

E-participation in Portuguese Local Governments: a Sociological Approach

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Abstract

In this paper we deal with the emergence of new forms of electronic participation in Portuguese local governments. Using some examples of e-participation in municipalities, we sustain that the correlation between technical modernization and the improvement of citizen participation is far from being taken for granted. Nevertheless, we may indeed find in some municipalities a changing attitude, more favourable to democratic participation, where the use of new technologies plays an important role. We also believe that some aspects of the *classic* debate on the relationship between the size of the municipality and its potential to embrace participation are also relevant in the context of e-participation. Finally, we present some comments on the future of these participatory mechanisms.

Key-words: e-participation, local governments, Portugal

1. Introduction: new technologies and citizen participation

We deal here with the emergence of new forms of electronic participation in Portuguese local governments¹. Using some examples of e-participation in municipalities, we develop a main argument: we do not agree that technical modernization could automatically improve citizen participation.

The question of whether the new technologies of information and communication bring more democracy is the main question on the studies of the importance of new media for governance. In some of the literature on the subject, we see that the technical potential of new technologies like the Internet is proposed as a means to counter the perceived decline of the quality of democracy, namely related with a decrease of the interest on politics. Hence, there is a belief on Internet as builder of a new “virtual public sphere” [Schalken, 2000], or of a “digital democracy” [Hague and Loader, 1999].

In this paper, we assume a different perspective. We argue that the emerging new forms of citizenship, like those promoted by the use of new technologies of information and communication, are engendered within the crisis and the now evident limits of political representation [Laclau, 1996]. The fight against a globalization that impoverishes human experience is possibly moving from a stage of resistance to another shaped by a shift towards a new political affirmation. As Lash and Urry [1993] argue, the political processes of the creation of groups involve a growing aesthetic identification and the creation of networks that are not limited by national territory and that, in latent form, are re-shaping the field of citizenship itself.

In fact, these new forms of connections change contemporary communication, not only in its immediate technological aspects but as well as in its social and intimate domains, turning society into a more complex entity. Media (and the new media used on e-participation) is the way through which we learn, think and create the world, as we think with media.

The New Media Studies could give us some interesting ideas to study the new links created by communication technologies. In addition, new media is concerned with cultural objects and paradigms enabled by all forms of computing and not just by networking. Therefore, while the cyberculture studies are focused on the social and on networking, New Media Studies are mainly focused on the cultural and computing [Manovich, 2003: 16]. Marshall McLuhan, considered by many as the founder of New Media Studies, developed the idea that media hide themselves in their contents. According to him, effective media are those that are more easily capable of creating in the receptor’s mind the illusion that he is receiving a pure content, deceiving mediation itself. Based in different technological premises, the new digital media, offering new formats for the organization of contents [Manovich, 2001], seem to imply changes in the user’s awareness of mediation and may transmit the feeling that we have new ways to participate.

¹ This paper is based on a book chapter forthcoming in 2006 [Neves and Felizes].

Recently, the new media authors Bolter and Grusin [2000] shared the basic intuition of McLuhan, but changing his vocabulary and criticizing his deterministic approach. For them, the media sphere is not simplistic divided on "hot" and "cool" based on the degree of participation they required, but on immediacy and hypermediacy. Immediacy is present on the media that try to avoid and wipe out mediation. Hypermediated phenomena, by contrast, are fascinated by their own status as media constructs and thus call attention to their strategies of mediation and representation. It is the case of the World-Wide Web and of many multimedia applications that subscribe to the logic of hypermediacy. And "our two seemingly contradictory logics not only coexist in digital media today but are mutually dependent" [Bolter and Grusin 2000: 6]. This process is also a continual genealogy, a "double logic of remediation": "each act of mediation depends on other acts of mediation. Media are continually commenting on, reproducing, and replacing each other, and this process is integral to media. Media need each other in order to function as media at all" [Bolter and Grusin 2000: 55].

The belief in the reformative and innovative nature of the new media assumes particularly strong forms when they replace the old ones: in the case of e-participation, the *old* media are verbal interaction or the texts written on paper. With the new media, it is argued, there is more participation and democracy [Bolter and Grusin 2000: 59-60].

Some American political figures have even suggested that the World Wide Web and the Internet can reform democracy by lending immediacy to the process of making decisions. When citizens are able to participate in the debate of issues and possibly even vote electronically, they argue, we may have a direct, "digital" democracy as our representational system. Even beyond claims for overt political reform, many technological enthusiasts assert that the web and computer applications are creating a digital culture that will revolutionize commerce, education, and social relationships.

That digital media can reform and even save society is reminiscent of the promise that has been made for technologies throughout much of the twentieth century. According to Bolter and Grusin, in terms of the concept of remediation, "new technologies of representation proceed by reforming or remediating earlier ones, while earlier technologies are struggling to maintain their legitimacy by remediating newer ones. Technological enthusiasts argue that in remediating older media the new media are accomplishing social change." [Bolter and Grusin 1998: 2].

