



Universidade do Minho

Centro de Estudos de Comunicação e Sociedade

## **E-participation in Portuguese local governments: an exploratory research about emerging networks**

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### **Abstract:**

In this paper, we analyse the appearance of new forms of electronic participation in Portuguese local communities. Using some cases studies of e-participation in municipalities, we sustain a main argument: technical modernization doesn't automatically develop citizen participation as a process of "reformation" (Neves & Felizes, 2007). For some social actors (technological producers, some "modern" politicians and sociologists), the process of “re-mediation” (the change on media) tends to be seen as a process of “reformation” (see Al Gore or M. Castells's concept of "info-exclusion"). Refusing this optimistic and linear view, we want to cross-examine the nature of the changes and of the combinations created by this new process of mediation on Local Governments and on the emerging networks. As Bolter and Grusin (1998: 2) sustain, "we want to begin to move towards an analysis of the cultural politics of the heterogeneous networks" created around these new technologies (see also Latour, 2005).

**Key-words:** e-participation, reformation, blogs, local governments, Portugal, New Media Studies

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## 1. Introduction

We want to analyse the emergence of new forms of electronic participation in Portuguese local communities<sup>1</sup>. Based on a study about e-participation in municipalities, we use a main argument: we do not agree that technical modernization can automatically improve citizen participation as a process of “reformation”.

The question of whether the new technologies of information and communication bring more democracy is the main question on the studies centred on 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.

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]. 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, changing therefore the cynical way of being on politics<sup>2</sup>.

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 can help us on that kind of complex perspective. They give some interesting ideas for the study of the new links created by information and

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<sup>1</sup> E-participation could be defined as a new research domain focusing the development of ICT-supported participation in processes of government and governance.

<sup>2</sup> As Tuinen said (2007: 9), “Sloterdijk gives us two strongly-related versions of the obscene: cynicism and the contempt of the masses, both of which characterize the modes of thinking of the Last Men. We are not condemned to freedom, as Sartre claimed, but rather to frivolity. Žižek describes how we have reduced ourselves from homo sacer to the nihilist ‘homo sucker’, who is only interested in his own right to happiness. The failure of the international community merely reflects the obscene consequences of the absence of *große Politik*. Politicians live in a semantic brothel; not only do they have to listen to and speak the twaddle of their own caste, a twaddle carried by the sterilized discourse of sociologists and political scientists, they also have to deal positively with the unmistakable presence of the lie”.

communication technologies and humans. In addition, new media is concerned with cultural objects and paradigms enabled by all forms of computing and not just by the networking as only a “social” process. Therefore, while the cyber culture 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.

Recently, the new media authors Bolter and Grusin [2000] shared the basic intuition of McLuhan, but changed his vocabulary and criticized 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.

The belief in the reformative and innovative nature of the new media assumes particularly strong forms when they replace the old ones on the process of “remediation”: in the case of e-participation, the *old* media are verbal interaction or printed texts. 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. 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 some authors of New Media Studies (Bolter and Grusin, 2000) 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<sup>3</sup>.

To sum up, refusing the optimistic view, we want to cross-examine the nature of the changes and of the combinations created by this new process of mediation on Local Governments. As Bolter and Grusin (1998: 2) sustain, “we want to begin to move towards an analysis of the cultural politics of the heterogeneous networks” created around these new technologies (see also Latour, 2005).

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

The 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.

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. 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). 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.

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<sup>3</sup> See Al Gore or M. Castells's concept of “info-exclusion” (2000).

In our own survey (2006) 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<sup>4</sup>. 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].

### Discussion forums: the overlooked e-citizen

*Table 1: E-participation in Portuguese municipalities – some figures*

<i>Feature</i>	
Municipalities with active websites	91%
Websites displaying on-line forms asking for suggestions or comments	52%
E-mail response rate : simple message (Santos <i>et al.</i> , 2003: 44)	50%
Websites displaying on-line active forums	10%

Source: Felizes & Neves – survey conducted in April 2006, except for the e-mail response rate

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 the announced forum, the forum actually had no any messages on it. The result is a meagre 10% of municipalities (see Table 1) 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.

<sup>4</sup> 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).

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 emerging local e-participation: weblogs**

The peripheral condition and the low level of human and financial resources in Portuguese local government can be pointed to as the most important reasons for the relatively low “maturity” of local 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.

