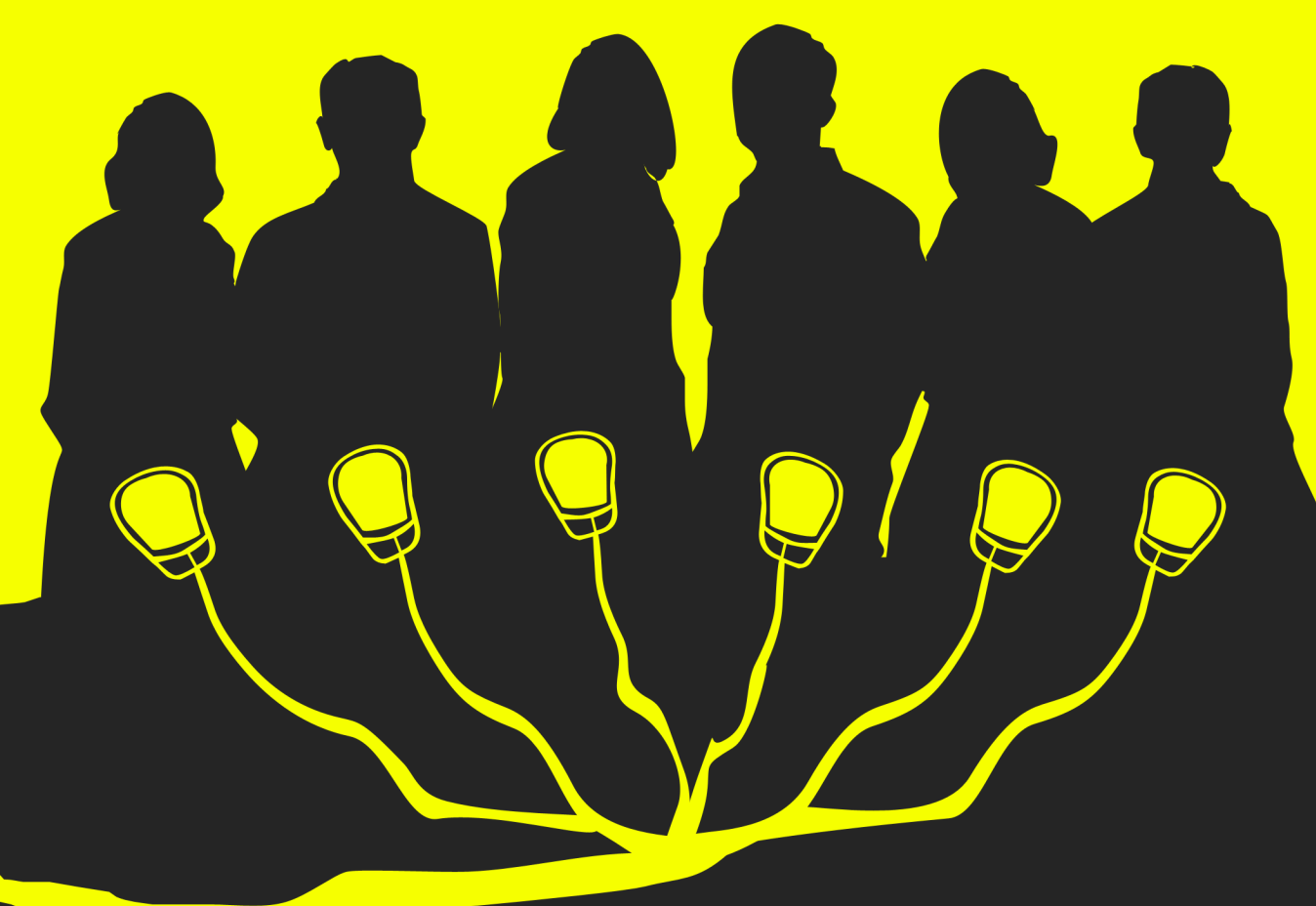
Beyond the Internet rhetoric of politicians, this research on e-participation seeks answers by exploring the perspective of the citizens. Linking **political theory** to **new media studies**, the project investigates the relations between citizen engagement in local e-participation initiatives on one side, and political attitudes along with off-line political behaviours on the other. The context under scrutiny is **Italy**, a Country renowned, amongst the many reasons, for political instabilities, peculiar media environment and widespread citizen distrust towards the political realm. The research offers an angle to effectively unveil the potential of emerging e-participation initiatives, with a chance to ultimately challenge the current state of affairs. In fact, although presented with extreme promotional verve by Italian politicians, the vast majority of e-participation initiatives still operate as empty shells, suggesting that Italy may be in need of a much more substantial commitment to e-democracy goals.

Democracy needs **citizens** to feel that they count in the political sphere. Is e-participation related to this feeling of **efficacy**? And how?

To theoretically frame this project, assumptions from **participatory theories of democracy** are merged into a **representative model**, such is that of nowadays Western Countries dominated by the liberal paradigm. Whereas traditional liberal accounts confine citizen attitudes to the role of predictors of participation, participatory claims strongly remind us that the same attitudes can be influenced by participation itself. Hence a (normative) view of **participation as a self-propelling force**. In light of this suggestion, e-participation will be tested on its influential capabilities towards: 1. other forms of political participation (including off-line behaviours); 2. the attitude known as **sense of political efficacy** (Spe). This last parameter is widely recognized as an indicator of **healthy democracy**. It comprises two dimensions: **1. internal efficacy**, as a citizen's perception of her ability to influence the political arena; **2. external efficacy**, as a citizen's perception of how politicians respond to influence attempts. By adopting this bi-dimensional parameter, power relations that characterize participation processes become acknowledged. In fact, Spe intrinsically incorporates the citizens' appraisal of the power relations operating in the context of reference.

Case-studies: Italian e-forums. Methods: **survey and interviews**. Why the **local** shall be central in e-participation

How does participation in a local e-forum relate (and possibly cause change) to the sense of political efficacy of participating citizens and to other forms of political participation that the citizens may engage with? The answer is sought in a selection of e-participation initiatives that refer to specific **local contexts** (municipality-level, district-level). Some are promoted by local governments within the frame of regional programmes, while others are managed and sustained spontaneously by groups of citizens. The focus given to locality hints at the common point amongst political theorists of **local participation as the necessary training ground for political engagement at higher levels**. Whereas the technological scope of the Internet can be seen as global, the enabling role of the Net for democratic citizenship may as well be fruitful, or even crucial, when expressed at the local level. Methods employed include both **quantitative and qualitative work** (small-scale survey and individual interviews). Triangulation of different methods becomes a fundamental objective if one aims at exposing not only the presence and the intensity of relations between relevant factors, but also the motivational shades that lie behind.



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The outlined research project is work-in-progress. **Scope and aims of this research may change in the future**. At the present time, the researcher is carrying out empirical work. Thanks go to: supervisors Dr. Damian Tambini and Dr. Bart Cammaerts; Dr. Hellen Helsper for her advice on methods; all members of Media@lse academic and administrative staff; fellow Phd students in the department.

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