Electronic Participation with a Special Reference to Social Media - A Literature Review

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Abstract. As a consequence of the interdisciplinary nature of Electronic Participation (e-Participation), current research on the field is fragmented and scattered. The exciting blurry boundaries and the immature identity of the field are making difficult the understanding of the main domain themes being investigated, in particular for "neophytes" researchers. In practice, several e-Participation initiatives often attract a wide audience but face serious limitations regarding involvement of those who attract. Recently, the potential of using social media to address citizens' involvement deficit has been subject of academic debate. By consulting 44 e-Participation papers, considered highly relevant to the aforementioned challenges, this paper produces a general overview of e-Participation research, particularly through social media. The findings show that the e-Participation field still faces the challenge of identity and strive for gaining wider recognition as an independent research area. Concerning e-Participation through social media which seems to be partly overlooked in the field research, the politicians-citizen's interaction has dominated scholars' attention and the adoption of such initiatives sponsored and driven by governments are rarely examine. Based on the findings, several research suggestions, which could play a significant contribution to advance future e-Participation research, are proposed.

Keywords: Electronic Participation · Social media · Literature review · Electronic Government · Electronic Democracy.

1 Introduction

Research on the use of digital technologies for the purpose of facilitating greater citizen participation in policy decision-making process (e-Participation) has witnessed explosive growth over the last few years. However, it has been widely acknowledged that the research area of e-Participation has been fragmented, immature, and under-theorized [1–4]. While prior reviews have been made [2–5], the field of e-Participation is yet to own cohesive "identity" and clearly defined boundaries, which are significantly preventing the field to be recognized as a distinct research area [3, 6].

In practice, while there are some successful e-Participation initiatives showing positive results, a low level of citizens' engagement is often recognized in the majority of them, and few have attained tangible citizens' influences into policy making process [1, 7–10]. For enhancing citizens engagement, policy makers – politicians and governments – have been encouraged to go where citizens are, rather than expecting them to move from their actual online location, namely social media space [11–13]. Nevertheless, despite such attempts for using social media, the challenges of e-Participation initiatives to attract and engage more citizens still remains [14–16].

The aim of this paper is twofold. First, to provide an overall view of the state of the art on e-Participation. Second, to review the emerging research on e-Participation through social media. In doing so, we first address how e-Participation is understood (Sections 3.1), implemented (Section 3.2), and later we review emerging research on e-Participation through social media (Section 4).

Motivated by numerous calls for developing the field maturity [1, 3–5], an effective review significantly advances such ambition [17]. For that, we argue that after more than a decade of introducing the concept of e-Participation in 2004 [18], the time is right for it to be treated as distinct field. The current review contributes towards clear understanding of e-Participation, either in its own right or within "neighboring" fields such as e-Democracy and e-Government, and to support current efforts for reaching a "self-identity" of the field [1, 4, 6]. It also addresses recent calls to encourage further research on e-Participation and social media [2, 4].

The rest of this paper is structured as follows. Section 2 explains the methodology adopted to carry out the research. Sections 3 presents the state of the art on e-Participation, while specific findings of e-Participation through social media are introduced in Section 4. Section 5 offers some topical propositions and implications for further research. Finally, Section 6 concludes the paper.

2 Research Methodology

The research methodology used to carry out the current review comprises four phases: 1) defining the assessment framework; 2) collecting relevant papers; 3) selecting papers; and 4) classifying the selected papers. The phases are briefly explained below.

2.1 Assessment Framework

In the recent years, high priority has been given towards systematizing and scoping the e-Participation field, addressing research gaps, and driving future research directions [1–5]. Based on the major findings of such studies, considering the multi-disciplinary nature of e-Participation, and addressing the current review objectives, this phase aims at defining the assessment framework for the research work. The adopted assessment framework is based on three main categories: 1) e-Participation "self-identity" (includes e-Participation concept and e-Participation boundaries); 2) e-Participation Initiatives and Projects; and 3) e-Participation through Social Media.

