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Towards an Evaluation Framework for eParticipation¹

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Abstract

Purpose

The paper demonstrates the use of a range of perspectives and methods to evaluate eParticipation initiatives. We argue that there is a need for coherent evaluation frameworks employing such perspectives and methods, the better to understand current eParticipation applications and learn from these experiences.

Approach

A case study² of eParticipation evaluation for four local authority led projects from the 'top down' stream of the UK Local e-Democracy National Project is presented.

Research implications

We argue that further research is needed in two main areas; first, on the applicability of eParticipation tools to particular contexts, and second, to integrate fieldwork methods to assess social acceptance of eParticipation and represent the diversity of views obtained from citizens, community groups and other stakeholders.

Practical implications

The paper describes the application of the framework, demonstrates the importance of a multi-method approach, and outlines some barriers to using it.

Originality

The described framework is a basis for further development since eParticipation evaluation is in its infancy despite strong advocacy of evaluation in e-government research and practice literature.

Classification: case study

Keywords: eDemocracy, digital democracy, eEngagement, e-Government, eParticipation, Evaluation

1 Introduction

The potential for information and communication technologies (ICTs) to increase political participation and address the growing democratic deficit across the USA and Europe has long been the subject of academic debate (e.g. Dutton, 1992). However, it is only in relatively recent times that there has been sufficient application of ICTs to support democracy that this 'potential' could be considered within a real-world context (Weber et al, 2003). The term 'eDemocracy' captures both the intent to support democracy and studies of the outcomes and context. Hacker and van Dijk (2000), using the term 'digital democracy' as opposed to eDemocracy, discuss the emergence of the concept. Previous work (Macintosh 2004a) considered two components to eDemocracy, one addressing the electoral process including e-voting, and the other addressing citizen eParticipation in democratic decision-making.

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² This work was undertaken at the International Teledemocracy Centre, Napier University, Edinburgh, UK

This paper builds on these earlier studies and uses a working definition of eParticipation as the use of ICTs to support information provision and “top-down” engagement i.e. government-led initiatives, or “ground-up” efforts to empower citizens, civil society organisations and other democratically constituted groups to gain the support of their elected representatives. Effective information provision is often seen as a corollary of effective engagement and empowerment. Other authors provide similar definitions; see for example Pratchett and Krimmer (2005).

Nowadays a large range of tools are available to form the basis for eParticipation applications and it is well accepted that technical, social and political factors need to be considered when developing eParticipation applications (Mambrey, 2004). However using any type of ICT to enhance democracy is a challenging task and a number of studies have been conducted to make the challenges explicit. In 2004 the eGovernment PRISMA project, funded by the European Commission, considered scenarios on the future use of eParticipation tools (Kubicek and Westholm, 2005). The resulting paper highlighted a number of issues with regard to technology design and development. First, the increasing amount of information available over the internet implies a need for knowledge and information management systems. Second, the range of stakeholders involved requires personalized communication integrated with the delivery of relevant information. Third, it highlighted the need for information systems design to move towards more collaborative working environments to support government and civil society to work in partnership. The need for a rigorous evaluation framework was stressed.

A similar future research direction is reported by Macintosh (2006), who arrives at five key issues for future information systems research to support eParticipation. The first concerns moving from experimentation and pilots to large-scale usage of eParticipation applications. The second challenge is concerned with understanding how to design tools to facilitate online deliberation and support collaborative working environments. The third challenge addresses the need for reliable representation of the information and analysis of contributions made by civil society. Fourth, the author stresses the need to embed the technology into political processes rather than to treat it as an isolated eParticipation exercise. The final challenge, like Kubicek and Westholm, is concerned with evaluation, so as to understand what has and has not been achieved.

The aim of this paper is to demonstrate the application of a range of methods and techniques to evaluate local eParticipation initiatives. The research purpose is to increase understanding of eParticipation and, consequently, determine how to measure impact and potential opportunity. Understanding how stakeholders perceive local eDemocracy and how the technology is used in practice is critical if we are to establish how ICTs may be *affecting* local democracy by changing existing practice, and *effecting* it as they become new instruments for achieving local democracy.

