Chapter VII
Moments and Modes for Triggering Civic Participation at the Urban Level

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ABSTRACT

After more than a decade of e-participation initiatives at the urban level, what remains obscure is the alchemy—i.e., the “arcane” combination of elements—that triggers and keeps citizens’ involvement in major decisions that affect the local community alive. The Community Informatics Lab’s experience with the Milan Community Network since 1994 and its two more recent spin-off initiatives enable us to provide a tentative answer to this question. This chapter presents these experiments and looks at election campaigns and protests as triggers for (e-)participation. It also discusses these events as opportunities to engender more sustained participation aided by appropriate technology tools such as software that is deliberately conceived and designed to support participation and managed with the required expertise.

INTRODUCTION

After more than a decade of e-participation initiatives at the urban level, the alchemy—i.e., the “arcane” combination of elements—that spurs lasting citizen involvement in decisions important to the local community, is still obscure. Furthermore, as Venkatesh (2003) claims, participation cannot be assumed to start up in a social vacuum, nor in a technological vacuum. Based on our 15
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years’ experience, we believe that, rather than as a “continuum”, participation should be seen as a discrete phenomenon, with peak moments when the local actors are more inclined to participate. This chapter discusses the phenomena observed during two of these recurring moments, the 2006 Milan municipal elections and a moment of protest at a Milan public school in June 2006. We also analyze the modes in which, using information and communication technology (ICT), the inclination to participate can be consolidated, beyond the hot moment, into a more ongoing practice of participation.

BACKGROUND

We take community networks (CNs) as the starting point of our analysis, because they can be considered pioneer experiences for supporting e-participation in local communities. Even though, over time, many community networks have declined or even disappeared (Luisi 2001; Schuler 2009, forthcoming), they remain landmarks, providing significant input for the design of socio-technical systems aimed at empowering active citizen participation. Community Networks as conceived in the 1990s (Schuler 1994; Bishop 1994; Silver 2004) were virtual (or online) communities, strongly rooted in a specific territory, whose shared focus of interest was ‘public affairs’. They provided a framework for gathering civic intelligence (Schuler 2001), for supporting the development of people’s projects (De Cindio, 2004), and for promoting public dialogue among citizens and between citizens and local institutions (e.g., Casapulla et al, 1998; Ranerup 2000; De Cindio et al., 2007). Kubiceck and Wagner’s (2002) “ex post” analysis of CN development is helpful in understanding the evolution of CNs as generational succession, with one generation following upon another in a common line of tradition. They state that every generation of community networks is characterized by the advent of new technologies (which represent the formative “collective event” for each generation) and by changes in cultural context under the influences both of the preceding generation and of its own Zeitgeist. On the other hand, Selznick (1996) stresses that the emergence of community is based on opportunity for, and the impulse toward, comprehensive interaction, commitment, and responsibility. Extending these considerations, we claim that participation rises within a specific socio-technical context around particular opportunities and impulses.

In the following section, we therefore examine today’s socio-technical context in order to show that all conditions for a new “generation” of participation are fulfilled. Against this backdrop, we then identify moments that can trigger participation and modes for transforming these opportunities into well-rooted participatory practice. We also provide examples of these moments and modes, analyzing them through some statistical indicators.

TRIGGERING CIVIC PARTICIPATION

In representative democracies, governing is done for rather than by the citizens. Political life is delegated to a separate sphere inhabited by a well-known class of professionals: government officials and politicians. In Western countries, this separation is recognized as one of the reasons of the increasing phenomenon of lower turnout (Ginsborg, 2006), which, in Europe, is manifest at all institutional levels—although, at least in our country (Italy), municipal elections still have good turnout. There are, however, several signs that citizens are eager to participate: the more traditional sign is the amount of time they volunteer with nonprofits, enabling these organizations to often act as stakeholder representatives. More recently, a new means of stake aggregation, that has found a place in people’s everyday lives, reveals citizens’ inclination toward involvement. We refer to the ‘Web 2.0’ phenomenon, a term that gained cur-
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