2.2 Collecting Relevant Papers

Given the lack of a specific set of key publication venues on e-Participation, it is difficult to select a limited number of major journals as the primary source for identification of literature [3]. Therefore, we decided to base our search on Scopus, ISI-Web of Science, and EBSCO Host database indexes. The search was conducted for the years (2004-2015) using two keywords "e-Participation" and "Electronic Participation", and returned 507 papers - 311 in Scopus, 69 ISI-Web of Science, and 127 in EBSCO Host. We followed two-stage filtering process for selecting most relevant papers as we explained in the next section. We highlight that this study does not duplicate findings of previous e-Participation literature reviews presented in 2007 [5], 2008 [3], and 2012 [2, 4]. However, we built on them, enriching their findings with latest results.

2.3 Selecting Papers

The selection process applied two filtering stages consistent with the aim of this review. The first aim is to present a general view and the identity of e-Participation research. In this stage, titles, abstracts, and keywords of the retrieved papers were scanned. All candidate papers had to meet one major criteria to be further used: the paper should address e-Participation as a central subject or as essential theme of discussion. In other words, any paper that did not focus on e-Participation but barely mentioned the term as just a concept, or merely mentioned e-Participation along with other political and government/governance topics for a general coverage was excluded. This decision relies on devoting more efforts towards considering e-Participation as a distinct research field, which in results is expected to contribute to the realization of the "self- identity" of the field [4]. The process selected 44 papers. The second aim is to investigate e-Participation through social media initiatives. Thus, the previous 44 identified papers were scanned once again to find those focused on e-Participation through social media. During this stage, 19 papers were selected.

2.4 Classifying Selected Papers

Table 1 shows a breakdown of the selected papers for each of the three categories of the research assessment framework: 12 papers concern e-Participation "self-identity", 13 papers focus on e-Participation initiatives and projects (the analysis of these 25 former papers is presented in Section 3), and 19 papers refer to e-Participation through social media (the analysis of these latter papers is explained in Section 4).

Table 1. Distribution of Papers per Category

Category	Papers	# Papers
E-Participation "self-identity"	[1–6, 8, 18–22]	12
E-Participation initiatives and projects	[9–11, 13, 23–31]	13
E-Participation through social media	[7, 12, 14–16, 32–45]	19

3 E-Participation State of the Art

This section fulfills the first aim of this review – generating an overview of the state of the art in e-Participation field. The findings are presented in two subsections: e-Participation "self-identity" and e-Participation initiatives and projects.

3.1 E-Participation "Self-Identity"

We analyze the identity of e-Participation by studying: a) the concept and b) the boundaries of the domain, as presented in the following sections.

E-Participation Concept

To date, there is no established or widely adopted consensus among scholars concerning the definition of e-Participation [3–5, 10, 34], and this fact may be influencing the development and the maturity of the research domain [4]. The cross-disciplinary research field of e-Participation is mainly related to political science and public administration disciplines [1, 3, 5]. Subsequently, this brings a number of different understandings, philosophies and research traditions inside the e-Participation field [3, 4, 24]. Thus, it is not surprising to find many definitions and perceptions for e-Participation. Generally, the term of e-Participation is used within a number of near synonyms such as engagement, involvement and empowerment [13], and sometimes interchangeably used with "Political Participation".

An early study [18] introduces e-Participation as one of two sub areas of e-Democracy. According to the author, e-Voting and e-Participation are two technological means and mechanisms to support representative democratic decision making. However, the term became closely associated only with e-Voting, which created some problems for those who believe that e-Participation is more than just voting [3, 5, 19]. A broader definition was provided later by [46:85]. These authors defined e-Participation as "the use of information and communication technologies (ICT) to broaden and deepen political participation by enabling citizens to connect with one another and with their elected representatives". This definition has gained scholars' attention, especially for those interested in political activities. As evidenced by the previous definitions, researchers have primarily associated e-Participation with political participation and e-Democracy field [4, 5]. However, the definitions excludes other types of political engagements as well as interactions between citizens and government officials who are not directly elected [24].