The approach discussed in this paper was part of a larger study commissioned by Bristol City Council to evaluate the Local eDemocracy National Project. The national project on local e-democracy was funded by the then UK Office of the Deputy Prime Minister, as part of a £80m National Project Program aiming to drive the modernization of local services. The e-democracy project had the following overarching objectives:

1. To encourage all local authorities to consider the ways in which they can use e-democracy tools to enhance local democracy and to develop locally appropriate strategies for implementing such tools where relevant.
2. To ensure that the knowledge and experience of e-democracy that already exists is systematically exposed and shared across local government for the benefit of all.
3. To develop new tools that support or enhance local democratic practice both within local government and beyond.
4. To provide a focal point for democratic innovation and the dissemination of best practice.
5. To begin a sustainable process of electronically enabled participation and engagement that complements existing democratic structures and processes.

The authors evaluated four of the government-led eDemocracy initiatives. These ‘top-down’ projects were in various states of readiness at the time, and the consequences for the evaluation are also discussed.

Following this introduction, section 2 overviews the research problem and section 3 explores methodologies for evaluating eParticipation. Section 4 outlines evaluation of the chosen eParticipation case studies. Finally, sections 5 and 6 provide an indication for future work and overall conclusions.

2 Research Problem

The objective of this on-going research is to develop an analytical framework through which eParticipation initiatives can be evaluated. Although the importance of evaluation of eParticipation projects is recognised by both government and academia, rigorous evaluations of eParticipation are hard to find.

In contrast there are a range of methods and the associated studies cited in the literature concerned with the evaluation of eGovernment (when this term is restricted to the online delivery of government services). For example, the paper by Sakowicz (2003) provides a table of examples of government evaluations, presenting the various approaches and giving the project name, methods used and characteristic features evaluated. One of the most used tools for the evaluations is the 'web survey', which typically consists of a list of questions to determine the content and the level of online service delivery. Importantly, Sakowicz concludes that the evaluation analysis for the majority of eGovernment studies is too limited. The focus tends to be on what is available on the website rather than 'if and how' the services are actually used. The evaluations are concentrated on a particular stakeholder's perspective, whether that is the government officials, businesses or citizens. None appear to take a holistic view and consider all stakeholders. In 2003 a number of researchers from different countries across Europe undertook an evaluation of the use of technology to support eDemocracy, focusing on the parliaments and political parties (Trechsel, et al. 2003). However, again, the evaluation was based on comparative website surveys with some case studies. What the researchers wished to learn was whether the introduction and diffusion of technology was having a significant impact upon the practice of democracy. They studied the websites of the then 15 member states and the 10 candidate states of the European Union, looking at information provision, user-friendliness, one-to-one interactivity and many-to-many interactivity. The authors state that this last type of interactivity is the most important since it has the potential to strengthen the deliberative aspects of citizen participation (p24); however they go on to point out that having a mechanism available on a website does not mean that it will be used. This, again, indicates the limitations of current evaluation research and the need to involve all stakeholders in order to get complete evaluation results.

Recent academic literature on eParticipation has begun to discuss methodological frameworks for undertaking evaluation. However, although the importance of rigorous evaluation is recognised, there is little evidence demonstrating the use of such evaluation approaches in practice. The 2001 study by the OECD considered effective off-line methods which government could use to engage with citizens and provided a number of 'guiding principles' for off-line citizen engagement. Guiding principle number 9 on 'evaluation' stated:

"Governments need the tools, information and capacity to evaluate their performance in providing information, conducting consultation and engaging citizens, in order to adapt to new requirements and changing conditions for policy-making." (OECD 2001, p.15).

During 2003 the OECD team responsible for citizen engagement commissioned a study into the potential of ICTs to support citizen engagement in policy-making. The resulting report made an initial attempt to scope the eParticipation domain from a government perspective, describe a number of eParticipation case studies in OECD member countries, and highlight the major issues facing eParticipation. The report highlighted five major issues, including evaluation. The report stressed that a major challenge was evaluating eParticipation in order to: make sense of what has, or has not, been achieved; and understanding of how to assess the benefits and the impacts of applying technology to the democratic process. (Macintosh, 2004b, p89)

However evaluation is novel even in the context of off-line participation. As noted by the OECD:

"There is a striking imbalance between the amount of time, money and energy that governments in OECD countries invest in engaging citizens and civil society in public decision-making and the amount of attention they pay to evaluating the effectiveness of such efforts." (OECD 2005, p 10).

This latter report then explains that the 'evaluation gap' is due to the relatively recent realisation by governments of the need to engage with citizens and therefore the evaluation of public participation is an even newer concept. This despite the OECD report published four years earlier providing the guiding principle number 9 on 'evaluation'!

