

Putting eParticipation research on the service of Civil Society

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Abstract: eParticipation research needs to become more closely aligned with citizens and civil society needs. The unavailability of eDemocracy systems that are fully adapted to the characteristics and capacities of civil society makes difficult for civic organizations to seize the potential of ICTs to promote civic participation. Since they don't have the capacity and knowledge required to design and build those systems, as much as eParticipation researchers don't have the capacity to experiment, leverage and replicate eParticipation experiences, such an alliance between researchers and civic organizations could prove to be very fruitful. By working cross-disciplinarily, eParticipation researchers will first need to identify civic organizations' needs and then use them as guiding objectives for their research. Evaluation of the results should increasingly consider civil society feed-back. This could probably be the most effective and quickest way to foster eParticipation.

Keywords: civic engagement, civil society, e-Participation research

In a recent conference hold in Tallinn to commemorate the 5th anniversary of the Estonian eDemocracy project "Today I decide", Prof. Stephen Coleman reflected on the role that governments should play with regard to eDemocracy initiatives:

"If you had asked me ten years ago, I would have said very firmly: 'we need government to take the lead in this area'. I now don't think that anymore. Cause I've watched government trying to do it. I take the view that the best initiatives always come from citizens himself. And the best two things governments can do are: first, get out of the way; second, give them some money. In reverse order." (Coleman 2006)

In a similar way, we could ask ourselves: What role should eParticipation researchers and research institutions play with regard to e-Democracy initiatives? The most candid answer we could possibly give is: first, get out of the way; second, don't take away public money that citizens could better use.

Trying to summarize this reasoning in a positive way, this paper argues that we -the community of eParticipation researchers- should increasingly adopt an innovative attitude for our research: we need to engage in a new kind of collaboration with citizens and social movements, incorporating their needs as one of our prior research objectives, and thus strive to support their participatory activities and initiatives in a practical way.

This kind of collaboration is currently specially required for the design of new tools and systems for eDemocracy and contrasts strongly with the approach taken so far in most eParticipation experiences, which have traditionally been more aligned with government's requests than with citizens' and civic organizations' needs. At best, citizens and civic organizations are invited to participate in the projects' pilot experiences and to provide some limited feed-back, but they don't usually play a determinant role establishing the projects' objectives, design and evaluation methods.

This tendency to disregard civil society is more extended than what we could initially think. As an example, we could have a look at some recent DEMO-Net's documents, as the presentation that describes DEMO-Net objectives, structure and partner relationships (Fraser 2006: p. 14), where no explicit mention to civil society is included. Similarly, if we recall the objectives of this very research workshop, they aim "to identify eParticipation research challenges for both researchers and government", apparently leaving all other players out of the game. Where has been civil society left?

Our claim on the necessity of a closer alignment of civic organizations needs and eParticipation research is based on some of the special characteristics of the eParticipation field:

- **Barriers to eParticipation** are of different nature and include legal, organizational, political, cultural and technological hindrances (Prieto Martín 2004). Most of them are extremely difficult to overcome, as participation actually aims to introduce changes in the core of our societies' political and power institutions. Cultural attitudes, on their part, require long periods of time to evolve. Technological barriers should be the ones easier to handle, but to date they have also posed serious challenges.

Most traditional civic organizations are having tremendous difficulties to exploit the potential of ITCs for mobilizing citizen participation (Barraket 2005; Brundin 2005). This is primarily because there are no tools available, which are adapted to the capacities, necessities and characteristics of civic participation, and civic organizations don't have the capacity to develop them themselves. It must be noted that most of the technological tools and concepts required to build citizen participation systems are already available; it's a matter of assembling them in a consistent, knowledgeable and usable way.

Moreover, even if most citizens and established civic organizations initially show some skepticism about the possibilities to use Internet for participation, they are also quick to recognize useful tools and start using them (Dutta-Bergman 2005; Stephens et al. 2006). We cannot afford not to have eParticipation tools available, as they could help to empower citizens and thus foster a generalization of civil society's eParticipation initiatives, which in turn will exercise the pressure required to overcome the other, more resilient, barriers to eParticipation.

Synergy building potential is enormous. This collaborative approach will, in fact, prove very fruitful for eParticipation researchers, as we will be able to benefit from the civic organizations' capacity to autonomously experiment with, leverage and replicate eParticipation experiences. By putting ourselves on the service of civil society and contribute with our eParticipation know-how to the design of eDemocracy processes and systems that are flexible, sustainable and, in short, adapted for generalized use by citizens and civic organizations, we can actually influence them, so they can be more easily used in our research (Prieto Martín 2005: p. 23). By helping to create our object of study, we'll be able to further increase our knowledge about it, refine our hypothesis, our experimental approach, etc.

