eParticipation and Social Media: a Symbiotic Relationship?

This paper charts the evolution of eParticipation projects and discusses the uptake of social media by the latest wave of eParticipation projects funded under the CIP PSP 2009 call, building on the lessons learned by the pioneering eParticipation Preparatory Action. The shift towards social media is clearly visible on two currently active projects: Puzzled by Policy and OurSpace. This paper proposes that eParticipation projects benefit from the use of social media in two fundamental ways: 1) Promotion of projects via internationally popular social networks such as Facebook makes eParticipation platforms more visible to audiences otherwise hard to reach. These networks also assist in targeting specific audiences interested in the project’s subject matter. 2) Designing eParticipation projects from a social media standpoint enhances the likelihood of eParticipation becoming part of citizens’ everyday lives. Moreover, it is suggested that the development of new eParticipation tools should be conducted in concert with the latest advances in social media to ensure eParticipation is not sidelined as an online activity, failing to engage a new generation of European citizens, whose online behaviour no longer reflects the traditional models of participation through proprietary web spaces.

Keywords
eParticipation, Social Media, eGovernment

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1. Introduction

In the last decade the European Commission (EC) has led the promotion and support of initiatives aiming to enhance political participation of citizens through the use of Information and Communication Technologies (ICT). Since 2005, the EC has launched - as part of the 5th and 6th Framework Programmes - a Preparatory Action on eParticipation and from 2006 to 2008 funded over 20 eParticipation projects targeting various themes with the ultimate aim of testing eParticipation on a European scale. The first three waves of eParticipation projects ended in 2010/2011. Some of these projects enjoyed huge success, while others failed to achieve widespread uptake, but all contributed to a deeper understanding of the environment in which eParticipation functions and the methodology for achieving desired results. The production of reports assessing the impact of the eParticipation Preparatory Action, such as the Impact Assessment and the Consolidated Report written by the eParticipation monitoring project ‘Momentum’ (Charalabidis, 2010) and the publication of other scientific papers examining the success of the completed eParticipation initiatives, such as ‘On Sustainable Participation’ (Molinari, 2010), all deepened this general understanding.

Several key lessons can be drawn from these reports: a) the number of participants in project pilots was below the predicted levels, b) the impact of the projects on decision-making was somewhat limited and, c) most projects did not outlive their funding schemes and the project outcomes therefore had limited sustainability options.

Based on the impact assessment reports and literature evaluating the success of the eParticipation projects, the EC launched the ICT Policy Support Programme (CIP PSP CALL 3bis). Special reference should be made to objective 3.5: eParticipation - empower and involve citizens in transparent decision making in the EU - under which several new projects were funded. Contrary to the first three waves of eParticipation projects, the emphasis of this call was not on developing new ICT, rather on: 1) using new trends in communication such as social media to generate mass participation, 2) deploying and enhancing existing validated ICT, and 3) achieving project sustainability. This paper will examine the uptake of social media by the eParticipation projects funded under ICT PSP in 2009, using the following case studies: Puzzled by Policy and OurSpace. In particular, this paper will analyse the specific use of social media by the two aforementioned projects, propose the benefits social media can deliver that traditional eParticipation tools cannot and based on the case studies, it will suggest the ways social media should be best implemented to maximise the success rates of eParticipation projects and initiatives.

2. Identifying New Trends in eParticipation

In the early 2000s, Europe recognised the need to follow the American style of more aggressive government, driven by technological innovation in the private sector (Nixon, 2007). As a result, the EU adopted several strategies aiming to make Europe more competitive on the global scale. ‘eEurope 2002’, part of the Lisbon Strategy, recognised the value of the Internet and encouraged its broad take up by governments, citizens and businesses, while ensuring all users are equipped with the appropriate competencies and skills. The follow-up ‘eEurope 2005’ strategy aimed to modernise and integrate public services through the newly deployed internet infrastructure, allowing eGovernment to expand into new areas such as health and education. In addition, the strategy supported the growth of mobile services and ICT-based knowledge management, while addressing the issues of internet security and interoperability. The follow-up initiative ‘e2010’ aimed to position Europe as the foremost facilitator of innovation, embracing the full use of ICT and developing a true information society (Nixon, 2007).
In this context, eGovernment was placed at the forefront of the e2010 initiative as the key driver of European transformation into a fully functional information society. eParticipation was promoted and used as an active tool for encouraging engagement with democratic processes as well as motivating the fulfilment of civic duties. Various eParticipation projects developed during the mid and late 2000s having helped to form a knowledge base for identifying the key criteria that are necessary for successfully embedding eParticipation in the organisation of society. By tracking the evolution of the eParticipation projects funded under the eParticipation Preparatory Action, certain patterns that allow for a better understanding of what tools are can be detected; additionally, strategies eParticipation projects must entail in order to reach their objectives. The most significant feature of successful projects is the emphasis on the deployed ICT, the maturity of the ICT, as well as the newest trends in online interaction. Furthermore, higher success rates were noted for projects deploying eParticipation tools tailored to the technical skills of the end-user emphasising easy-to-use interfaces and visually appealing graphic designs. In essence, the development of eParticipation projects reveals a common trend: the format of the project is of paramount importance relating to its long-term impacts, sustainability prospects and society's acceptance (Millard et al., 2009).