3 Methodological Approaches

As stated earlier, rigorous evaluations of eParticipation applications are hard to find and only a few embryonic evaluation frameworks have been published (e.g. Whyte and Macintosh, 2003a, Frewer and Rowe, 2005). Forss (2005) suggests three purposes for eParticipation evaluation: audit; management and learning, and states that in the public sector the emphasis, typically, has been on audit – where there is a need to monitor the spending of public money and ascertain whether services are effective and efficient (page 45). However, given the immaturity of eParticipation work, evaluation for the purpose of learning from current pilots would seem appropriate. The publication provides a useful source for those wishing to undertake evaluation, however it does not explore the specifics of eParticipation evaluation requirements.

In the same OECD publication, Frewer and Rowe (2005) consider some of the practical issues in evaluating public participation based on their experiences of a number of scientific and environmental-related citizen engagement exercises. The annex to their paper provides a list of possible evaluation criteria with suggested questions. This is a useful basis for constructing an evaluation, but without the necessary detail to evaluate ICT as the media for the engagement.

The work of Antturi (2003) suggests that, in evaluating eDemocracy, the broad capability of technology to add value should be included. This added value of technology should be articulated through:

Institutions. To what extent are the ICT-based citizen-centred solutions and applications integrated in the practices of existing political institutions and how do they affect actual decision-making processes.

Influence. Are the eDemocracy experiments or practices such that people involved may truly influence the issues of interest?

Integration. Is the potential of technology used optimally in integrating the elements of the eDemocratic process, including agenda-setting, planning, preparation, decision-making, implementation, evaluation and control?

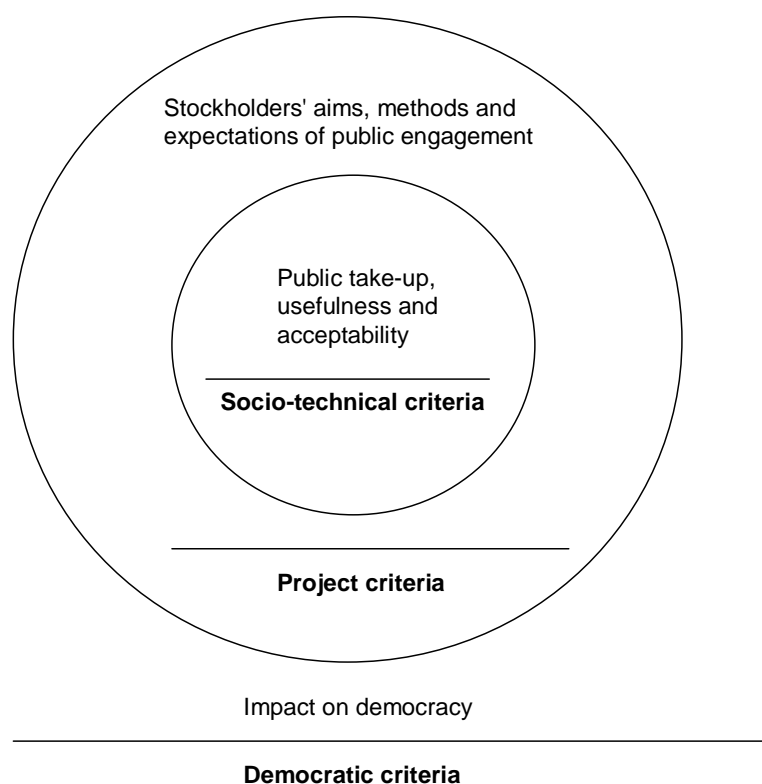
Interaction. Is the potential of technology in disseminating information, facilitating interaction and conducting political transactions used to increase the transparency, efficiency, flexibility, cost-effectiveness and inclusiveness of the democratic process? (p.125).

Gil-Garcia and Pardo (2006) discuss the necessity of a multi-method approach to eGovernment research, arguing that eGovernment is a complex social phenomenon that can greatly benefit from the use of multiple disciplines. The case for such a multi-method approach to eParticipation evaluation is even stronger.

Based on previous work (Whyte and Macintosh, 2003), the authors argue that to evaluate how effective eParticipation is in engaging a wide audience so as to inform and influence the policy process, an analytical framework has to be developed that takes into account three dimensions: the evaluation criteria; the analysis methods available; and the actors involved. The evaluation criteria, as illustrated in Figure 1, consider three overlapping perspectives: democratic, project and socio-technical.

