

## PARTICIPATION SPACES

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*Abstract. A wide democratic view of participation and eParticipation informs research centred on citizens' experiences of participation. Case studies of participation are conceived in the vein of work place studies: ethnographic approaches to studying current situations and identifying potential opportunities and challenges of using more digital technology. The concept of "Participation Spaces" themes the investigation, helping to focus on the perceptions and preferences of those participating, without pre-specifying technologies, websites, locations or activities. Theoretical and methodological input from related fields, including Participation, Social Movement Research, Sociology and Social Informatics, supports the studies and helps to identify the most useful results.*

### 1. EParticipation and eDemocracy

The term eParticipation emerged about a decade ago [1] to describe eDemocracy activities that were not e-voting and to provide distance from direct democracy, enabled by the Internet. Macintosh provides a useful definition: *use of information and communication technologies to broaden and deepen political participation by enabling citizens to connect with one another and with their elected representatives* [2]. As an emerging research area, eParticipation was the subject of networks [3][4] and literature reviews [5][6][7]. The European Commission adopted the term, sponsoring the eParticipation Preparatory Action from 2007 to 9[8]. Their definition is government-centric: *eParticipation is about reconnecting ordinary people with politics and policy-making and making the decision-making processes easier to understand and follow through the use of new Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs)* [9]. From the Commission's point of view, eParticipation shows their active work to increase democracy [10]. Their investment in these technologies can indicate that they are modern, progressive and trustworthy [11][12]. Funding is instrumental in channelling research and influencing the direction of knowledge [13] and the Commission's focus was technology to enhance relationships with government.

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As an academic area, eParticipation is an emerging and interdisciplinary field, including contributions from political science, public administration, sociology, information systems, computer science, media and communications, planning, management, science/ technology studies, journalism, innovation and more [7]. In this context, eParticipation does not have an agreed body of theory or established commitment to shared concepts or methods [14]. One direction for eParticipation is to build on established participation theories and techniques [7].

## 2. Participation and democratic space

Academics writing about (e)Participation understand that the choice of activities to study reflects views of democracy which place relative emphasis on the practices of people or government. Oxford English Dictionary entries for participation highlight processes (sharing and influence) rather than actors or institutions: *The process or fact of sharing in an action, sentiment, etc.; (now esp.) active involvement in a matter or event, esp. one in which the outcome directly affects those taking part* [15]. For Arnstein [16]: *citizen participation is a categorical term for citizen power*. Unlike the EU's definition of eParticipation, these definitions do not allude to legislative bodies. Democratic space includes power structures close to people and/or extraneous to government, wherever decisions are made. Participation needs to be recognised in this wide democratic context. The Pathways Through Participation project formulated three categories, as part of their investigation into participation in the UK: Public Participation describes engagement of individuals with the structures and institutions of democracy; Social Participation describes collective activities as part of peoples' everyday lives; Individual Participation describes the choices and actions individuals make [17]. Democratic bodies may not be the primary audiences for participation: publicising your opinion and trying to influence others directly may be an effective political activity. Van Zoonen, Vis and Mihelj [18], explore this kind of eParticipation in their analysis of YouTube contributions designed to counter the anti-Muslim sentiments in Geert Wilders' "Fitna" video. Carpentier and Dahlgren [19] emphasise participation's *material and actionist dimension* and argue that participation is strongly related to the power logics of decision-making, whether it is explicit or implicit, formal or informal, minimalist or maximalist and egalitarian or not. The goal of *influence* is important, beyond or without integration with democratic institutions.

## 3. Invited spaces, invented spaces and social movement research

Cornwall suggests that different actors in participatory processes have different perceptions of what participation means [20]. Cornwall's background in international development helps her draw out the important characteristics of participation, including the top-down or grass roots provenance, characterising invited or invented participation spaces [21]. *Invented spaces* are bottom-up in origin, while *invited spaces* are top-down: citizens are invited to participate in a space opened by an authority or institution. This often cited conceptualisation encompasses issues around the initiation and control of participation. Further, participants' perceptions of the space may form or inhibit their behaviour: citizens may feel constrained by government agendas in invited spaces. Participation spaces may also be opened, by participants, to purposes that initiators did not envisage. Escobar [22] describes the extensive organisation and facilitation work which shapes *invited spaces*. Community engagement workers *translate* between policy documents and the materials they use with participants; then translate the

results of engagement back into a form suitable for their employers. They publicise, organise, facilitate, mediate, write up, liaise and build relationships. This skilled work takes place in difficult contexts: those in power define topics and processes, but may remain vague about their objectives. Escobar's account includes a series of tasks that do not seem to be amenable to computerisation- an essential consideration for eParticipation.