In fact, for some social actors (technological producers and some "modern" politicians), the process of remediation tends to be seen as a process of reformation (see Al Gore or M. Castells's concept of "info-exclusion"). Refusing this optimistic view, we want to cross-examine the nature of the changes and of the combinations created by this new process of mediation. As Bolter and Grusin sustain, "we want to begin to move towards an analysis of the cultural politics of the heterogeneous networks" (*ibidem*, 2) created around these new technologies.

2. Municipalities on the Internet: website maturity and e-participation

In order to analyse the development of e-participation in local governments, we need to take account of the technical quality of the presence of municipalities on the Internet, something that we assume as a prior condition for e-participation. Here we will present the Portuguese case, one of a relatively modest presence, in greater detail.

This modest presence of Portuguese municipalities on the Internet can be partly explained by the fact that, given the higher political status and autonomy of Portuguese local government, some of the on-going initiatives of administrative modernization promoted by central government don't seem to have enough enforcement capability. Besides, if the move towards an information and knowledge society is a key issue for Portuguese politics, the whole process seems nonetheless to be rather distant from the citizens' daily concerns. Another striking example of the resistance raised by local government towards constricting legislation would be the time it took for Portuguese municipalities to make their land management plans. Nowadays, in 2006, after a very slow process characterized in many municipalities by some shocking examples of violation of basic rules of urbanism (and good taste) there are still 5 municipalities – all in the Azores – where this basic planning tool has not yet been approved, although the first regulations date from 1982. Given this context, we may see the modest presence of Portuguese municipalities on the Internet as a somewhat expected outcome of their peripheral and also resistant condition.

The most comprehensive study of Portuguese municipality websites has been under way since 1999 and involves one of the Portuguese agencies for innovation (UMIC), together with a team of researchers from the University of Minho. Chart 1 reports the latest data available. This study established a ranking of maturity divided into 4 levels, from the more developed websites (1) to the less developed (4).

The highest level of maturity (1) was still non-existent in 2003, and implies a complete transaction of services via the Internet. The next level (2), with a low number of cases verified (10.7%), implies that the municipality website contains at least a form that can be filled online or allows the online verification of requests (e.g. construction permits).

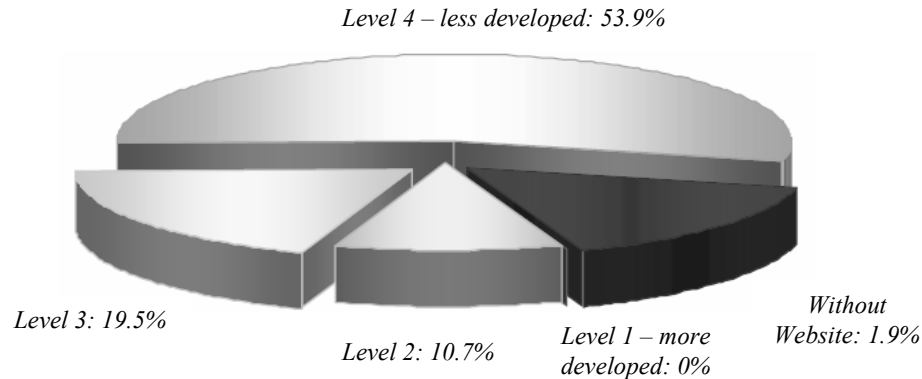


Chart 1: Portuguese municipality websites: level of maturity (2003)
Source: Santos et al. [2003: 35]

Level 3, which covered 19.5% of Portuguese municipalities, means the existence on the website of at least one downloadable form, for services offered by the local government to its citizens. Finally, at level 4 we find in 2003 most of the municipalities (53.9%), whose websites offer none of the previous services, merely displaying information about the municipality and the local government.

There were also 49 municipalities without websites (15.9%), a somewhat unexpected figure. In our own survey we focused on these cases, checking whether these municipalities had created their websites in the meantime. However, we still found 28 municipalities with websites unavailable, some showing a webpage stating that the site would be soon ready, or a webpage saying that the website was being renovated (but with no link to the previous website). These 9% of Portuguese municipalities may thus be considered as still at a kind of prehistoric e-participation stage. In these cases the only electronic feature available is an e-mail address, displayed on websites such as the one from the Portuguese National Association of Municipalities [ANMP, 2006], or the directory of Portuguese Local Administration, available on the central government website [Portal do Governo, 2006].

We also found that these cases of the “e-absence” of Portuguese local governments are not limited to small municipalities. Indeed, we are dealing with cases such as Tomar (43,000 inhabitants), Mangualde (21,000) or Ponte de Sôr (17,500), among others still smaller. The smallest municipality, Corvo Island in the Azores – 425 inhabitants –, is in fact present, displaying a high quality design and also an online discussion forum (Ilha do Corvo, 2006).

2.1. Size and participation: a classic debate revisited

The issue of the size of municipalities appears as also relevant in this matter of e-participation. This was also the case in the Portuguese UMIC 2003 study [Santos *et al.*]. Here municipalities were divided in 4 size categories – from the smaller ones, with less than 10,000 voters, to the larger ones, with more than 100,000 voters. In the overall ranking of the websites, the best small municipality is placed only in the 20th position. In Denmark, a similar finding is presented: “authorities in larger municipalities generally perform better than do smaller municipalities” [Torpe and Nielsen, 2004: 240].