A new definition provides more details of e-Participation, "the use of ICT to support information provisioning and "top-down" engagement i.e. government-initiated citizen participation, or "ground-up" efforts to empower citizens, civil society organizations and other democratically constituted groups to gain the support of their elected representatives" [24:17]. In such view, citizens are seen as more integrated in administrative and policy processes either with their elected politicians or assigned officials.

A broader perspective also sees e-Participation as an act intrinsically concerned with shaping government policy decision making by citizen's involvement in government

and governance processes through digital technologies [3, 5]. According to these authors, e-Participation aims to increase citizens participation in digital governance, which includes citizens participation in political process likewise in transformation of digital government information and services [3, 5]. Such view considered e-Participation as contributing to discussions or activities related not only to political issues such as voting, but also to public issues that shape day-to-day relationships between citizens and their governments [19]. In this respect, citizen participation can occur through actions that aimed at selecting citizens' representatives and at influencing decisions taken either by those who were elected or by government officials. Then, the main principle of e-Participation could also be implemented through citizens' participation in public affairs, i.e. citizen participation in a decision making process for the development a "COVE" of five acres, located near of a Norwegian city center [45].

In conclusion, we believe that e-Participation is a budding field that leverages on available digital technologies to enable and strengthen more opportunities for citizen's involvement in political and public affairs tailored for influencing policy making. Such approach is a useful mechanism for governments to fulfill the 2030 Sustainable Development Agenda.

E-Participation Boundaries
Overall, e-Participation research is mainly placed into e-Democracy and e-Government fields. In fact, much of the discussions of e-Participation are conducted in these two literature fields. Accordingly, the boundaries between e-Participation and the two other fields are not clear yet [3, 4]. The intersection of e-Participation with e-Democracy is understood since e-Participation by its origin and definition is largely related to e-Democracy and political context [18, 46]. Likewise, it is closely related to e-Government and Open Government [3, 4]. Hence, e-Participation has to be placed on a well-established field [3]. This section may not be able to clearly delineate such boundaries; however, it paves the way for a better understanding of the intersections between them.

There is no deny that e-Participation was born as a response to a perceived decline in political engagement (decline in election turnout), and a disconnection between citizens and their elected representatives [18]. Thus, the crossing between e-Participation and e-Democracy started early, when Macintosh (2004) claimed that e-Participation seek to achieve the principles of e-Democracy [18]. Since then, to a certain degree, e-Participation has been applied widely strictly in a political context [4, 5, 19, 20], that seeks to increase citizens' political participation in order to overcome the growing democratic deficit [22, 28, 47]. Consequently, e-Participation is widely considered as an integral part of e-Democracy [10, 18] – in other cases, both concepts are misconceived as synonymous [4, 20]. Recently, some researchers studied the common perception that e-Participation is equal to e-Democracy [4]. The authors came to the conclusion that e-Participation scope is much broader and encompasses citizens' participation in various processes that are not necessarily political, e.g. in patient participation [4].

In government context, there were several advancements towards restoration of government role in addressing "democratic deficit" through participation initiatives [20, 48]. Nowadays, the development of enhanced e-Participation initiatives is at the heart of worldwide e-Government strategies [49]. In such context, it is common to find that

e-Participation is considered an integral part of e-Government [10, 50]. However, government-led e-Participation initiatives is mainly informational and do not promote interactivity since they usually focus on information dissemination, enhancing e-service delivery, and fostering transparency [9, 51]. Accordingly, e-Government overall impact on enhancing citizen participation and strengthening democratic processes has been quite modest [48].

In summary, e-Participation research is pervaded with syntactically similar notions, such as e-Democracy and e-Government. These notions related to e-Participation have often lack any accurate differentiation or boundaries, in result the research of e-Participation is still "fragmented and disjointed". In fact, the field is still torn between them. In addition, e-Participation has various stakeholders including citizens, politicians and government officials, who posse a wide variety of needs, aims, activities, and purposes [2, 3, 10]. Consequently, e-Participation is asked to seek different tasks and address different objectives according to the context in which the initiatives occur (e.g. in e-Democracy, or in e-Government) [3, 4, 10].

