Engaging Citizens:
How can Public Institutions Take Advantage of ICT for More Inclusion?

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Introduction

Information and communication technologies (ICT) have supported the emergence of online citizens' communities and non-institutional actors involved in politics, who have shaped public opinion on a number of issues. In parallel to a relative decline in formal civic engagement – both in terms of voters' turnout or political party membership – new kinds of participation fostered by digital media are influencing policy initiatives and government behaviour[1]. The new possibilities offered by the internet enable ordinary citizens or civil society stakeholders to voice their opinions, to organise and mobilise themselves as well as to interact with public officials[2].

Public institutions- referred to as bodies from all levels of government, national, local, regional or European- have a substantial role to play in the fostering of citizens' involvement in public affairs through digital communication channels- regularly used by an increasing number of people around the globe. Information technology, by reason of its networking and linkage capacity is a crucial factor in strengthening civic engagement and ensuring a link between governmental organisations and grassroots. What is the relevance of digital media in the public participation challenge? How can public institutions use information technology to revive citizens' interest in public affairs? Our view is that governments may build on the connectivity effect of online tools to encourage constituents' participation in the policy process and get engaged in a two-way interaction with the public to better serve those who elect them.

Creating the conditions for citizens' empowerment

Citizens' engagement in the public debate lies to a great extent in the availability of channels for participation. Information and communication technologies play a great role in widening the possibilities for accessing knowledge and expressing one's opinions. Consequently public institutions have a responsibility to make sure that people have access and capacity to use digital tools in order to let them be active citizens.

In the European Union[3], citizens have increasing access to ICT, whether by phone, computer or internet access; however 43% of European households still do not have access to an internet connection at home. Moreover, there are also significant disparities

among EU countries in terms of broadband availability, with top ranking Member States, such as the Netherlands (92%), Denmark (87%) and Sweden (87%); meanwhile, Bulgaria and Romania are lagging behind the European average where respectively 37% and 42% of the population have the internet at home.

Overcoming the physical and cultural barriers that prevent people from taking advantage of online opportunities is a fundamental mission of governments in the internet age. Citizens need to be supported in the quest for digital empowerment through the creation of favourable conditions for skills enhancement. Developing interest and trust in technology may increase people's motivation to get online and grasp the benefits of digital engagement.

Similarly, people's involvement in society needs to be encouraged by public authorities. The availability of information about government activities is likely to enhance citizens' capacity to intervene in the public debate. In this view, public authorities could compensate the often-claimed lack of visibility and attractiveness of complex governmental issues, especially at European level, by providing clear and accessible information about the political system, parties' functioning and governmental policies. Digital channels can potentially make a great contribution to reducing the distance between institutions and the people.

Figure 1: Households in Europe having an internet connection- Source: Eurobarometer survey conducted by TNS Opinion & Social (October 2010)