- The democratic perspective considers the overarching democratic criteria that the eParticipation initiative is addressing. Here one of the most difficult aspects is to understand to what extent the eParticipation affects policy.
- The project perspective looks in detail at the specific aims and objectives of the eParticipation initiative as set by the project stakeholders.
- The socio-technical perspective considers to what extent the design of the ICTs directly affects the outcomes. Established frameworks from the software engineering and information systems fields can be used to assess issues such as usability and accessibility.

Figure 1 Layered eParticipation evaluation perspectives



A range of data gathering and analysis methods should be used depending, on eParticipation tools and context of use. These include:

- field observation of relevant actors using the tool in a real-world setting
- interviewing and group discussion with relevant actors
- analysis of online questions and discussion
- analysis of project documentation
- usage statistics from the tools and server logfile analysis

Including methods that analyse interaction ensures that the evaluation provides evidence of what people actually do with eParticipation tools, as well as what they say they do. Importantly, using mixed methods allows triangulation of methods and results and, therefore, helps to maximise their validity.

To understand how stakeholders perceive eParticipation it is also important to involve a range of actors in the evaluation process. The challenge is to involve each appropriately in the evaluation.

In government-led eParticipation projects actors might include:

- officials setting up and administrating the eParticipation mechanism
- people who have used the eParticipation mechanism
- others who have not used it
- elected representatives or officials considering the eParticipation results;
- other interested representatives
- project managers and technologists supplying the online tools.

The authors argue that any generalised evaluation framework for eParticipation needs to state clearly which evaluation criteria are being considered, needs to define the actors addressed, and needs to ensure that relevant research methods are matched to the appropriate actor considering the timing, their skills and their willingness to be involved.

4 The Local eDemocracy Evaluation Case Study

This case study is based on work undertaken as part of the UK Local eDemocracy National Project, specifically “Workstream 4: Public and Stakeholder Opinion and eDemocracy”. The local eDemocracy projects had originally been classified as *top-down* projects (which were government-led and mainly dealt with linking citizens to council processes), *ground-up* projects (which are mainly concerned to encourage community networks) and *youth-related* eParticipation tools and games. The authors were responsible for the research into ‘top-down’ projects (Whyte, et al, 2005). In all cases the evaluations were constrained by the very limited time provided for eParticipation to be designed and developed, most of which remained at formative stages of implementation. The ‘top-down’ projects had to be completed in less than one year during which the project staff had to be recruited, suppliers contracted, applications implemented, working practices examined and eParticipation tools publicised and used. The evaluations in the final months were therefore too short to cover the projects evenly and in some cases lacked involvement of key actors.

4.1 The Local eDemocracy projects

The four government-led projects discussed in this paper focus on:

1. An ePanel forum for debating city-wide issues;
2. ePetitioning for citizens to lobby their local authority;
3. Personalized survey tool for local authorities to make engagement individually relevant;
4. Best practice in partnership consultation on crosscutting issues.

Due to space limitations the detailed descriptions of these projects are not presented here but can be found in Whyte et.al. 2005.

4.1.1 The ePanel

The ePanel project was led by Bristol City Council and had three main aims:

- To demonstrate that the democratic potential of citizens’ panels can be increased using eDemocracy tools
- To produce detailed guidance for local authorities and case studies demonstrating how various e-panel approaches can be implemented.
- To strengthen links between authorities engaged in on-line consultation.

The Bristol e-panel website, Askbristol.com integrated various tools such as discussion forums, surveys and live chats. Registered e-panel members could discuss issues with experts and with each other before giving their final views in polls or surveys.

4.1.2 ePetitioning

The ePetitioning project was led by The Royal Borough of Kingston upon Thames. e-Petitioning in the National Project built on the experience of the Scottish Parliament, which formally launched its e-petitioning system in February 2004 after a 4 year pilot (Adams et al, 2005). The local authority ePetitioner was based directly on this system. Kingston local authority trialled it in addition to traditional paper petitioning processes. The new service aimed to increase transparency, accessibility and strengthen the petitioning process through creating an online service for starting and supporting petitions, and a central location where petitions could be viewed and their progress tracked.