- Because of **Internet leveraging and replicating capacities**, these synergies would increasingly reach society as a whole. Getting the eDemocracy tools and processes in the hands of civil society is just one first step, but it could act as a catalytic for further developments. The current situation on the eParticipation field somehow resembles the one of computers before the first Graphical Operative Systems –specially, Windows– were made available to the general public: no wonder only geeks were using computers at that time; no wonder they are used everywhere now.

To finalize, I'd like to summarize the most important implications of this collaborative approach on our eParticipation research practices:

- **Increased emphasis on applied and practical research** is required, so that civil society needs are satisfied. We need to progressively think more in terms of tools and processes, in terms of sustainability, flexibility and reusability, in terms of impact and utility of our research. But this is actually nothing new. The eParticipation collaborative approach does not mean doing different things, but rather rebalancing their significance. If we consider that our ratio for "Theorizing / Opportunistic evaluation / Purposed experimentation / eParticipation tools development" could currently be 40/35/15/10, we could well try to attain a healthier 20/25/35/20 ratio.
- **Cross-disciplinary teams and research:** inputs and know-how from different disciplines (sociology, political sciences, systems engineering, etc.) are all required, not to be added but to be multiplied; these teams must be able to melt different perspectives and forge innovative approaches and solutions. Their members have to be able to communicate with each other -not such an easy task as it could seem- and with civil society representatives.
- **Alliances with civil society representatives** need to be an integral part of our research agenda. We have to consider their needs -conscious as well as unconscious- as part of our research objectives and keep continuously open to their critics and suggestions. Finally, they should play a determinant role on the evaluations of the projects results and its dissemination.

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Putting e-Participation Research on the Service of Civil Society

- I. Science, 'unscience' and e-Participation
- II. e-Participation Research and Civil Society
- III. Implications on Research Practices

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Tale of the lost key and the drunk researchers

An important key was lost in the cellar, and three researchers try to find it...



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In the Garden: Example Plato: theories away from reality. Sometimes even normative conclusions...

Under the street light: Example economists, who just like mathematics, statistics, numbers!! Sure, sometimes those numbers doesn't make much sense, but... We are too busy with our calculations to worry about that.

In the office of the major: conflicts of interest. Financial stability or the funding of the projects. For sure, you'll not find the key, but nevertheless, you have powerful friends. A similar pressure comes from the "performance" worry of most researchers: publish, publish, publish... no matter what!

It's not too bad. Actually, this combination has been able to make science sometimes. But... It actually depends on the subject studied.

There is a REAL risk of becoming irrelevant as researchers. In the industrial revolution, which was responsible for changing the world's balance of power for the almost three centuries, this is what happened. Universities didn't do much. It was craftsmen who changed the world.

Science, 'unscience' and e-Participation e-Participation Research and Civil Society Implications on Research Practices

The e-Participation domain

e-Participation does not exist

At most, it's like a baby or like bacterial cultures, which necessarily need to first be nurtured to be fully understood