Map Legend
- 70% - 100%
- 61% - 70%
- 51% - 60%
- 41% - 50%
- 0% - 40%
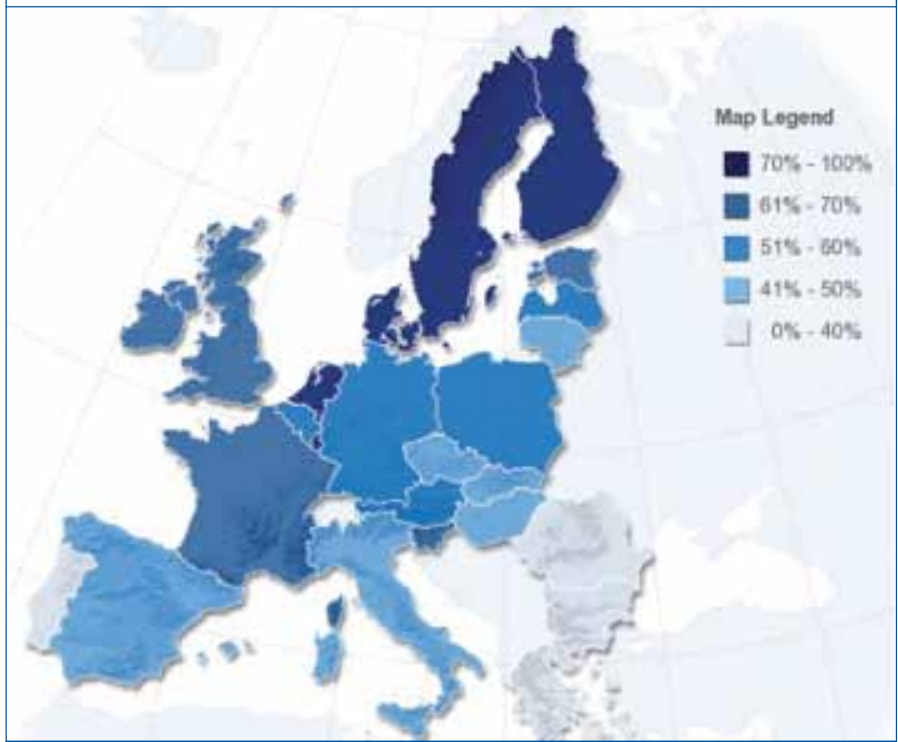
© European Union, eCommunications household survey: The results of a special Euro-barometer survey, October 2010, p. 79.

To bridge the gap between governments and constituents, a framework for political dialogue needs to be established to ensure that citizens are updated on governmental topics and policy leaders take into account the electorate's views. Technology has the potential to nurture political participation by offering the means to exchange ideas and widespread information among constituents.

An Austrian model?

In Austria[4], an electronic democracy model was established to organise the political debate in a digital environment. By connecting online and offline participation within a whole strategy for public participation, Austrian authorities developed standards for online participation including communication and transparency as objectives for a more open decision making (Standards for public participation, 2008).

In addition to this political framework, a successful project for online deliberation was set up in 2002 called the *Wahlkabine*[5] ('polling booth') which aimed to help citizens understand political views and party positions before elections. This commitment to citizenry empowerment through a wider access to information and deliberation processes contributed to fostering democratic participation and people's interest in the public debate.

Figure 2: Image of the Wahlkabine.at portal

Knowledge, trust and participation as key principles

In Norris's[6] view, the civic engagement concept entails three fundamental dimensions which are the political knowledge, trust and participation. Governments' pro-activeness in offering public participation tools have a marginal influence upon citizen engagement but it may, however, greatly influence people's resources and opportunities to be active political actors if they wish to do so. In this respect, the use of information technology to publicise political debates, policy developments and governmental data may foster interest and participation from civil society. Existing research on public sector information[7] shows that transparency and the availability of public documents on the web promote citizens' confidence and interest in the policy-making process. Comprehensive and relevant government data strengthens people's availability to find information on policy issues in an efficient way. Nevertheless, the democratic interaction between public authorities and grassroots should not be limited to appropriate information delivery but rather developed into a continuous dialogue.

Engaging in a two-way interaction with citizens

Public entities willing to engage in a two-way interaction with constituents need to develop comprehensive communication models which incorporate the latest technological developments. Indeed recent evolutions brought about by information technology diffusion in society and the high impact of the internet on people's perception of politicians and governments imply that the public sector adjusts its practices to such changes.