4.1.3 Personalised survey tool

This project, called Micro Democracy, was led by Swindon Borough Council. It piloted a highly personalized and localized “micro democracy process” for informing and consulting citizens. It utilized aspects of customer relationship management and knowledge management. The stated aims were:

- More efficient and effective consultation in terms of cost per consultation undertaken and improved response rate;
- Personal engagement about issues that matter to the individual;
- Multi-threaded approach – it was not anticipated that the system would be the sole method of eParticipation but would be complemented and integrated with other online and offline approaches.

The developed tool is not a publicly available website but a web-based tool that users within the local authority may use to generate questionnaires.

4.1.4 Partnership consultation on cross-cutting issues

This project, named “Democractising Cross-Cutting Issues and Partnerships” was led by Wolverhampton City Council. The aim was not to develop a specific eParticipation tool as such, but rather to develop best practice guidelines on engaging citizens on issues that cut across organizational boundaries, and engage them with the work of partnerships of local public services and civic organisations. To that end a Wolverhampton Partnership website described the partnership and linked to an ePanel tool for conducting online engagement in a partnership context.

4.2 Evaluation Design

In order to determine the democratic evaluation criteria, we first needed to understand the objectives of the Local eDemocracy National Project as a whole. The National Project had defined overarching ‘democratic criteria’ for what the projects should do to support and enhance democracy. These are summarized in Table 1 and were used as our democratic evaluation perspective.

Table 1: Democratic criteria

(Source: Project Initiation Document, National Project on Local e-Democracy v3.0)

Criteria	Description
Representation	eParticipation should be used to support, complement or enhance the activities and understanding of representative government, and should not undermine the value of representative democracy.
Engagement	Projects need to support local identity and help individuals understand, and link into, the wider democratic processes that are part of their community.
Transparency	Projects need to make decision-making processes more transparent.
Conflict and consensus	Projects need to recognise that divergence of opinion may be an inevitable outcome of enhanced democratic engagement. Wherever possible, tools should incorporate an expectation of such divergence and provide opportunities for negotiation, mediation and consensus building.
Political equality	This criterion requires e-democracy to improve the inclusiveness of policy-making or, at the minimum, not to further disadvantage those who already are in some way excluded or less powerful in the political process.
Community control	Democracy is about citizens collectively controlling those who take decisions on their behalf. The tools of e-democracy therefore must ensure that citizen engagement is closely linked to decision-making processes and that those who take decisions are responsive to the communities which they serve.

The project criteria were taken directly from the individual local projects aims and objectives and involved one or more of the following criteria shown in Table 2.

Table 2: Project criteria

Criteria	Description
Engaging with a wider audience	Usability criteria such as ‘ease of use’ are important elements of any evaluation irrespective of there being an explicit intent to widen participation.. The acceptability (and hence use) of the technology will be affected by other non-usability criteria.
Obtaining better informed opinions	Where the engagement method deliberately provides respondents with background information in order to elicit better informed opinions the evaluation should analyse

	the use made of this information as an indication of how relevant it has been.
Enabling more in-depth consultation	This requires an engagement method that goes further than simply providing background information by supporting deliberative debate. The evaluation should therefore consider analysis of the content and structure of the discussion to assess the depth achieved.
Cost effective analysis of contributions	online submission of responses creates opportunities for more cost effective engagement. Responses made online save transcription costs, and those to closed questions can be analysed in real-time.
Providing feedback to citizens	where there is an intent to inform participants about the responses received and their impact on local authority decisions, the evaluation needs citizens' assessment of this feedback.

The socio-technical criteria encompassed aspects of usability, usefulness and acceptability (Neilson, 1993) and aimed for consistency with the Quality Framework for UK Government Websites (Cabinet Office, 2003). These criteria are described in Table 3.

Table 3: Socio-technical criteria

Criteria	Description
<i>Social acceptability</i>	
Trust and security	Is the information presented accurate, complete and reliable, and is the information users have provided handled securely?
Relevance and legitimacy	Are the intended users satisfied that the tool meets a purpose relevant to their own and their community's needs, and are the content and surrounding processes relevant to that purpose?
<i>Usefulness</i>	
Accessibility	Is the level of compliance with Web Accessibility Initiative (WAI) content guidelines sufficient to meet the needs of users with disabilities?
Appeal	Is the take-up in line with expectations, and do the intended users like it enough to want to use it?
Content clarity	Can users understand what the content means in relation to their task or situation?
Responsiveness	Does the tool and/or process answer the user's questions quickly and effectively?
<i>Usability</i>	
Navigation and organisation	Do the intended users have sufficient and consistent information about their current position within the site organisation, the path taken, and options available?
Efficiency and flexibility	Can the intended users perform tasks in an acceptable time, and are there appropriate short-cuts for doing repetitive or familiar tasks?
Error recovery	Can the intended users 'undo' their previous action, and are they guided effectively on the correct procedure so they can continue without distraction or hesitation?