3.2 E-Participation Initiatives and Projects

The notion of e-Participation has attracted considerable attention from governments worldwide especially in Europe. It is being seen as a way to increase government transparency, to legitimize their decisions, and, consequently, enhance citizens political participation and address the growing democratic deficit [10, 13, 18, 22, 28].

Recent studies identified the existence of around 255 e-Participation initiatives from 23 European countries [27, 28], 53 of which have been funded with over 120 million Euros by the European Union between 1990 and 2010 [31]. Despite the high costs and great interest, findings show that the majority of them generated low citizens participation [29], and that they were mainly focused on information provision [13, 27].

Overall, European e-Participation initiatives apparently failed to meet expectations [8, 29, 30] particularly in reaching and sustaining wider audiences, as well as in increasing their participation [8]. While the success of e-Participation may depend on understanding citizens' needs [9], European e-Participation projects are giving more attention towards delivering technical digital solutions than to the understanding the needs of citizens [30]. Furthermore, the highly sophisticated e-Participation tools and the weak communication means that were used to reach and to interact with citizens in such projects appear as other reasons for the low level of engagement achieved [11, 29]. An evaluation study of various e-Participation project has found a positive impact between providing citizens with attractive and easy-to-use e-Participation tools and their participation rate [41]. Other study demonstrates that limited amount of administrative support available (i.e. few staff) might affect the success of such projects in sustaining citizen's participation [23].

4 E-Participation through Social Media

This section addresses the second aim of this review – investigating e-Participation through social media initiatives. While social media enables a new dimension to the e-Participation field, and has the potential role of enhancing citizen participation at different stages of policy making processes [1, 2, 4, 12], there is a further lack of research on social media and participation [2, 4, 52]. Recently, new attempts aim at summarizing and organizing the literature on e-Participation through social media [53, 54].

While the first documented attempt of introducing social media for e-Participation was in 2009 [12], the topic of e-Participation through social media has been developed at a slow pace, since many of retrieved studies have been published after 2012. Furthermore, the majority of discussions around social media for e-Participation are more placed in e-Government and e-Democracy research rather than in the e-Participation field [53, 54]. Another relevant aspect is that e-Participation through social media initiatives are more informative than interactive [14, 40, 44], and few initiatives have been found that aim at considerably enhancing citizen participation in policy decision making processes [33, 53, 54].

There are two major criticisms of the existing literature on e-Participation through social media. On the one hand, typical e-Participation through social media research is more driven towards political system processes activities [15, 42, 44] - e.g. e-Voting, e-Campaign [14, 34–36, 38, 39], which might nearly discuss similar ideas as in the e-Democracy field. The majority of e-Participation initiatives in such "political setting" have been mainly addressed by politicians and the pursued aim was to enable them to disseminate information, to promote themselves, and to seek potential vote-gaining during election time [44, 53]. The focus has often been on making the interactions easier and more beneficial for the politicians, not the citizens. Hence, this view of e-Participation can be seen as communication, rather than truly participation [55].

On the other hand, except few cases [16, 37, 43, 45], e-Participation through social media studies rarely capture and examine citizens' involvement in e-Participation projects that are sponsored and driven by governments, which seems that the e-Participation field community is reluctant to move towards the e-Government context. Such findings confirm that the e-Participation field focuses mostly around political process. As general observation, e-Participation concept in e-Government research context has been superficially examined along with other government principles or public policy objectives, such as openness, transparency, and accountability. For sure, e-Participation has direct relation with and impact on those principles and objectives [10]. Nevertheless, e-Participation for openness, accountability, and transparency does not inevitably mean a truly participation [8, 9, 33, 51].

5 Propositions and Implications

Based on the analysis of major e-Participation challenges identified in the review, we derive a number of propositions that may assist future research. Such propositions were discussed and agreed among researchers of the project team.

