

# Citizens4Citizens: Mapping Participatory Practices on the Internet

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**Abstract:** Many important forms of public participation take place in interactions between citizens. Studying these interactions is crucial for understanding e-governance, defined as steering in the public domain. The new forms of public participations can be labeled Citizens2Citizens interactions (C2C). Citizens use the Internet to facilitate policy participation (meant to support or undermine government policies), political participation (directed at influencing political decision-making and agenda-setting) and social participation (to increase social capital). Attention for these forms of digital participation coincides with the rise of a new set of Web applications which are grouped under the label 'Web 2.0'. This paper is an attempt to conceptualize and categorize the wide variety of types and forms of C2C to provide a basis for a further development of this new research field. We do not claim that our exploration will lead to a final and complete description of C2C; we merely aim to present an overview of the diversity of forms of C2C initiatives that are taking place in the digital world. The argument we are putting forward is that new technologies offer new venues for participating and that these new practices will constitute both a replication of and an addition to existing offline practices of public participation. Our explorative research of C2C initiatives results in a map of political, policy and social participation. This map of C2C initiatives can provide insights in the variety of Internet practices and help subsequent researches in their selection of initiatives for in-depth studies. Additionally, our research results in an exploration of the implications the analyzed initiatives can have for participation in the public sector.

**Keywords:** political participation, policy participation, social participation, e-governance

## 1. Introduction

Government agencies find it difficult to attract citizens to their websites and participate in discussions on political issues whereas political content swarms well-known websites such as Youtube and Facebook. Citizens seem to be interested in the public sphere but discuss issues in digital places that they are familiar with rather than visit government websites (Calenda & Meijer, 2009). Many analyses of e-participation disregard these interactions since they do not directly result in signals to government. E-participation is often limited to a study of how governments use website to elicit signals and feedback from citizens.

Public participation is generally regarded as a matter of contact between government and citizens but many important forms of public participation take place in interactions between citizens. A traditional perspective on public administration may ignore these practices since there is no direct relation with government. From a governance perspective it will immediately become clear that a focus on these practices is crucial for understanding steering in the public sector. Rhodes (1997: 15) emphasizes that governance refers to self-organizing networks in the pursuit of common goals with significant autonomy from the state. Citizen interactions in new digital spaces often concern common goals and the perceived common goods and therefore merit the interest of scholars interested in understanding e-governance.

These forms of public participation can be labeled Citizens2Citizens interactions (C2C). C2C interactions on the Internet are used to facilitate various forms of participation which are all efforts to realize common goals, either through bringing forward demands to the political and administrative system or by creating forms of mutual support. In this paper we distinguish between policy participation (meant to strengthen government policies), political participation (directed at influencing political decision-making) and social participation (to increase social capital).

Attention for C2C coincides with the rise of a new set of Web applications which are grouped under the label 'Web 2.0'. Defined in a technological way Web 2.0 refers to the emergence of new technologies such as RSS and blogging (O'Reilly, 2005; Rapoza, 2006). Defined in a sociological way the changing role of the user takes up centre stage. Particularly the growing importance of user generated content and social networking (Pascu et al, 2007) are key features of Web 2.0 and these features are extremely useful for supporting interactions between citizens. The sharing and exchanging of video images, pictures, opinions, informative texts, personal preferences, et cetera has become commonplace. Such online behavior has implications for the public sphere. The 'new Internet' is no longer a collection of information websites but rather a network of platforms that support diverse interactions between users. C2C is just one type of interaction that is taking place through Web 2.0 applications but for political scientists probably one of the most interesting ones.

Studying new forms of participation is important for political scientists who want to understand governance in the information age. The characteristics of the medium influence the interactions between citizens and, consequently, may induce new relations between citizens and governments. To be more precise, in this paper we depart from the government-centered position that is characteristic for most investigations into e-participation and we focus on new patterns of interactions between (networks of) citizens to understand these forms of e-governance.