*Invented spaces* are created by citizens in order to influence matters that concern them. This kind of activity is investigated within the umbrella field of social movement research [23]. Like participation and eParticipation, social movement research is conducted by people from various disciplines using a variety of methods and generally favouring multi-method approaches. If we accept that participation takes place in invented spaces, as well as invited ones, it follows that we consider the online activities of social movements within eParticipation and that social movement research is an important resource for eParticipation. Hara and Huang [24] provide a useful overview of research into social movements using ICT, identifying four established theoretical frameworks being used for this analysis: Frame Analysis, Resource Mobilisation, Political Process and New Social Movement Theory.

#### 4. Technology and democracy

Internet media are experienced as continuous with everyday activities and social spaces [25]. What distinguishes eParticipation research from participation and social movement research? The Internet is the focus, product and media, of a diverse volume of academic and cultural output, especially concerning democracy. In 2000, van Dijk [26] mapped scenarios for the co-evolution of democracy and the Internet, based on Held's models of democracy [27]. The results are dynamic, reflecting the combined possibilities of changes in governance methods combined with power shifts in Internet governance. For example, the Internet facilitates open government and transparency, but also surveillance. Fountain [28] is specific, and prescient, with her predictions of the impact of technological change on government: flattening structures, encouraging cooperation across departments and favouring the tech-savvy. Bijker [29] reminds us that the term technocrat is derogatory, indicating a boundary breach between technology and democracy: technology conceived as a value-neutral tool. However, technology and politics constitute each other *as two sides of the same coin* [29]. Technological developments require choices and judgements; outcomes favour one perspective over others. Decisions require both technical understanding and the implementation of (someone's) values and priorities.

Thus it is not the addition of technology that is important to eParticipation. It is the integration, as participation and technology develop and change each other. Dahlgren [30] investigates the relationship between Internet contingencies and parameters of modern participation: as media and societal circumstances evolve, we need to update our understanding of participation. In order to avoid determinism, we need to understand the co-development of participation, democracy and technology, especially the Internet. Fountain [28] notes: *Too few analyses of digital government treat technology and politics with equal seriousness*. Fountain's challenge to treat *technology and politics* seriously summarises the necessity of the field of eParticipation well. The entwined complexities of participation, democracy, the Internet and technological change require experts to work together to develop

appropriate paradigms and methods, share results and ideas. This integration of expert knowledge is a necessary current challenge for democracy [29][31].

## 5. Participation studies

EParticipation research takes place in the wider discourse of the digital society, knowledge economy and technological revolution. Dunlop and Kling [32] describe how digital revolution polemics, and Utopian/ dystopian visions, dramatise and oversimplify the integration of computer systems in our government, work and social lives. Papacharissi identifies Utopian and dystopian visions channelling discussions about the online public sphere [33]. Loader and Mercea describe the current excitement around social networking tools as a new wave of Internet mythology; though perhaps social media provide real opportunities for changing power dynamics [34]. This polarised discourse needs to be countered by studying real people's activities in context [32][33][34]. Participation studies are case studies with this aim.

Utopian, dystopian and revolutionary discourses also frame relationships between technology and work [35]. Digital technology brings possibilities (opportunities and dilemmas [32]) to transform work environments and workers' lives. *Work place studies* explore these possibilities and can inform additions or changes to information systems, taking seriously the situated and social nature of technology and tasks [36]. Study methodologies tend to be naturalistic and ethnographic, based on fieldwork in the workplace. There are also parallels with ethnography for design [14]. Participation studies follow this approach for eParticipation, through case studies of community engagement and social movement organisations. By grounding this investigation in appropriate theoretical frameworks, a rich picture of participation can be built, that increases understanding of the ways in which additional uses of technology could increase efficacy, especially by widening access or increasing impact. Equally, this approach may highlight contingencies where technological interventions could have negative effects and be divisive or disruptive, where borders of privacy may become blurred or something is lost from a face to face context. Flyvbjerg [13] describes how investigations into real world contexts contribute to concrete and practical knowledge. Example cases are a key learning mechanism, informing our understanding and values.