3. Embracing Social Media

Nowadays, social media represents a disproportionately high share of internet traffic, with people spending increasing amounts of time on sites such as Facebook, YouTube and Twitter. Moreover, these types of online activities are perceived as trendy, convenient, easy-to-use and universally appealing, revealing the following correlation: The strengths of social media are the alleged weaknesses of the pioneering eParticipation projects (Sæbø, 2008). It has been acknowledged that “given the importance of eParticipation to Europe’s future, it is essential to experiment with these new tools to support European policy making and democracy, also because of the leadership and economic advantages this will bring” (EC, 2009: 28). Thus, the use of social media can be considered as a logical choice for filling in the gaps that prevent eParticipation from becoming part of people’s lives in the following ways: 1) increasing general awareness of the issues at stake, 2) making eParticipation platforms more accessible to audiences otherwise not engaged in political debates and, 3) utilising the newest trends in online communications to its advantage, making users’ participation easier and more intuitive.

In order to illustrate the need of linking eParticipation with social media, the validity of these theoretical claims must be strengthened by showing the exploitation of social media by two currently running eParticipation projects funded under CIP PSP 2009.

4. Case Studies

4.1 Puzzled by Policy

‘Puzzled by Policy’ is an online platform that encourages people to become actively involved in discussions concerning immigration policies across Europe as well as increases interaction levels between various stakeholders, mainly ordinary citizens and decision-makers. Moreover, Puzzled by Policy gives people a medium to exchange opinions and ideas across the borders of their own countries with the potential of influencing public policy at the European level. From a practical perspective, the Puzzled by Policy pilot is currently deployed in four countries: Italy, Greece, Spain and Hungary. The key features of this platform allow users to: 1) identify where their views on immigration stand in relation to current policies in the field, 2) join online discussions on different
strands of immigration-related policies and, 3) install the Puzzled by Policy widget on their platform of choice in order to share it with friends and engage directly with policy-makers.

The key rationale behind designing Puzzled by Policy project was to “combine tried and tested eParticipation concepts and tools such as EU Profiler and a debate forum (U-Debate), with new widget applications to reduce the complexity of decision making at the EU level and ‘push’ the platform to popular social media sites such as Facebook as well as to users own desktop and mobile devices - in effect bringing policymaking ‘to the people’ rather than relying on people to come to a specific site” (Puzzled by Policy, 2012).

Apart from furthering the wider policy objectives, the project embraces the use of social media to reach mass audiences and thus follows the latest web 2.0 trend as “today, everything is about Social Media” (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010: 67). To date, the project has been successful in realising the set objectives. The project offers countless interactive features to its users who can install the PbP widget on anyone’s social network, blog or other destination and share the widget with friends or colleagues. Installing and sharing the widget allows the user to see the views of his/her friends on the same immigration issues and leads the user into a debate on the subject. In addition the project can be followed on social media sites such as Facebook, Twitter, Linked in, Flicker and YouTube. The platform places a great emphasis on becoming better known via users’ recommendations to their friends: one of the most influential functions of the social media. Most importantly, the user-driven community created by the project on various social media sites promises the project sustainability even without direct funding from the EC. Thus, the use of social media for increasing eParticipation can be an efficient, cost-effective way to establish continued presence for policy-projects, allowing them to become part and parcel of people’s everyday lives.