This paper is an attempt to conceptualize and categorize the wide variety of types and forms of C2C. We do not claim that our exploration will lead to a final and complete description of C2C; we merely aim to present a first overview of the diversity of forms of C2C initiatives that are taking place in the digital world. The argument put forward is that new technologies offer new venues for participating and that these new practices will constitute both a replication of and an addition to existing offline practices of public participation. The research question leading our research is: how can we map and categorize the variety of citizen to citizen initiatives on the Internet and what are the possible implications of the analyzed initiatives for different sorts of participation?

The aim of this paper is twofold. First of all we present an international explorative research into the varied domain of C2C in the form of a web analysis. The explorative research should be regarded as a 'mapping exercise'; the variation in forms of C2C is investigated to show how new technologies lead to a replication of but also an addition to existing offline practices. A map of C2C initiatives can provide insights in the variety of Internet practices and help subsequent researches in their selection of initiatives for in-depth studies. Our map is mainly biased towards websites in the Netherlands but we have also included English and American websites. Nevertheless, we hope that this map can be helpful in focusing the attention of researchers of e-participation on interaction forms that they would have missed if they had departed from a narrow definition of public participation. Our second aim is to explore the implications that the initiatives we have studied can have for the three different forms of participation we identified. These implications are relevant and interesting for the academic community but also for government practitioners interested in public participation.

## **2. Three types of participation**

Public participation is a key concept in political science and is generally defined as involvement in political, administrative and social processes. The central concept is that citizens transform themselves from bystanders to actively involved people aiming to realize what they perceive as the public good. The active involvement may take the form of putting demands on the political and administrative system but also includes developing systems of mutual support to reach common goals. Reasons for developing forms of public participation vary from a recognition of basic human rights concerning democracy and procedural justice to a practical recognition that public participation may result in more support for government policies (Rowe and Frewer, 2000). A closer look at public participation shows that three types of participation can be distinguished: political participation, policy participation and social participation.

Within these three forms of public participation, political scientists traditionally focus on *political participation* and describe this in terms of power and influence on political decision-making (Arnstein, 1969; Smith, 1983). Political participation is defined as the actions of citizens that aim to influence the selection and behavior of political decision-makers. Smith (1983) stresses that participation is about designing a group of procedures to consult, involve, and inform the public to allow those affected by a decision to have an input into that decision. Coleman, Morrison and Svennenig (2007) use the work efficacy to refer to 'a citizen's capacity to intervene in political affairs'. Following this conceptualization, political participation does not only refer to influencing decision-making processes but includes political agenda setting. Political participation often focuses on influencing formal political arenas, but also includes self control (e.g. squatting) and protest against other actors (e.g. protest against killing whales).

Citizens participate in political agenda setting and decision-making to influence these processes in a certain direction. Lobbying, writing letters to representatives, writing newspaper articles and organizing protests are some well-known forms of political participation. Political participation is often organized in the form of referenda, public hearings, citizens' panels, focus groups, etc. (Rowe and Frewer, 2000). Barber (1984) argues that a high degree of political participation strengthens democracy since citizens are more involved in political processes. Voting is seen as a 'weak' form of democracy which does not require much effort whereas political participation is a characteristic of 'strong' democracies. A growing political trust and the

construction of a political identity are important byproducts of political participation. Political participation is therefore regarded as a means to strengthen citizenship.

Traditional perspectives on public participation focus on the first phases of policy processes (agenda setting and decision-making) whereas modern perspectives also focus on the later phase (implementation). Participation in the implementation phase of policy processes can be referred to as public participation in policy implementation (Desai, 1989) or *policy participation*. This form of public participation has escaped the attention of many political scientists but it has been studied by policy scientists and scholars investigating administration (Desai, 1989; Edwards, 2003; Meijer, Homburg and Bekkers, 2007). Different forms of policy participation have been mentioned in the scientific literature. Desai (1989) describes how citizens are involved in the implementation of environmental policies concerning surface mining control. Edwards (2003: 41) highlights the active role that citizens play in public service delivery and shows that the actual implementation of tax and income policies is the result of interactions between government and citizens. Civic competence is a core element of these forms of policy participation, something which can be illustrated with the example of citizens helping one another when filling in tax forms.

