Guest Editorial

Tobias Bevc

Weldishoferstr. 14,
86156 Augsburg, Germany
Email: tobiasbevc@posteo.de

Darren Mundy

School of Drama, Music and Screen,
University of Hull,
Hull, HU6 7RX, UK
Email: d.mundy@hull.ac.uk

Biographical notes: Tobias Bevc worked at the Universities of Munich, Augsburg and Frankfurt from 2000 to 2014. His research areas are political theory, political communication and the impact of new media on democracy. Since 2014, he works as a Manager of a Parliamentary Group in the city council of Augsburg and as Publicist.

Darren Mundy is a Senior Lecturer in Digital Media at the University of Hull. His main areas of research interest focus on electronic government with a particular focus on local government authorities and their use of digital services coupled with a focus on internet-based privacy and security.

1   Introduction

At the first European Conference on Social Media in Brighton in July 2014, the two guest editors of this special issue hosted a mini track on e-participation and democracy. The mini track ran for the two days of the conference, across the full program, proving to be an extremely popular topic of interest, provoking discussion and the generation of further ideas for research. Within the context of this conference, we heard papers focused on the impact of e-participation and democratic processes at national governmental level (Mundy and Asmi, 2014; Arslan et al., 2014); use of social media by local government and public organisations (Warren et al., 2014; Bayerl et al., 2014); critique of the use of the social web to support policy, citizen-based movements and processes (Preece et al., 2014; Bowser et al., 2014; Fernandez et al., 2014; Keshtiban, 2014; Planosi and Bull, 2014; Ellison and Orchard-Webb, 2014; Ronzhyn, 2014); and a small number of additional related papers (Barrett, 2014; Magnusson, 2014).

The mini track offered an opportunity to explore through the presentation of works from a wide range of European and International locations the scope of the interest area. This special issue offers a further opportunity to explore this scope as we begin to articulate the range of research, which exists with a direct relationship to this topic area.

We thank the authors of the papers across the conference and the special issue for their interest, discussion and works in helping to better articulate the area of interest.

In addition to the mini track and this special issue it is also worth pointing readers back to previous issues of this journal with a particular focus on the special issue Vol. 6, No. 4 in 2013. The issue explored online political participation and as such has existed as pre-requisite reading for the range of research into e-participation that has occurred since. Indeed, the suggested focus for further research of "geographically situated research, comparative studies and transnational analyses" are areas which researchers since 2013 have been working towards.

E-participation itself is being facilitated in numerous ways, for instance: through national and local government adopting social media channels for citizen communication; community groups using social media as platforms to engender community action and citizen–citizen communication about problems at local and national levels. In addition, there is a perception that this development can help to enhance the prospects for existing democracies to include their citizens in the political process.

However, at the same time, a brief look at the public sphere in democratic states will show an ambivalent impact of social media on the public sphere. Here the keywords surveillance, sousveillance, coveillance, digital divide and censorship are essential to sketching the field of discussion. The question is whether e-participation through social media really enhances participation of the people, or whether it privileges those who are already participating, regardless of the technical possibilities.

This special issue encourages discussion of the range of different ways in which e-participation through social media is occurring, including what it is facilitating. In addition, it will help in determining potential future research directions in this area of interest and enable discussion of the impact of social media on the public sphere and its consequences for democracy and its practises.

2   Impact of e-participation and the social web

There are similarities and differences between the four papers presented in this issue. Each of the papers focuses on the concern of challenging government through participation facilitated through the social web. Abdel-Fattah coupled with both Melliou et al. and Berrio-Zapata and Santana focus on exploring perspectives of groups of students focused around service provision and civic awareness, respectively. Zimmermann focuses his research within the social web itself accessing and exploring social media communities in his analysis of public opinion formulation. Finally, each of the papers focuses on continuing to push the need to explore participation and its impact through the social web on our national infrastructures and identities.

Abdel-Fattah's paper 'Constructing a model for the adoptability of using e-government services in developing countries: the case of Egypt' builds on previously presented research (Abdel-Fattah, 2014) to test and validate a series of proposed factors affecting citizen's adoption of using e-government services through primary research with a sample of 402 students. Analysing seven constructs Abdel-Fattah discover that service cost, e-government readiness (as a construct of political issues and ICT infrastructure) and trust are "*the main reasons that decrease the adaptability of using e-government services*".

