

Chapter 4

Proposal for the Use of Digital Mediation for Public Direct Participation during Electoral Periods

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ABSTRACT

This work of research and development seeks to present a proposal of digital mediation for direct public participation during electoral periods. The proposal includes a conceptual and functional model and the corresponding proof of concept—a web application named iLeger. In summary, this application supports collaborative interactions such as questions, answers, suggestions, ratings, comments and live debates, and was specifically designed to gather, in a single neutral deliberative and regulated space, the main stakeholders in an electoral campaign, fostering multidirectional communication (synchronous and asynchronous) and sharing between them. This chapter also includes the results obtained from the use of the iLeger platform in the electoral campaign for the Portuguese Parliamentary and Local Elections held in 2009, the 2010 election of the Head of the Portuguese Medical Association and the Presidential and Parliamentary Elections held in 2011 in Portugal. The developing effort was conducted taking into account an Agile strategy which is briefly reported in the development process.

INTRODUCTION

The widespread access to the Internet, together with the technological evolution witnessed in the last years and the recent social and economic developments, which more than ever call to democratic participation, has led to an increased interest in solutions based on digital mediation for direct public participation.

Today, the Internet is a tool that shapes lives in many respects. For some, the Internet is an open source of information, and for others it is a means by which they manage their bank accounts, shop and use public services. Most real life activities already have an online equivalent. Following this trend, the field of public participation has seen a growing integration of ICT and the Internet, leading to the concept of electronic participation – e-participation (Sanford & Rose, 2007).

The potential of technology to increase public participation has been a topic of debate in recent years. Although there are sceptics (Sunstein, 2001; Morozov, 2011), we believe, as (Chadwick & Howard, 2010; Medaglia, 2012), that the Internet-based technologies have the potential to change and improve how the stakeholders interact with each other in the democratic process.

Recently, uses of the Internet are becoming relatively more interactive and user-oriented. The Web 2.0 and more recently the rise of Social Media have not only created new playing fields for communication and self-expression but also new forms of social behaviour as well as societal and political engagement (Kes-Erkul & Erkul, 2009). Today, social websites such as Facebook, YouTube, Twitter, LinkedIn, Wikipedia and Flickr have millions of active users. With examples of mass mobilization such as the Arab Spring and protests against the global economic crisis such as the We Are the 99 Percent (<http://wearethe-99percent.tumblr.com/>) and Occupy Wall Street (<http://occupywallst.org/>) movements, it is safe to argue that Social Media are changing the game of politics. In the literature review about Social

Media and participation, Effing and colleagues state that Internet use by citizens is also becoming more social and participatory (Effing, Hillegersberg & Huibers, 2011). They furthermore argue that a key factor of Web 2.0 and Social Media is participation.

Growing numbers of citizens interacting with networked digital devices converts the Internet into an important communication medium in electoral disputes with clear differences from campaigns based on traditional media. On the other hand, an increasing number of politicians is using the Internet to transmit their electoral messages. According to (Bimber & Davis, 2003), the real democratic contribution of online campaigns consists of exploring the Internet potential for interactivity and take electors from their role of passive mere spectators.

This work of research and development seeks to present a brief literature review on digital mediation, social media and elections and to present a proposal for the use of digital mediation for direct public participation during electoral periods. This work aims to contribute to narrow the existing communication gap between candidates and the community, make electoral campaigns more open and encourage citizens to become involved and actively participate in electoral debates. This work also includes results from five experiments in electoral campaigns held in Portugal between 2009 and 2011. In these two last electoral campaigns, *iLeger* was used in partnership with the largest Portuguese web portal, SAPO, (<http://www.sapo.pt>), property of Portugal Telecom.

Among the main results, it should be highlighted the role of the Media as a driving force for initiatives of public participation during electoral periods, the importance of advertisement and awareness to events involving public participation, and the influence of events of short duration and live coverage in the number of participants and in the active participation of the stakeholders.

In summary, it is strongly believed that participation tools based on the Internet, such as

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