Newer forms of policy participation focus on the role of citizens in regulation. Meijer, Homburg and Bekkers (2007) mention the opportunities that have been created to signal bad smells, unsafe labor conditions or poor hygiene in restaurants. Citizens can become the 'eyes' of regulators and this enhance the effectiveness of policies. Common goals such as safe food, a safe environment and safe working conditions can be realized by involving citizens in implementing regulatory policies. Policy participation may not always serve the interest of government: citizens can also help each other to avoid certain forms of regulation. Well known in the Netherlands are the notices of police speed controls on the radio. Citizens mention these speed controls to the radio stations and thus help each other to avoid tickets for speeding.

Public participation does not only refer to relations between citizens and government but includes interactions between citizens as well. These forms of participation can be grouped under the heading of '*social participation*'. Central to this concept is the idea that citizens vary in the extent to which they are involved in society and hence they vary in their systems for mutual support. Social participation has been studied mainly in the field of sociology. Axelrod (1956), for example, describes the relation between urbanization and social participation. Important for our thinking about social participation has been Putnam's 'Bowling Alone' (2000). Putnam describes how social capital is created through interaction between groups in society and these interactions can take the form of 'bonding' when persons from the same group interact with each other and 'bridging' when the interactions cross the boundaries between different groups in society.

Governments in Europe and North America pay a great deal of attention to social capital since this is seen as an important way to prevent disintegration of societies (and, additionally, social capital also contributes to material wealth). Traditional connections in societies are wearing out and Putnam paints a grim picture of people who do not spend time with friends and family but rather go 'bowling alone'. Others have argued that new societal groups such as environmental and social groups still play a crucial role and Putnam's book is misleading (Wellman, 1999).

Public participation is often regarded as something 'good' which is important for 'strong democracies'. However, public participation can also hamper government policies and lead to all kinds of anti-social behavior on the Internet. Public participation certainly has, to use Putnam's phrase, a 'dark side' (Putnam, 2000: 350) to it. Political participation by extremist groups can result in undermining democratic regimes, policy participation by people intending to violate policies can result in a decrease in compliance with government rules and social participation in the form of exclusive bonding can strengthen stereotyping of groups in society. Public participation has to be studied and understood within a specific context and evaluated from a normative frame for a sophisticated view on its effects on political and social systems.

The three types of public participation have been summarized in the table below:

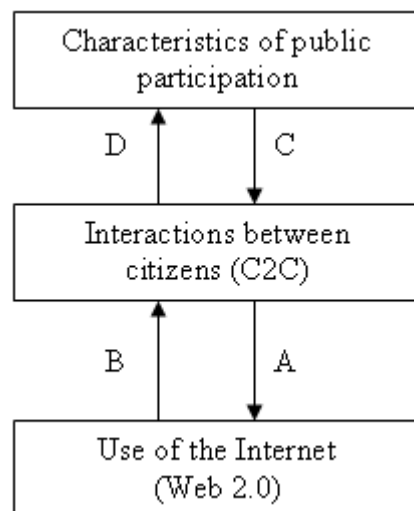
**Table 1:** Three forms of public participation

	Political participation	Policy participation	Social participation
Goals	Influencing agenda-setting and decision-making	Influencing policy implementation	Creating mutual support
Public good	Debated in political system	Debated in administrative system	Realized in social networks
Relevance for e-governance	Influencing the political system	Influencing the administrative system	Influencing the public sphere
Research community	Political science	Policy sciences	Sociology

Three types of participation have been described but the distinction between these types cannot always be made easily. Well known are Habermas' (1991) coffee houses in London and Vienna where citizens would discuss personal but also public issues. These coffee houses combined political and social participation. Policy participation can, then and now, not always be distinguished from political participation since influencing policy processes also has an influence on political decisions. Even though we acknowledge that distinguishing the types of participation in practice is not always easy, we pose that this distinction can be used as an analytical tool to map the diversity of forms of participation on the Internet. As will be seen later, the analyzed initiatives do not always fit neatly into these theoretically deduced forms of participation, but the three form of participation have proven to be a useful heuristic device in categorizing and understanding the differences between the initiatives.

