Current social context and implications for eParticipation

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Abstract. The panel will address the implications and the challenges for the design, implementation, and deployment of eParticipation systems and online environments that are appropriate to the current socio-political context.

The economic crisis in Europe and worldwide, calls for a stronger involvement of people in public affairs. The Spanish Indignados who demand "Democracia Real Ya!" (Real Democracy Right Now!), the Occupy Movement, the political demands in Italy, Greece, India, Brazil, the Middle East and elsewhere, call for more citizen participation in public decisions. This has many implications for the design, implementation, and deployment of eParticipation systems and online environments. These are *socio*-technological systems and therefore shouldn't be defined or governed solely via technical decisions. They are intended to empower people, communities, and governments as well towards new forms of civic collaboration and to explore new forms of democracy at the same time. The complexity and urgency of the challenges now facing societies around the world stresses our current systems and compels us to think creatively as well as practically. The development of equitable and effective eParticipation systems will require social as well as technological innovation. They represent important potential foundation for the civic intelligence [Sc01] that our historical circumstances demand.

The Internet developed as a worldwide platform for sharing and organizing knowledge and, hence, provides a potentially rich platform for the cultivation and exercise of civic intelligence. Recently, social media was used as a key tool for enabling citizen protests and opposition to non democratic governments empowering and extending the networks of social relationships a society consists of. Castells [Ca12] claims: "It was in the connection between social networks on the Internet and social networks in people lives where the protest was forged. […] Thus, the precondition for the revolts was the existence of an internet culture, made up of bloggers, social networks and cyberactivism." However, there is no evidence, and it is

hard to believe that current social media, owned by private companies driven by business goals, can provide by themselves the support that is necessary to let these social innovators meet and renew "their" governments, when democratic elections take place. e-participation and e-democracy are research fields that are directly challenged to acknowledge these demands; the need for systems that support inclusive, distributed and democratic forms of deliberation and decision-making, both online and offline, emerges as a crucial issue. Researchers and developers within these fields hold a social responsibility within this complex and challenging scenario.

While the developers of eParticipation systems might not be directly affected by the state of society, the viability of the systems they develop will ultimately depend on the factors such as those discussed above. Hence, the developers must be at least indirectly involved in the defining the requirements that are outside the system itself, and must be aware of the impact of their design choices [De12]. While the need for specialists (including system and software designers) still exists, the conversations and other connections with the variety of actual and potential stakeholders and users must be respectful, rich, responsive, and mutually informative.

In the panel we will:
- explore external factors – generally varying from situation to situation – that need to be considered in the design of eParticipation systems;
- explore responsibilities and roles of the various social actors;
- explore factors that impinge on the social effectivity of the systems;
- explore mechanisms for addressing shortcomings;
- provide evidence that the development and/or adoption of adequate software tools and environments has impact on the democratic processes.

Hopefully, the panel will collect, discuss and prioritize possible recommendations for participative design processes and other interventions, through a process which in itself describes (and calls for) deliberative / participative systems.

References

[Ca12]   Castells, M.: Networks of Outrage and Hope: Social Movements in the Internet Age. University of California, Berkeley, 2012.

[De12]   De Cindio, F.: Guidelines for Designing Deliberative Digital Habitats: Learning from e-Participation for Open Data Initiatives. In (Davies, T.; Bawa, Z. Eds.): Special Issue: "Community Informatics and Open Government Data", The Journal of Community Informatics, Vol 8, No 2, 2012.

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