4.2 OurSpace

Social networking plays an increasingly important role in young people’s lives, as belonging to various online social networking sites has become the norm for opinion and news exchanges while serving as the key source of youth daily entertainment. At the same time, young people are becoming more disengaged from any political processes both at the national and supra-national levels. The outcome of the 2009 European Elections confirms that a vast gap exists between European decision-makers and their citizens. More than two-thirds of voters between 18 and 24 did not vote in the 2009 European elections (DG Communications, 2009). According to a research conducted by SEK-Youth in 2004, only 35 % of young people in the EU know their rights. Young people have a limited knowledge of the EU legislation and their obligations in the new European framework (Matsas, 2005). OurSpace is a project that attempts to bridge this gap by “contributing towards bringing the EU closer to the youth by improving their role within the democratic system of the EC through the use of ICT” (OurSpace, 2012).

OurSpace embraces the success of social media as its key foundation for furthering eParticipation in two separate but equally important directions. First of all, the project’s format as a social networking site, aiming to include the commonly used features such as user’s profile, invitations, recommendations, rating and statistics, is a way to appeal to young audiences that have been taking full advantage of similar sites in different areas. OurSpace is reaching to wide audiences by its own Android App, iGoogle gadget and a Facebook app, enabling mobile access to the platform and adjusting to the current trend that an increasing number of people use their mobile phones rather than their laptops to engage in online activities. Secondly, the promotion of OurSpace on very popular social networking sites, such as Facebook and Twitter, generates a wide user base from young audiences.
Having social media embedded at the core of the OurSpace design makes youth involvement in political and social debates more realistic and prevents the project from being rejected by its target users for being ‘old-fashioned’ and too complicated to use. In short, OurSpace demonstrates the attempt to tailor traditional eParticipation tools based on the dominant trends of web 2.0.

5. Analysis of the Case Studies

The two case studies described in the previous section demonstrate the recent efforts of eParticipation to place social media at the core of the projects’ design. The first presented project, Puzzled by Policy, uses social media to reach out to masses, while the later project OurSpace uses the format of a social media platform to appeal to its target users - the young people.

Nearly two years into the projects, the first signs of successes and failures from using social media to achieve the projects’ objectives can be observed. Puzzled by Policy launched its pilots in February 2012 and by May 2012 the widget has been downloaded more than 750 times, through it social media presence attracted more than 3 000 users participating in the debates and had more nearly 2 000 people to complete the profiler. OurSpace opened its pilots in May and, only after few weeks in operation, attracted more than 300 posts and 45 different debates from more than 250 active users. Based on the current trend of preliminary results, Puzzled by Policy and OurSpace are expected to significantly outperform previous eParticipation projects because of the use of social media.

Thus, it can be argued that the use of social media is complementary to traditional eParticipation tools and practices and can in fact increase user engagement.

6. Conclusions

Having examined the newest trends in ICT development and online activities as well as the latest eParticipation tools, it has been suggested that eParticipation has higher chances of succeeding, if it engages citizens through content channels that are otherwise popular, rather than operating independently of them. eParticipation is more effective as a passive content requirement of interface behaviour (social media interfaces) rather than as an active requirement of citizens to navigate to a dedicated portal to engage in these activities. In other words, utilising people’s existing preferences for engagement in online activities should shape eParticipation and not the other way around. As people spend an increasing amount of time using social media, its inclusion in eParticipation tools is logical as well as a necessary development, and it can be predicted that the future of eParticipation will be intrinsically linked to the newest developments and trends in the field of social media. As presented by the two case studies examined in this paper, social media can be exploited to the advantage of eParticipation in two ways. Firstly, eParticipation projects can utilise popular social media platforms such as Facebook and Twitter to engage mass audiences and raise awareness about the project, as it has been done in the case of Puzzled by Policy. Secondly, if a certain eParticipation project can succeed to take the form of a social media site, as is happening with OurSpace, these types of developments should be highly encouraged.

In short, by linking social media to previously existing eParticipation tools, the overarching objective of eParticipation - engagement of audiences that usually are not active participants in policy processes - can be significantly enhanced. Hence, the future creation of eParticipation projects should go hand in hand with the newest developments in social media to increase the chance of people perceiving active interaction within policy processes as easy and accessible as logging into Facebook. The key to ensuring that eParticipation does not become a sidelined activity is to move beyond proprietary web platforms toward greater integration with existing social media, integrating eParticipation into the online behaviours of citizens across Europe.
7. References


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