Chapter 10

E-Participation with Stakeholders’ Feedback Platforms

Guillaume Bouchard
Xerox Research Centre Europe, France

Stephane Clinchant
Xerox Research Centre Europe, France

Gregorio Convertino
Informatica, USA

ABSTRACT

Natural language summarization and other social media analytics tools enable a communication manager to rapidly browse through a large number of text documents authored by citizens and get a sense of their interests and opinions. However, this approach is rather passive and unidirectional because it does not allow proposing to the citizen to express their opinions on specific topics. Similarly, social media platforms allow a crowd of individuals to answer questions but not support a “one-to-many” dialogue, where the communication manager, acting on behalf of the public authorities, can interact with the crowd. In this chapter, the authors describe a software platform that aims to address this gap and describe the system envisioned in the FUPOL project.

INTRODUCTION

A Community Feedback Platform (CFP) enables efficient bi-directional communication between policy makers and citizens. It is designed to manage ideas, opinions, and arguments for or against a future or ongoing project. Depending on the state and maturity of the political objective that we are targeting, in order to gather innovative ideas from citizens one could consider using Idea Management Systems (IMS), Question-Answer websites (Q&A), or online forums. However, since these tools have not been designed specifically for public consultation, they exhibit some limitations:
E-Participation with Stakeholders’ Feedback Platforms

- **Lack of a centralized repository.** There is no single centralized repository of comments that decision-makers can easily access. Political discussions occur on a variety of social media websites (Facebook, Twitter), online forums, tools for commenting news articles, and sometimes on the official town website itself.

- **It is hard to reach critical mass.** Dedicated CFP may lack enough critical mass of participation because the citizens’ contributions are dispersed across several disparate and unconnected social media or communication channels.

- **Balance in contributions.** The comments from the citizens often vastly outnumber the comments or propositions from the policy makers, who have less time to participate.

- **Polarization and balkanization.** Social media channels such as political blogs and discussion forums often suffer from biases due to polarization and balkanization (Klein, 2012). That is, some cater to the right-leaning audience whereas others cater to the left-leaning audience. This results in stale debates within balkanized forums where people discuss only with others that think alike and thus fail to examine the broader set of alternatives being examined globally.

Due to these limitations, traditional CFPs require several improvements to become more effective decision-making spaces. Citizens need to be able to directly express their opinions in the system, answer to policy makers, and report problems in a city. Policy makers need to be able to timely analyse and browse citizen’s ideas. They should also be able to easily relate citizen’s opinions and issues to areas of the city map. The system presented in the next section addresses these requirements.

In addition, a new challenge for collective intelligence tools is to enable ideation and deliberation at the meso-scale level of organizations such as local geographic communities (e.g., cities). Prior technologies, in part, supported idea generation and collaborative deliberation at the level of small groups (i.e., groupware) and, in part, enabled large-scale sharing of knowledge and opinions (e.g., wikis, blogs, and forums). However, when an entire local community participates in a decision making process, a much larger number of ideas are generated. Thus the selection and judgment can become prohibitively time consuming for selecting and implementing the best ideas.

### Customer Feedback Systems

Systems for managing customer feedback are used by organizations to obtain knowledge from communities. These technologies are based on three traditional methodologies for managing feedback, each with existing problems:

- **Traditional Surveys and Polls:** Survey campaigns with random on-site interviews of citizen are the most common solution to extract opinions. Large European cities (i.e., with more than a million inhabitants) invest a significant portion of their budget on household surveys to understand the needs and opinions about their inhabitants. Household surveys are typically run every decade. Their main limitation is the high cost of distribution and data collection and the long turnaround time. Since many cities are trying to reduce their debts and become more efficient, information technologies represent a better alternative to paper-based surveys. That is, citizen can obtain feedback from their public authorities more frequently than every ten years! Moreover, traditional surveys are often limited in their ability to collect informa-