Abdel-Fattah suggests that further work could involve the translation of their work to other contexts and extension of the study with students to other citizen participant groups. It would certainly make sense to consider extending the analysis to other developing countries exploring whether the constructs discovered in an Egyptian context were similar in other contexts. It would be also useful to compare such constructs with developed world contexts. In recent consultancy research work in the UK conducted by Mundy with citizen groups in the Dacorum Borough Council community, trust certainly continued to play a key role in determining whether citizens were willing to engage with government services. Trust concerns expressed by citizens in developed countries can be a little different to those expressed in developing countries, with generally a focus on trust in government figuring less in conversations with citizens. However, in the case of Abdel-Fattah's study, the principle focus of trust concerns focused on external influences obtaining access to citizen credentials.

The discussion section within Abdel-Fattah's paper provides food for thought with respect to overcoming challenges presented by the seven identified constructs in constructing e-government services. A number of recommendations are provided as practical considerations for how the model presented within the paper can be applied to existing and future e-government services.

Logically the work presented in the paper 'Transparency and open data in the classroom: a pedagogical exercise to construct civic awareness about access to public digital data in Brazil' by Berrio-Zapata and Santana relates directly to Abdel-Fattah's paper. One of Abdel-Fattah's constructs that of "awareness" is explored in more detail within Berrio-Zapata and Santana's work.

Transparent and open data presents substantial opportunities within civic society to both: enable access to public content and to facilitate public–private partnership in the provision of services. However, citizens may not be in a position to understand the data that is available to them and/or not be able to translate such data into a service offering from which they can derive value. In addition, our governmental structures may have a public responsibility to provide such data but as demonstrated through Berrio-Zapata and Santana's paper, in developing countries they may not truly deliver this.

The approach demonstrated through the open data administration course (ATADA in the Portuguese acronym) at Universidade Estadual Paulista UNESP, Brazil appears to be an interesting model. The goals of the program are commendable, developing citizens as key citizens in exploring and driving forward change in openness within public service provision. The questions posed towards the end of the paper present the clear challenges to making a sustainable impact, however, with an extended period of time of course delivery some of the graduate contributions may start to drive forward change in open data provision within government service delivery in Brazil.

The research discussed within Melliou et al. outlines an approach to enabling young learners to develop their perspectives on understanding basic human rights. The paper explores how young learners can be encouraged to explore human rights through the use of digital technologies which can be shared on the social web. Technology in the context of this paper is seen as an enabler, providing a facilitative mechanism to developing students understanding of the issues and providing a mechanism through which their ideas can be expressed.

Respect, protection and participation are seen as critical thematic elements of the items highlighted by young people as being critical to children's rights. Participation in this context demonstrates clear value expressed by the student group in the ability to

engage with items impacting on themselves and others and to participate in transforming these through active agency. The visible thinking approach put forward as a mechanism to encourage students to think carefully about the issues and present their ideas to others, seems to be an approach which can be explored in other contexts, as such the guest editors suggest that further studies exploring how such an approach can help to develop perspectives on e-participation would be worth constructing. Indeed, it would be useful to explore whether such visual methods can work for different groups of participants rather than solely young adults.

In the final paper of the issue 'Between individualism and deliberation: rethinking discursive participation via social media' Zimmermann builds on the work of Dahlberg (2001) defining and measuring deliberation through an empirical study of two online communities. This research is translated through into the presentation of a typology of discursive participation containing five types of discursive participation, which can be discovered in social web contexts. This typology provides an interesting structure to adapt to other research and to explore through other social media platforms. In addition, an area of clear interest would be to apply such a typology to an analysis of how this applies in the context of visual social platforms-like Flickr and Instagram.

Zimmermann's work offers further interesting opportunities to explore the presence of such a typology of discursive participation in different spheres across different platforms with different areas of focus. Is there a difference between nations in the percentages of discursive participation found on various issues? How much does the percentage of discursive participation influence governmental change? How do platforms and public organisations promote different forms of discursive practice and what value can be added?

3   The need for further research

Taking into account the previous issue of this journal in 2013, the recent mini track at ECSM, this special issue and the many other output channels where research in this area is being actively presented and discussed, there is clearly still a large amount to be discovered not only about participation and how it presents itself on the social web, but also about what the impact of this participation is, and can be, coupled with how we can harness such community power to bring about changes in the public sphere.

From the guest editors perspective the most interesting angles for further research in this area are: the continuing development of longitudinal studies of social web platforms and governmental participation similar to Bimber et al. (2015); the creation of studies which cross national and international borders exploring whether national identity, culture and governmental structures have an impact on public participation in government-related issues, perhaps applying Zimmermann's model to explore communities across multiple platforms and national environments; and exploring the true impact of the social web on political participation, the 'Is it real?' question – does it truly impact on governance.

One further thread of research that must be focused on in future is the question of the ownership of the internet and its infrastructure. The main keyword is the question of network neutrality and the monopolisation of internet content, respectively, its find-ability, through big internet companies. The line of thought here is, that with unclear rules over the reachability of any content, the state and internet companies have more

possibilities to influence the content provided to customers and its plurality. One possibility to counter this thread for free speech is a public internet-like infrastructure for public radio and television. Instead of private vices (profits), public benefits (network neutrality, plurality of opinions) would prevail.