The use of ICT- and especially the internet- for government-citizens interactions implies a change in the nature of communication itself, not just in its form. Traditional hierarchical communication systems, as developed by governmental bureaucracies, become less effective in a world where horizontal networks and loose informal coalitions rule[8]. Digital tools dramatically reduce communication costs while increasing speed and extend potential recipient reach. The contemporary repertoire for civic engagement offered by new media requires a new approach to political debate in which participants need to be considered on an equal basis. Those citizens who are interested in participating in online public discussions will expect their input to be acknowledged and integrated in the policy-making process. To facilitate constituents' participation in online political fora, content, language and resources need to be easily accessible.
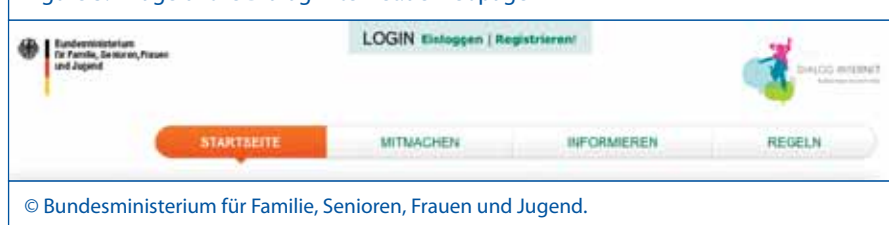
The German federal government developed online communication platforms to stimulate citizens' dialogue[9]. Even though those who participate in online political discussions could also be engaged in other traditional participation media anyway, the internet provides a chance to include virtual communities which may not be otherwise involved in political debates. In the German case, citizens are consulted in a structured way on a wide range of issues, such as sustainable development, future technologies or family policies, in order to achieve common policy goals. Digital tools offer opportunities for stimulating the political debate in a different way and to reach less engaged constituents by reducing the difficulty of expressing an individual's views and providing easier access to political deliberation.

Figure 3: Image of the Dialog-internet.de webpage

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Real-time communication patterns emphasised by the current surge of social media tend to increase the need for responsiveness and transparency in public deliberation while developing online relations with citizens[10]. Therefore the adoption of innovative ICT tools to support interactive communication processes between public administration and constituents needs to be managed in a strategic way. Such management involves the development of a long-term vision considering the risks and benefits of next generation communication channels to ensure consistency and sustainability. A careful planning of actions as well as the adequate allocation of resources may guide the public sector's leap into new media. A coordinated approach to balance the effects of such new communication modes could include standards and guidelines to guide public participation. Strategic planning, as well as a legal and political framework that facilitates access to public institutions, are among the key policy steps required for any constructive political dialogue with constituents.

Conclusion

Information and communication technologies have a substantial role to play in enabling governments to do a better job as regards citizens' involvement in the policy process. To achieve the objective of a more open and responsive government, commensurate with good governance principles, public authorities need to develop expertise and experience in managing digital resources. ICT-based interaction between public institutions and constituents is a lengthy process which demands political commitment and leadership.

Developing openness and transparency through digital means requires a significant change in the way public administration traditionally works. The requirements for the public sector to adapt to such new communication modes involve different aspects. At an organisational level, information technology tends to make interactions less formal and more spontaneous, therefore flexibility and open mindsets in communications and any resultant administrative tasks. The innovation brought about by ever-evolving technologies implies that civil servants learn from new practices and are empowered through alternative ways of reaching out to citizens. Such a change is only effective when organisational and hierarchical barriers are lowered. Furthermore, from a technical and legal point of view, new forms of communication have deep implications on the status of public sector information and communication which need to be anticipated and managed. At the political and strategic level, a clear framing of goals and objectives is a prerequisite for enabling the public sector to take advantage of online resources to communicate with the public.

Notes

[1] Frissen, V., (2005), *The e-mancipation of the citizen and the future of e-government in Practice eGovernment: A Global Perspective*, Khosrow-Pour Ed. IGI Global.
[2] Norris (2001), *The Digital Divide*, Cambridge University Press.
[3] European Commission (2010), eCommunications household survey: *The results of a special Eurobarometer*. TNS Opinion & Social. http://ec.europa.eu/information_society/policy/ecomm/library/ext_studies/index_en.htm#2010
[4] Reinsalu, K. (2009), Handbook on eDemocracy, EPACE Project.
[5] www.wahlkabine.at (2009) Project rated as a good practice example in the above mentioned: *Handbook on eDemocracy*, EPACE Project.
[6] Norris (2001), *The Digital Divide*, Cambridge University Press.
[7] *Ibid.*
[8] *Ibid.*
[9] www.buergerdialog-bmbf.de, http://dialog-internet.de
[10] Archmann, S. and Guiffart, A. (forthcoming), *The Use of Social Media in Public Administration: Towards Citizens' Empowerment*, for the METTEG 11 Conference.