
Editorial

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Biographical notes: Clive Sanford received his PhD in Management Information Systems from the University of South Carolina and is currently an Associate Professor of Information Systems. He previously worked at Honeywell as an Engineer on the space shuttle project and has recently served as a Fulbright scholar and as a Peace Corps volunteer. He has published books and papers in journals such as *MIS Quarterly*, *Journal of Global Information Management*, *Information and Management*, and the *Journal of Database Management*. His current research is in IT adoption and switching.

Scientists from a variety of disciplines have studied different forms of social relations and social units, and the recent popularity of social networks and social networking on the Internet has kindled renewed interest in understanding the nature of social ties among actors, which can be a person, organisation, or nation. While, for example, social psychologists focus on affections, and economists investigate trade and organisational ties among firms, political scientists study power relations among actors. Other academics with expertise in government studies have traditionally espoused the public sphere as a theoretical conception of an ideal speech situation, where public reasoning is open and reflective, and different forms of argumentation are acceptable. This concept of the public sphere has evolved into social networks that were inspired by the early bourgeois European public spheres that consisted of conversations in meeting places, debates in the media, and political and voluntary associations. The success of the public sphere presupposes a normative discourse where communication skills are essential and everyone is an equal participant. Public spheres are composed of civil society, businesses, and individual citizens, and institutionalised procedures of governmental decision making are connected with the public sphere, whose legitimacy relies on a direct communicative and discursive foundation that foments a synergistic interaction between the constitutional democratic state and its governmental and legal institutions.

A cornerstone of democracy is the emphasis on public discussion of selected societal issues in order to arrive at a consensus or, at least, a majority opinion. The supposition is that no single actor can know all the facts or anticipate all the consequences of a proposed policy or action, and having an open process for public input and debate will result in better decisions. The legitimacy of institutionalised procedures of

governmental decision-making relies on a direct communicative and discursive foundation that foments interaction between the constitutional democratic state (its citizens) and its governmental and legal institutions. Therefore, in contrast to the more traditional hierarchical organisation of decision-making, participation in the rhizomatic horizontal networks between components of the public sphere, politicians, and government officials support a new structure of governance. Because of a finite supply of goods and societal issues that are competing for attention, this particular kind of social network interacts in a contested arena that is influenced by actors with money, moral clout, or other forms of power.

Citizens, non-governmental organisations, businesses, lobbyists, and pressure groups (who are all components of the public sphere) demand participation in order to further their own interests, either within the established political system or outside it through activism and civil disobedience. Participation contributes to deliberation, opinion forming, agenda setting, political decision-making, and feedback mechanisms. Governments and the public sphere are thus encouraging the use of information and communication technologies in order to improve on discourse and decision-making, which are engendered from participatory activities.

E-participation is a term that is used to describe the extension and transformation of participation and dialogues between components of the public sphere and the public sphere and government that are mediated by Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs). It synergistically augments democracy and the formal political processes through the use of ICT by facilitating, changing, and improving patterns of democratic deliberation and decision-making. This special issue of the IJEB is devoted to extending our understanding of the emerging research area of e-participation. The six research papers in this issue present to the academic and practitioner communities many ideas and results that contribute to the growing literature on e-participation. These papers are summarised according to the particular challenges and opportunities that they address.

Theoretical accounts of the relationship between technology and participation

Tambouris et al. identify priorities in e-participation areas of research and the ICT tools that are used in projects within the European Union in 'A survey of e-participation research projects in the European Union'. All of the surveyed projects have been, and are being, financially supported by the European Commission.

Administrative systems, technology applications and improvement programmes are understood as different forms of e-participation artefacts, and the role of the applied e-participation researcher is, thus, to support government institutions through the design and evaluation of these artefacts. The study on 'Designing the e-participation artefact' by Sanford and Rose views e-participation as applied research, in which researchers support government institutions by developing technology-enabled ways for citizens to participate in policy-making. They characterise three different types of e-participation design activities: *conceptualisation*, *development* and *dissemination*, and show how design science principles can be used to improve rigour and relevance in this kind of research.

Governmental and societal challenges

Improving access to the Internet and avoiding elite control and inequality is important for governments to consider when they address the digital divide. In 'ACM: a new index to measure the digital divide', Brandtweiner et al. observe a decrease in the rate of

growth of Internet usage and a persistent number of people who do not engage in online activities, and develop an index that accurately measures the extent of the digital divide by assessing the skills and motivation of users.

Socio-technical design of technologies and the participation and governance structures they are embedded in

An important and sometimes controversial governmental activity involves taxation and the agencies that are responsible for tax collection. In addition to governmental budgeting of available public funds, participatory budgeting includes citizens in the decisions that involve fund allocation. Kalikakis et al. stress the importance of participatory budgeting in their paper 'A participatory architecture for taxation and budgeting'. They propose a unified e-participation scheme in which the entire life cycle of public fund collection and spending is transparent, and describe the tools and operational workflows that are necessary for this scheme to succeed.

Evaluating e-participation genres

The effective use of the Internet by activists and online political groups is an example of its potential to support participatory processes and political discourse. It is, therefore, useful to decompose these activities into different features that can be individually addressed according to their potential contribution to participation. In 'Alternative frames of participation: the east-timor newsgroup', Stewart evaluates the East-Timor newsgroup on its ability to reveal a highly differentiated community of resistance that has conflicting socio-political dynamics.

In 'An empirical study of e-participation in Social Movement Organisations', Sudulich empirically evaluates the impact of ICT enabled political participation by social movement organisations. She measures their ability to disseminate information and engage in participatory communication through analysis of a variety of e-participation genres that are available on their websites.

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