The above is particularly important with respect to the erosion of public trust in the internet and in the protection of user data, since the Snowden revelations and the aftermaths of national secret service scandals (NSA, GCHQ, BND). The disappearance of privacy with the knowledge, that anyone may know everything one does in the internet, including political participation, is a big stumbling block towards increased e-participation and e-government, since the secrecy and the privacy of our political decisions is one of the foundations of western democracy. Western democracy itself is at threat, with an increasing focus on private companies cataloguing and storing data which national secret service organisations may access and explore.

References

Abdel-Fattah, M.A. (2014) 'Factors influencing adoption and diffusion of e-government services', *14th European Conference on e-Government*, The Spiru Haret University, Faculty of Legal and Administrative Sciences, Brasov, Romania, 12–13 June, 2014, Academic Publishing Limited, UK, pp.1–9.

Arslan, M., Tantawi, P. and El Sahn, F. (2014) 'Egyptian youth; social networking sites and civic participation', *Proceedings of the European Conference on Social Media: ECSM 2014*, Academic Conferences Limited, Brighton, UK.

Barrett, B. (2014) 'Virtual risks of e-Participation in online learning environments and dialogue', *Proceedings of the European Conference on Social Media: ECSM 2014*, Academic Conferences Limited, Brighton, UK.

Bayerl, S., Horton, K., Jacobs, G. and Akhgar, B. (2014) 'Who wants police on social media?', *Proceedings of the European Conference on Social Media: ECSM 2014*, Academic Conferences Limited, Brighton, UK.

Bimber, B., Cunill, M.C., Copeland, L. and Gibson, R. (2015) 'Digital media and political participation the moderating role of political interest across acts and over time', *Social Science Computer Review*, Vol. 33, No. 1, pp.21–42.

Bowser, A., He, Y., Rotman, D., Preece, J., Boston, C., Hanson, D. and Hammock, J. (2014), 'Motivating participation in citizen science', *Proceedings of the European Conference on Social Media: ECSM 2014*, Academic Conferences Limited, Brighton, UK.

Dahlberg, L. (2001) 'Computer-mediated communication and the public sphere: a critical analysis', *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication*, Vol. 7, No. 1.

Ellison, N. and Orchard-Webb, J. (2014) 'Civic conversations and citizen engagement – a new framework of analysis for Web 2.0 mediated citizen participation', *Proceedings of the European Conference on Social Media: ECSM 2014*, Academic Conferences Limited, Brighton, UK.

Fernandez, M., Wandhoefer, T., Allan, B., Alani, H. and Cano, A. (2014) 'Using social media to inform policy making: To whom are we listening?', *Proceedings of the European Conference on Social Media: ECSM 2014*, Academic Conferences Limited, Brighton, UK.

Keshtiban, E. (2014) 'Leadership, leaderlessness and social media: the case of occupy movement', *Proceedings of the European Conference on Social Media: ECSM 2014*, Academic Conferences Limited, Brighton, UK.

Magnusson, M. (2014) 'Information seeking and sharing during a flood – a content analysis of a local government's Facebook page', *Proceedings of the European Conference on Social Media: ECSM 2014*, Academic Conferences Limited, Brighton, UK.

Mundy, D.P. and Asmi, A. (2014) 'The power of social media in political processes – a case study of politics in Pakistan', *Proceedings of the European Conference on Social Media: ECSM 2014*, Academic Conferences Limited, Brighton, UK.

Planosi, M. and Bull, R. (2014) 'Is there a role for social media in enhancing environmental citizenship? Lessons from a UK case study', *Proceedings of the European Conference on Social Media: ECSM 2014*, Academic Conferences Limited, Brighton, UK.

Preece, J., Boston, C., Grace, L., Yeh, T. and Stangl, A. (2014) 'Crowdsourcing design citizen science data using a tabletop in a nature preserve', *Proceedings of the European Conference on Social Media: ECSM 2014*, Academic Conferences Limited, Brighton, UK.

Ronzhyn, R. (2014) 'The use of Facebook and Twitter during the 2013–2014 protests in Ukraine', *Proceedings of the European Conference on Social Media: ECSM 2014*, Academic Conferences Limited, Brighton, UK.

Warren, A.M., Sulaiman, A. and Ismawati Jafar, N. (2014) 'Investigating civic engagement behaviour on Facebook from a social capital perspective', *Proceedings of the European Conference on Social Media: ECSM 2014*, Academic Conferences Limited, Brighton, UK.