Proposition 1: E-Participation Concept and Boundaries
The lack of cohesive definitions and clear boundaries within the field of e-Participation shape the consequential difficulties in research, application, and indeed for the identification of the field identity [4, 6]. Further work for both conceptual clarification and boundaries is still needed [1, 3–6]. Many lessons can be drawn from specific insights generated by other disciplines that have experienced similar challenges and suffered from similar symptoms, e.g. e-Government [56]. Those challenges refer to how such disciplines shaped their identities, and cleared what are their core subjects matter [57, 58]. For example, Information Systems (IS) academic discipline had been earlier exposed and encountered a great difficulty in establishing itself among other related disciplines, i.e. Information Science and Computer Science, [58, 59]. Thus, e-Participation discipline can get inspiration and learn from IS accumulative experience in the matter. Around two decades ago, some authors set forward a theoretical framework of the main areas of the IS by undertaken "Delphi" method survey [57]. Since the Delphi method has been successfully employed to systemize new concepts and to propose frameworks within IS research [60], that gives a good reason that the emergent research field of e-Participation is demanding for such studies.

Proposition 2: Remedy E-Participation Internal Disciplinary Boundaries [4]
While e-Participation knowledge puts forward arguments on why separating the technological or social perspectives appear inadequate to explain and investigate e-Participation [1, 21, 22, 50], few studies overcome the internal disciplinary boundaries that exist at the moment among e-Participation research [4]. The internal disciplinary boundaries appear in the lack of researches that link and interlace several e-Participation themes together, such as connecting stakeholders, tools and environment when they are studying e-Participation topics [4].

Indeed, neither the technological nor the social perspectives alone can be successful when implementing and investigating e-Participation [22], but in the possibility for their interweaving by taking multi-approaches and perspectives. In this sense, integrated a balanced sociology and psychology perspectives with technological one could be more convenient to understand e-Participation [21]. The current review reaffirms these arguments and further suggests that there is a great opportunity for harnessing and transforming knowledge from one area to another [61], in order to get a more comprehensive overview of e-Participation. The IS discipline for instance, significantly contributes to advance the maturity of e-Government field [56, 62]. In thus, IS can offer similar contributions for maturing e-Participation.

Proposition 3: E-Participation Diversity
It is interesting to find some recent applications of e-Participation related to the governance field but in specific contexts [4], such as in students' online participation in higher education processes [63], in environmental protection initiatives [64], and global climate change [65]. Such efforts highlight more evidence that today's e-Participation research does not necessarily need to be centered on political activities. Our argument is similar to the one used in IS, - i.e. the use of Information Technologies (IT) artifacts

it does not necessarily imply that IT is the core subject matter of IS studies [58]; likewise, e-Voting and e-Campaign activities are not required to be the core subjects matter of e-Participation studies.

E-Participation-related research may start under the e-Democracy discipline or following a political interest. However, our conclusion is that strictly following a banner of research that is only interested in political activities will result in a micro focus for e-Participation research and, in turn, puts e-Participation as subdivision of e-Democracy field. Similarly, more researches are also demanding to differentiate "typical" e-Government projects from other government projects related to e-Participation [8]. The field needs theoretical comparative studies contributing to this debate and researchers should be aware of such differences when advancing e-Participation studies.

Accepting a smaller role and viewing political activities as the core subject matter of the e-Participation field will limit the potential contributions and significance of the e-Participation field in other areas. Moreover, it may further make more difficult for e-Participation to be recognized as independent research area.

6   Conclusions

The current findings challenge the optimistic argument that e-Participation may soon emerge as an independent research area. Perhaps, it may take longer time than what was expected, not because the concept may lose its usefulness, but, on the contrary, because it may be fully integrated in "more matured fields" such as e-Government.

While political activities are the focal point of e-Participation through social media studies, few contributions focus specifically on studying such initiatives to involve citizens in government policy decision making process. The e-Participation community has a great story to tell and thus this paper questions that the political activities should not be viewed as the only core matters of the e-Participation field. In practice, the majority of e-Participation initiatives, particularly through social media, have been heavily performed as one-way communication method, rather than as tools enabling citizens to be actually involved in the decision-making process.

A limitation of this study is the number of analyzed papers. Although the sample is small, it could be argued that this is due to the restricted approach that has been followed to fulfill the specific aims of this research work. Future work includes expanding the literature review to propose a more detailed outline of the field.

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