During the evaluation we targeted these actors:

- (a) Citizens who have used the e-democracy tools deployed (or agreed to take part in a pilot).
- (b) Citizens who have *not* used the tools.
- (c) Councillors involved in the engagement process.
- (d) Engagement 'owners': managers responsible for aspects of the engagement process.
- (e) Project managers/ technologists, whether employed by the Council or by suppliers.

(f) 'Internal' users: moderators or administrators.

Also, we used a range of methods:

1. Semi-structured interviews were carried out face-to face and supplemented with telephone interviews. These were audio-recorded and notes taken to enable quicker analysis.
2. Field tests of the tools involved observing how members of the public interacted with the tools, to better understand their acceptability and usability in a real-world setting (e.g. public libraries).
3. Online questionnaires to gather perceptions of the tools acceptability
4. Project documentation was inspected to understand each project's rationale and expectations.
5. Results of online discussions were analysed.
6. Web server log analysis provided information on visits and page requests.

To appreciate how each of the actors should be involved and plan appropriate questions, the 'key dimensions' of eParticipation adapted from previous work to help characterize eParticipation initiatives (Macintosh, 2004b) was used. Table 4 shows these key dimensions (in bold) along with the evaluation questions, the actors targeted and the methods used.

Table 4: Detailed evaluation questions and how they were addressed

Dimension/ Questions	Methods	Actors
Type of engagement		
How does the project relate to the Council's e-Democracy and participation agenda, and how should it benefit relations with the public, elected representatives (executive and opposition), partners and national government? Have views changed in light of the outcomes apparent so far? If so, how?	1	all
What are actors' views of the weight given to engagement results in the Council's decision-making, and how do their perceptions differ from those of officials & representatives who 'own' the engagement process?	1	all
Stage in decision-making		
Where do actors think the engagement process fits into service delivery and/or more general policy making (as 'monitoring', 'agenda setting' etc.)? How does this vary according to the issue or topic?	1	all
What important differences, if any, are there between the issues raised in online engagement and those using other methods?	1, 2, 3, 5	all
Actors		
Who are the relevant actors (politicians, officials, technologists, citizens as individuals and groups), and why are they involved? i.e. who does the work, who controls it, who are the actual or potential beneficiaries, who may be adversely affected, who is otherwise involved?	1, 3, 5	all
What important differences, if any, are there between the roles of the moderator (or facilitator) in online engagement compared with other approaches used?	2	(d), (e), (f)
Technologies used		
How are the tools provided used?	1, 2, 3, 5, 6	all
How useful are the tools to their intended users.	all	(a), (b), (f)
Rules of engagement		
What is the impact on public engagement of the project and what implications does that have for the engagement process?	all	all
How do actors view the privacy implications of engagement and what measures have/should be taken to address these (considering DP & FOI)?	1, 2, 3	all
Duration & sustainability		

How does the project impact on other public engagement activities, especially when they also have an online element?	1, 2, 4, 5	all
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4.3 Evaluation Results

There is scope here to outline what we concluded from applying the evaluation framework, the results of which were fed back to the local authorities and technology providers involved (Whyte et al 2005).

Representation

The major strength of Bristol City Council's e-panel was its leverage of existing liaison between the consultation team and service departments, enlisting their direct participation in online discussion. The Royal Borough of Kingston's e-petitioner project had strong support from councillors, although the outcomes of e-petitions remained uncertain and there were weaknesses in the integration with other engagement processes. The Personalised Survey project in Swindon generated keen interest from councillors. The Wolverhampton Partnership rested on a strong consultation infrastructure, although support from partners and councillors appeared limited.

Engagement

In all cases strong efforts were made to encourage public response on issues of local relevance. The early evidence was that this was forthcoming, but only when the issues were general enough to affect a broad cross-section of citizens.

Transparency

The ePetitioner project was strongest on this point since it established a process for publishing decision outcomes. There was potential in each project to enhance transparency, but it would have been preferable for them to first establish what citizens would need or expect in terms of enhanced transparency. This is necessary because "enhancing transparency" may be taken to mean either providing detailed information or hiding it in the name of simplicity. The projects each had published policies on privacy and acceptable use, with the exception of the Micro Democracy personalised survey project where these were strengthened on our recommendation.