### 3. Structuration and e-participation

Researchers in political science have always shown a strong interest in public participation and researchers nowadays are showing a growing interest in the developing field of e-participation (Macintosh and Whyte, 2006). To conceptualize e-participation, one needs a theoretical perspective on the relation between technology and new social and political practices. How can we understand the relation between the Internet and public participation? We pose that technology is neither an instrument nor a determinant of social practices: the confrontation of technology and social practices can be understood by using a structuration framework (Giddens, 1984; Orlikowski, 1992; DeSanctis and Poole, 1994). Central to the structuration framework is the idea that technology is shaped by social practices but, at the same time, technology also transforms these practices. This argument is summarized in the following figure (adapted from Orlikowski, 1992).



**Figure 1:** Interrelation between use of the Internet and public participation (adapted from Orlikowski, 1992)

We will explain the various relations in the model:

- *Relation A.* Citizens have certain patterns in interacting with other citizens and various media are used for these interactions. The Internet will be used as an additional medium for their interactions.
- *Relation B.* The Internet offers citizens new opportunities for interacting with each other. They can, for example, more easily interact with citizens that share their interest. In that sense, the Internet influences how citizens interact.

- *Relation C.* Formal and informal rules regarding public participation influence how citizens interact. Legal rules regarding political participation, for example, and informal rules for social participation, as another example, structure how citizens interact.
- *Relation D.* Formal and informal rules only exist when they are being reproduced through citizen interactions. Rules that are not being followed in any citizen interactions lose their meaning.

In addition to this model we argue that the Internet has certain characteristics. DeSanctis and Poole (1994: 126) refer to the structural features such as the algorithm and hardware characteristics and spirit of technologies which can be regarded as the 'script' underlying the technology. The characteristics of communication media are a central tenet of the so-called 'new medium studies' (Deibert, 1997; Hutchby, 2001, 2003). These studies highlight the way media structure communication by facilitating certain forms of interactions while hindering other forms. The concept of 'affordance' plays a key role in these studies. Sellen and Harper (2003): 'An affordance refers to the fact that the physical properties of an object make possible different functions for the person perceiving or using that object.'

The following affordances of the Internet at large have been highlighted in various researches: transparency, many-to-many communication, virtuality, calculability, etc. (Bekkers, 1994; Frissen, 1999). New medium studies, however, highlight that these affordances do not determine outcomes. The outcome should be conceptualized as the results of affordance, the context of use and individual choices. This makes this theoretical approach compatible with structuration theory, although new medium studies do not emphasize that the context also changes in the use of technology.

The model shows that the outcome of the interaction on the Internet emerges from the various relations and loops into the model and cannot be predicted. In this paper we study the forms of e-participation that emerge from these interactions. For analytic purposes, we will characterize these outcomes as either replications of current practices (when social structures are not challenged by the new medium) or transformations of these practices (when the structure of political participation is transformed through the new medium). The new forms of public participation on the Internet have been studied before and we will present some of the previous findings before going into our own empirical research.

E-participation is generally seen as the use of ICT-tools to involve citizens in finding solutions for social problems ([www.burger.overheid.nl](http://www.burger.overheid.nl)). This description focuses primarily on what we call policy participation because the political/normative desirability of change is not questioned and the problems focused on are not directly related to social participation. We see e-participation as referring to all the ways in which citizens interact with one another or with other parties on the Internet. This participation takes place in the virtual world, but can have concrete effects on the lived or 'real' world (Gotved, 2002).

The question can be asked how the different forms of public participation, as identified above, will develop in the information age. In other words, what effect or influence does the Internet have on public participation? For a long time the digital divide dominated the discussion about the meaning of Internet for participation (Bekkers, 2004; Frissen, 2007). However, the importance of the digital divide in the sense of the social divide between the people who are information rich and poor within a nation (Norris, 2000) has been diminishing. Among Dutch youth for example one can no longer speak of a digital divide, for 97% has access to a computer and Internet (SCP, 2005). Youngsters are 'digital natives' and for them the Internet has become the most important medium of communication, more important for example than television (Frissen, 2007). This means that we can further specify the question regarding the meaning of Internet for participation. Which forms of participation take place on the Internet and what meaning should we attribute to this participation?