In our case, we must take into account the above mentioned importance given to face-to-face communication based on *old media*. Thus the minor role played by new information technologies (web sites) in Portuguese local government does not have to be explained by a failure to perceive that e-participation can 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.

| PESQUISAR NO BLOGUE || ASSINALAR BLOGUE! | Blogue seguinte-
 Criar blogue | efectuar login

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## NOTÍCIAS DA ALDEIA

AQUI DA NINHA ALDEIA, O MUNDO VÊ-SE COM MAIS NITIDEZ, O AR QUE SE RESPIRA É MAIS LEVE E À NOITE, O LUAR PISTA A PAISAGEM A TONS DE PRATA.

QUARTA-FEIRA, SETEMBRO 20, 2006

**Morte no meu esteiro**



De regresso à aldeia, fui ontem ver as marcas de mais uma tragédia ambiental que a incúria ou o imprevisto, possibilitou que tivesse acontecido.

Deixando para quem de direito as averiguações, parece-me que não será difícil identificar o responsável, até porque as possibilidades não são muitas. Este é um daqueles casos em que se a culpa morrer solteira, será definitivamente porque assim querem que seja.

CORREIO D'ALDEIA

Noticiasdaaldeia@gmail.com



OUTROS BLOGS DA CASA

O meu Basset

Telas & Tintas

FOTOS D'ALDEIA

A Nossa Escola

Arquivo Fotográfico

Source. One log of the weblog “News of the village” – 28<sup>th</sup> September of 2006 (<http://noticiasdaaldeia.blogspot.com/2007/06/falta-de-decoro.html>). It was a debate about some ecological issues in the local community. The picture shows us some dead fish because of pollution.

In fact, the new phenomena, that are changing the process, are not the organized *forums* on-line but mainly the process of creation of others forms of using the Internet as more participative *forums*. As an example, the weblogs created by individuals tend to have a very important role. In our research we found references to weblogs on the online forums of the sites of Municipalities.

After doing an exploratory research, we concluded that these kinds of sites are improving our participation based also on old media, as it is the case of language in co-presence. The new media are not a miraculous solution that can automatically improve citizen participation.

Although one cannot see great changes of the local political dynamics, one can argue that new ways of doing politics, more closed to micro politics groups, are emerging. Some of these forms are based in the new ICT, namely in the use of weblogs and in the use of the Web 2.0.

We live times of change that now seem quicker, more fluid, times of globalization, of a “network society” (Castells, 2000), or of a “liquid modernity”, in the expression of Zygmunt Bauman (2001), after all, times that impose a reconsideration of some of traditional concepts. Here, we may think of political activity as a core

mechanism for the definition of the articulation that is produced between a multiplicity of events – the “global flows” – and their “sedimentation” (Amin & Thrift, 1994: 9-10) as a memory that builds the historical time and that acts on those events. Anyway, this will be a political activity that, in our perspective, may present itself as democratically renewed, though and always without the faculty of becoming constituted in a framework of firmly established practices and solutions, a feature that shows what C. Mouffe calls its “paradoxical” nature (Mouffe, 2000).

This diffuse process can be a sign of a new attitude towards politics, far from traditional and formal models. It can be, according to Slöterdijk, the emergence of “hyper-politics, which becomes the prolongation of paleo-politics through other means” (1996: 79). The task of contemporary hyper-politics is to forge out of the self-centred Last Man. Create someone who is still interested in the Other, a ‘between-man’ (*Zwischenmensch*) who can function both spatially and timely as a mediator or ‘distantiator’ between different coexisting parties and between ancestors and future generations (Tuinen, 2007: 9). The new forms of communication, as the weblogs we found in our research, can improved this mediation, creating a more rich experience of life in our modern societies resisting to the economy of nihilism<sup>5</sup>.

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<sup>5</sup> Our reflection is somewhat similar to that of the German philosopher Peter Slöterdijk. He argues that nowadays we are more and more trapped in a nihilist and destructive economy: “The industrial process of the grand capital depletes human and material reserves faster than they can be created or regenerated. In this sense, this process is as autopoietic as a cancer, as creative as a firework, as productive as the cultivation of drugs.” (Slöterdijk, 1996: 78).



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