Conflict and consensus

Each of the projects provided an online forum and opportunities for divergence of opinion on the issues raised and the method for raising them, with the exception of the Personalised Survey project. The preparation for effective moderation of such discussions was a strong feature of the e-panel project and the Wolverhampton Partnership project, although Kingston's preparations for moderating any controversial e-petitions were not fully developed at the time.

Political equality

The projects each showed strong potential for greater inclusiveness. There was evidence that the tools were already being actively used by hundreds of citizens in each of the local authority areas. There were also signs that these were mostly not previously "engaged" in local authority decision making. Demographically there were disabled and minority ethnic users almost in proportion to local populations, but male and middle-aged users predominated. The Personalised Survey project had strong potential given its integration of online and offline channels, although its take-up could not be assessed during the evaluation period.

Community control

Citizens had modest expectations that their views would have some impact on decision-making and strong expectations that the councils should in any case publish a response to their input. The evidence that citizens were satisfied with the arrangements was limited but mostly positive for the ePetitioner and e-panel projects. The Wolverhampton Partnership showed strong potential to liaise effectively with existing community groups, although it was not possible to directly assess the latter's involvement in the time available. The personalised Survey project placed much emphasis on responsiveness, though again citizens' views on that were unavailable.

5 Future work

This paper has demonstrated the use of a range of perspectives and methods to evaluate eParticipation initiatives and provide a coherent evaluation framework for their integration and use. However, at the same time, the authors recognise that there is a need to develop further

the framework which recognises the complexity of the domain and the need to use methods relevant to all those with an interest in the outcome.

The evaluation framework presented here seeks to integrate different perspectives on evaluation criteria, a range of stakeholders and methods for assessing eParticipation projects. The aim is to evaluate eParticipation applications in terms of their impact on local democracy, their planning of public engagement and quality of the tools provided for public engagement. The described framework is a basis for further development since eParticipation evaluation is in its infancy despite strong advocacy of evaluation in e-government research and practice literature.

This framework, has been the subject of academic debate within the Demo-Net project which is a Network of Excellence on eParticipation funded by the European Commission. The framework is viewed by the members of the network as a 'reasonable' starting point on which to build a fully multi-method approach to eParticipation evaluation.

The evaluation highlighted measures taken to ensure that ease-of-use and accessibility were not barriers to take-up. However, the main barriers to citizens making effective use of the tools are much more likely to be the organizational ones of coordinating the provision of the tools on the one hand, and, on the other hand, societal ones of citizens and civic groups accepting and using them. Evaluation research in the Information Systems field (see e.g. Hirschheim, 2007) provides a variety of relevant theoretical perspectives that may usefully be applied to eParticipation to build on the few existing studies (e.g. Whyte and Macintosh, 2003b).

6 Conclusions

Applying the eParticipation framework resulted in an assessment that was considered fair by participants. However the framework needs further development. More consideration needs to be placed on how and when to use tools in which contexts, also, on how to combine tools to enable inclusive engagement. The evaluation timescale meant important aspects of the framework were downplayed.

In terms of practical application, local authorities are still relying on questionnaires that deal with user satisfaction levels to assess whether local democracy is being enhanced by eParticipation. There is a strong case for using field study methods to observe and analyse eParticipation tools being used in community group settings and public places. This would complement views expressed in individual discussions and group workshops, to assess social acceptability in a better way.

Evaluation is vital to providing a well-rounded and holistic view of any eParticipation initiative or project. It needs to be independent of the project, yet planned at the beginning as part of the project. It should be critically honest about what things have gone well, as well as about its difficulties and shortcomings. To achieve this we have argued that a range of qualitative methods are needed that do not simply relate to user satisfaction but rather establish how the eParticipation project is affecting local democracy by changing existing practice, and effecting it as they become new instruments for achieving local democracy. We should note however that there are no standard definitions of effectiveness in eParticipation, nor should we expect any to emerge. As we have stated the evaluation must accommodate a variety of subjective assessments of the many actors involved, and of the many constituent elements of the eParticipation application. eParticipation is a hybrid of various technologies, social and political measures and there is a need to improve understanding of the relationships between these components and how their respective evaluation practices can be applied to eParticipation as a whole.

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