Based on a secondary analysis of research into ICT and political participation Bovens (2003) concludes that the importance of ICT on this form of participation is minimal. There is no 'digital Athens' in the making. He perceives the rising of an 'enclave democracy' in which there is engagement with political issues, but this engagement is between people who already think alike and focuses on specific issues. However, developments in the senatorial campaign of Howard Dean in 2004 do indicate that Internet can lead to a greater engagement (Hindman, 2005). In the current presidential campaign of Barack Obama Internet also plays a significant role. What is interesting about political participation on the Internet is that it does not only relate to existing political institutions, but that it can create new institutions such as the European Social Consulta (which, by the way, only existed for a short period of time). What is more, online participation can be used to organise offline participation (Bennett, 2007). For example, in 2004 a total of twenty million people were mobilised within six months for demonstrations against the war in Iraq.

When looking at policy participation, what could the impact of ICT be? Little research into this field has been conducted. Research by Meijer, Homburg and Bekkers (2007) does indicate that policy participation regarding surveillance (in Dutch: toezicht en handhaving) still is very limited. They show that hardly any possibilities for policy participation have been created (by government) and as far as these do exist the public interest is marginal.

What could be the impact of the Internet on social participation? Bekkers (2004: 68) indicates that three 'camps' can be identified regarding the perceived impact of ICT on social participation (see also Norris, 2000; Linders and Goossen, 2004). One camp argues that the Internet improves social participation because new connections between people can be made and already existing relations can be maintained. Another camp believes that people are spending an increasing amount of time on the Internet and thereby less time with family, friends and neighbours. The third camp points out – mainly inspired by Wellman (1999) – that social participation obtains another form on the Internet because a digital community is developing on the Net. Here we would also like to identify a fourth camp which does not believe new connections are made, but that the Internet mainly leads to bonding in the sense of 'digital balkanization' (Putnam, 2000), meaning that primarily likeminded people meet each other on the Net and strengthen the boundaries among one another (see also Papacharissi, 2002; Anduiza, Cantijoch and Gallego, 2007).

With regards to all these forms of participation the question is relevant how representative the users of all the different (Web 2.0) Internet applications are for the whole population. The general remark can be made that people will make use certain forma of Internet applications if this fits their 'normal' offline behaviour (Frissen, 2007). So people who do not normally take part in public discussions offline will probably not start doing this on an online forum either. In the words of Norris (2000) there is a 'democratic divide', meaning that there is a difference between those who do, and do not, use the panoply of digital resources to engage, mobilize and participate in public life. People who participate are thus not representative. Moreover, the people within a nation who have access to Internet are also not representative for the whole population. However, it should be noted that people who normally take part in for example political activities are not necessarily representative of the whole population either.

A remark that is often made about participation on the Internet is that its quality is low due to the ease with which one can participate. Two reactions are in order. First of all, being physically present at a discussion does not guarantee that the participation is of high quality in the sense that discussions are held in a rational-critical manner so as to reach a consensus of opinion (Habermas, 1991). Internet could contribute to the quality of a discussion because it gives people time to consider their responses and possibly look up relevant information. Secondly, discussions on the Internet can also be evaluated in another way than looking at quality. Perhaps it is not only the contents of a discussion that is important, but also the fact that Internet enables people to stand in constant communication with one another. When we, for example, look at MSN, the contents of what is being discussed can, from an external perspective, be seen as having little quality. However, the fact that people are constantly online and talking to their contacts is in itself an interesting phenomenon. Constantly being in contact with each other and knowing what your peers are doing means that social ties are continually being confirmed and new (loose) ties may be created.

This short exploration of the meaning of ICT – and in particular the Internet – for political, policy and social participation shows us that the perceptions are very diverse. These differences can be ascribed to different conceptualisations of participation and also to choices for the practices that are being studied. What is more is that Internet and its use are constantly changing and every analysis is therefore of a temporary value. Nevertheless, the previous research has informed our present study in that it has helped us to map and categorize the various citizens to citizens initiatives on the Internet.