The Portuguese study also found that, in the next category (between 10,000 and 50,000 voters), the 5 best municipalities are among the overall 6 best ones [Santos *et al.*, 2003: 38]. However, the average ranking of these medium sized municipalities is significantly lower than that of larger units [idem: 43]. Again, as in many other local government studies, size *per se* does not seem enough to reveal the level of local democracy or participation. If we bear in mind the relatively lower complexity of the management of these smaller municipality websites – mainly if compared with the giant ones like Lisbon or Porto –, this suggests that it is always possible to spread good Internet practices in local governments. These differences found among municipalities of similar size are related, in our opinion, not only to technical issues, but also to political factors. Then, we see, in the case of the presence of these technical mediations, a tendency to place the still dominant mechanisms toward e-government practices in opposition to the less developed practices of e-democracy and e-participation. The abovementioned Danish study concludes with a nevertheless optimistic perspective:

“While there can be great incentives to introduce more e-government stemming from expectations of the increased efficiency of local authorities and fewer required resources, there are no such strong incentives with regard to e-democracy. Many local politicians continue to fail to appreciate the perspectives in e-democracy, partly because many of them still have an alienated relationship to the new medium and prefer to use the old media, and partly because many local politicians do not feel that the new medium is that important for local political communication. However, this may change as times goes by.” [Torpe and Nielsen, 2004: 243]

2.2. E-mails and discussion forums: the overlooked e-citizen

As website maturity, taken alone, is an indirect measure of electronic participation, especially relevant in the cases of missing websites quoted, we must now have a closer look at some basic indicators of that participation, beginning with the response rate to e-mail messages. Drawing on the 2003 UMIC study [Santos *et al.*, 2003] we can see an important shortcoming, as only 50% of the 308 Portuguese municipalities answered a simple question made by the researchers. As they significantly remark:

“Quite often the problem is that the process of forwarding the messages received is not defined, regardless of being physically or digitally supported. This is a situation that municipalities should work out rapidly, given that the present condition harms the image and discredits the municipalities in the eyes of the citizen and enterprise.” [Santos et al., 2003: 45]

In order to compare this poor performance, in the above quoted Danish research the same strategy produced different results (13% failed to answer), although a similar criticism was made of the defective municipalities:

“85 per cent of local authorities replied to the email concerning childcare fees within a week, two per cent replied after a week, while 13 per cent did not respond at all. How does one account for the failure of 35 local authorities to respond to such an enquiry? One possible explanation is that some local authorities still do not regard emails as being as important as traditional mail”. [Torpe and Nielsen, 2004: 239]

After that, we also investigated alternative means of electronic participation and decided to have another look into the municipality websites, searching for two specific features: first, the existence of an on-line form, asking for comments, suggestions, requests or complaints, which could be filled and immediately sent back, i.e., a more direct alternative to the e-mail. This is a feature related to the websites’ maturity, so again we found a relatively low percentage: only 52% of the websites display this feature. Furthermore, most of them require the identity of the sender, which tends to restrict the use of this channel.

Finally, we conducted a thorough search looking for municipality websites that had some kind of on-line discussion forum. The condition we established was quite simple: regardless of the need for prior registration (which we complied with whenever asked), we counted as valid forums those pages where it was possible to read the content of messages sent by other persons. This resulted in the elimination of several websites where, in spite of their announcing their forum, the forum actually had no any messages on it. The result is a meagre 10% of municipalities displaying a valid on-line forum, made worse by the very low average number of messages displayed and by the lack of relevance of many of those messages.

Nevertheless, there were some exceptions to this situation, as some of the forums showed a high degree of participation, which also means that this mechanism tends to operate on a snowball basis. In other cases it was possible to find many messages containing unfair disrespect (and even insults) regarding the local government and the mayor, a problem probably caused by the lack of an effective moderator. Anyway, these cases of immoderate e-participation, with a loss of control (even if only temporary) over the situation, illustrate the well-known double-edged potential of new communication technologies.

3. The future of e-government and e-participation

Portuguese local leaders seem to be in favour of participation and, of course, its modern electronic forms. However, the peripheral condition and the low level of human and financial resources in local

government could be pointed to as the most important reasons for the relatively low maturity of local e-government and e-participation in countries like Portugal. Many studies tend to agree on the illusive nature of some participatory mechanisms, as after all the final word belongs to the politicians. Here we assumed a more optimistic position, stating the improbability of large-scale participation, but also the improbability of a fully controlled participation.

In our case, we must take into account the abovementioned importance given to face-to-face communication, one of the features of a still very common – and not necessarily undesirable – personal management of political issues. Thus the minor role played by new information technologies in Portuguese local government would not have to be explained by a failure to perceive that e-government could bring possible gains to political communication. In fact, on the contrary, it is possible that these new mechanisms imply a reduction in the quality of that communication because of the fundamental significance attributed to personal contact. But, as we have mentioned, this does not mean that we are not facing a changing situation, given the more *technophile* environment found in some Portuguese municipalities.

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