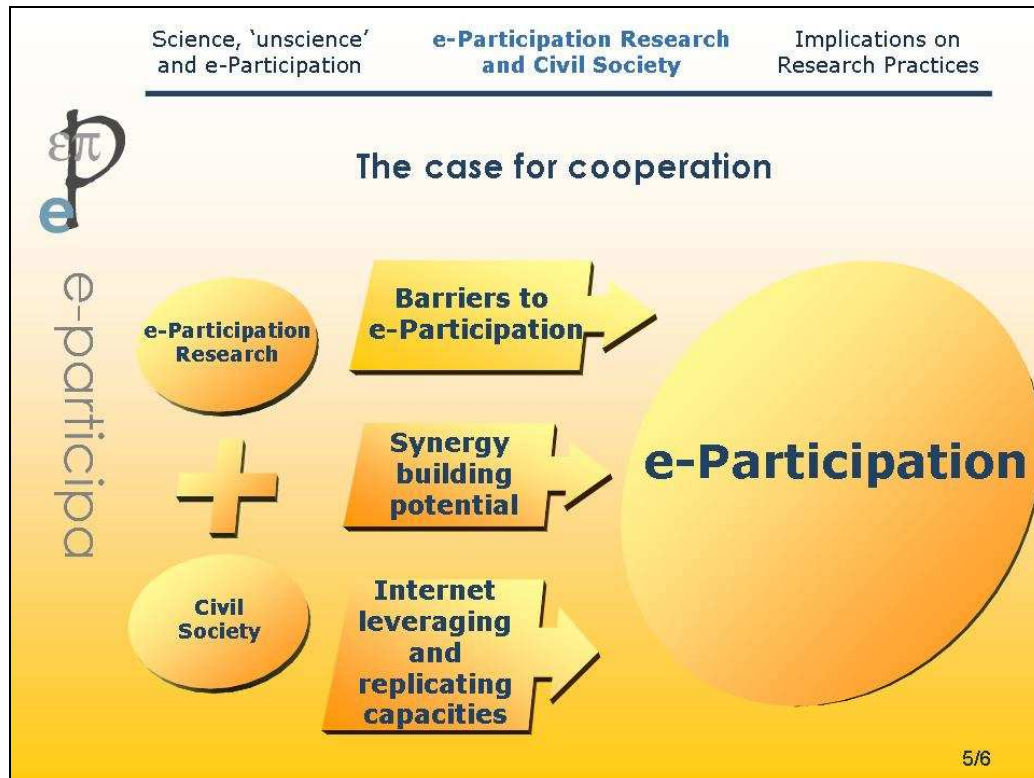
Governments are not the best partners

What about Civil Society?

"If you had asked me ten years ago, I would have said very firmly: 'we need government to take the lead in this area'. I now don't think that anymore. Cause I've watched government trying to do it. I take the view that the best initiatives always come from citizens himself. And the best two things governments can do are: first, get out of the way; second, give them some money. In reverse order." (Stephen Coleman, 2006)

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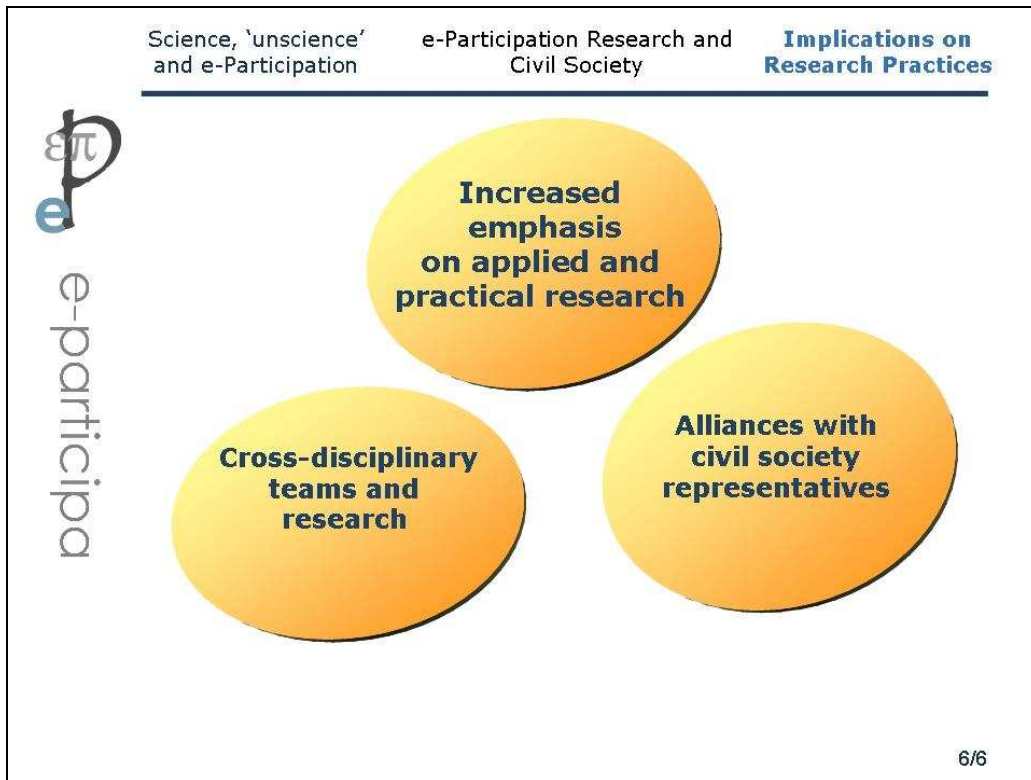
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