## 6. Socio-technical frameworks and participation spaces

In the studies, eParticipation is both an imagined future and a likely part of the present. Care needs to be taken to avoid a precocious focus on current technology use, while identifying *contingencies for technologies* [37]: needs, skills, access, current use, available social networks, including offline personal contacts. Online and offline activities are investigated to create a picture of the present, including properties of activities salient to eParticipation. Socio-technical frameworks are available to support analysis of technology systems (existing or potential) in social and organisational contexts, including Actor Network Theory [31], Social Construction of Technology [29], Technology Action Frames and Socio-Technical Interaction Network [38]. These take a people-centred approach to technology choices and impacts, informed by social behaviour theories and a comprehensive view of technology, including sustainable maintenance. Focusing on *participation spaces* enables the identification of participation situations, without specifying technologies, websites, locations

or activities. Spaces are identified by participants and used to explore their experiences, beyond research preconceptions. Participants' perceptions of space help to describe their understanding of situations, their activities, inhibitions, behaviours and preferences.

The space theme brings useful theories into the investigation to support analysis and understanding, including Goffman's theatrical regions metaphor [39]. Goffman divides our social experiences into two, non-exclusive, regions: the *front region* (where performance is the focus) and *backstage* (where performers prepare and/or relax). The front region is performed and observed: politeness and decorum are generally expected. The backstage region is observed only by the team: a wider, more casual range of behaviour is expected. This metaphor is an easily understood way to describe how certain behaviour is expected in certain situations. Situations are defined by a sense of place and who is likely to be interacting or observing: the social setting. Understanding the privacy/surveillance level of a situation is necessary to empower people to act confidently and appropriately and online settings are often uncertain [40]. Harrison and Dourish [41] suggest that *place* is a more useful concept for designing online collaborative environments. Space is structural; place is space that has been humanised: *a place is a space which is invested with understandings of behavioural appropriateness, cultural expectations, and so forth. We are located in "space", but we act in "place"*[41]. However, the more inclusive concept of space can describe indeterminate spaces (on or offline), where we are unsure about boundaries and appropriate behaviour. For the participation studies, to start with place would be premature.

Participation studies explore the overlap of skills, resources and exposure between areas of peoples' lives. For example, social media are increasingly used in work and education, socially and civically [34]. The case studies could reveal available resources, not currently used in eParticipation, while being sensitive to peoples' preferences for organising their lives. The space theme encourages participants to identify boundaries and their consequences. Participatory research methods may also help: using interactive instruments, such as diaries or collaborative mapping, to encourage participants to collect and reflect on data, talking through their activities. Participatory methodologies favour shared explorations of present and future, rather than problematising current activities and use of technology [38].

Encouraging participants to explore and share how their perceptions of participation spaces encourage or inhibit activity, may indicate relationships between people's skills and preferences and their desire to eParticipate. Papacharissi and Easton [42] identify digital literacy skills to cope with online spaces, including *performative fluency*: the ability to continually establish meanings and appropriate behaviour in online, offline and converged situations, leading to enhanced agency. They suggest that these skills are not widely held. Exploring participants' recognition of similar skills may shed light on ways to increase the diversity of (e)participants. Hastings and Matthews [43] show participation imbalances, in the UK, US and Scandinavian countries, tending to bias provision of services towards the most active and well connected: the middle classes. Dahlgren [30] suggests that the contingencies for democratic participation become entrenched, contribute to political and power structures, and shape the possibilities for categories of citizen to participate. Concerns about who participates follow the long-running normalisation debate [44], worrying that Internet engagement is predominantly taken up by politically active and well represented citizens [45].

## 7. Conclusion

EParticipation research is essential to modern society. It is necessary to explore the continuous and entwined development of digital technologies, government and participation, investigating assumptions, constraints and opportunities, and avoiding polemic and technological determinism. Experts need to work across domains, both in collaboration and by building a knowledge base. EParticipation needs to be grounded in social theory and a holistic and practical view of technology. Case studies of real life participation in context will make valuable contributions to understanding how technology can be integrated to support meaningful participation by more people. This research is usefully influenced by work place study methodologies, which use ethnographic methods to study people's work, in situ: both types of study try to identify how digital technologies can help people to achieve their aims and where technology challenges can be met or avoided. The space theme combines with a socio-technical strategy to explore individual experiences and possibilities for eParticipation, including concerns that are vital to sustainability, such as access, privacy and control. The space theme focuses on the micro of participants' activities and outlooks, while a socio-technical framework introduces a macro investigation of the group's outlook and context.

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