#### **4. Research methods**

The goal of this research is to develop categories of public participation on the Internet and to reflect on the possible implications of the researched initiatives for the different forms of participation. The three different forms of participation were deduced from existing theory on public participation. Based on the theoretical conceptualizations, we formulated the following operational definitions:

- *Political participation.* The website is devoted to the influencing of decision-making and agenda-setting by political institutions or is about citizens' opinions about their role in the political process.
- *Policy participation.* The website is devoted to activities influencing the realization of governmental policy goals by supporting government and direct action towards third parties.

- *Social participation.* The website helps in the construction of social capital. Connections within and between social networks are supported by interactions on the website.

Based on these definitions we identified initiatives to be researched. We are well aware that these definitions do not give an unconditional footing for the identification of websites. One of the goals of this explorative research was therefore to give empirical substance to these categories. The basic idea behind our argument is that theoretical subcategories can be constructed on the basis of empirical findings.

Sites were identified in the following ways:

- *Searches on the Internet for relevant sites.* A few key search words were: forum government, forum overheid (forum government), political discussion, politieke discussie (political discussion), uitleg belastingen (explanation taxes). On the following dates Google was used to search for sites based, amongst others, on these search words: 18 October 2007, 20 October 2007, 30 October 2007, 2 November 2007 and 23 November 2007.
- *The identification of relevant sites in newspapers.* In the period October – December 2007 the Dutch newspapers the Volkskrant and the NRC Handelsblad were screened for relevant sites.
- *Asking experts in the field of ICT en politics for relevant sites.* The international network of contacts of the researchers formed the starting point for approaching experts. The following experts have presented us with relevant websites: Arre Zuurmond (Zenc en TU Delft, Lilia Efimova (Telematica Instituut), Robert Slagter (Telematica Instituut), Marcel Thaens (Ordina en EUR), Gert den Toom (UU), Dennis de Kool (EUR), Rebecca Moody (EUR), Charlie Schweik (University of Massachusetts, Amherst), Michael Ash (University of Massachusetts, Amherst).
- *Participating in lectures and congresses on this subject.* The authors participated in the e-participation summit in Amsterdam (15 november 2007) and attended a lecture by professor V. Frissen (*Digitale Diaspora* (Digital Diasporas), in The Hague on the 16<sup>th</sup> of November 2007).
- *A workshop on this subject was organized.* On the 27<sup>th</sup> of November 2007 a workshop on this subject was organized at the Telematica Institute in Enschede (the Netherlands). Participants from the Telematica Institute were: Wolfgang Ebbers, Mark Melenhorst, Wil Janssen, Marcel Bijlsma, Mettina Veenstra. Participants from the Utrecht School of Governance were: Albert Meijer, Nils Burger, Stephan Grimmelhuijsen en Gijs-Jan Brandsma. Participants from the University of Twente were: Jörgen Svensson, Lex van Velsen. In the workshop they were all explicitly asked to name examples of relevant sites.

The aim of the exploration was not to describe all the e-participation sites but rather to identify the best known initiatives and to show the variation between initiatives. The variation was primarily achieved by looking at different forms of participation and different geographical levels of participation. The explorative research was ended when additional efforts to find new subcategories no longer led to new results and all new found websites could be placed within the subcategories we had found (cf. Doreian and Woodard, 1992). In other words: the categories became saturated (Corbin and Strauss, 2008).

The description and analysis of the sites took place based on the following criteria: type of public participation (policy, political or social), geographical level (local, national or international), founder of the website (citizens, government, media, political parties, NGOs, companies), offerings of the website (forum, information, voting, evaluating, virtual world, social networking, exchanging multimedia files, download files), goal of the website (inform, debate, organize protest, entertainment, support, improve service delivery, create social coherence, trade), moderation (no, little, great deal), approximation of number of visitors (if available) (few, moderate, many), depth of argumentation (little, moderate, much), publicness (fully public, free subscription required, not public) and anonymity (fully anonymous, partly anonymous, not anonymous).

These criteria were, apart from the different forms of participation, not pre-established, but were developed during the research. We found the criteria useful for comparing sites and explaining differences between them. We used the descriptions to give an elaborate overview of forms of e-participation. This overview was subsequently analyzed to bring out the subcategories of the three forms of public participation.

## **5. Empirical analysis of types of participation**

### **5.1 Types of policy participation**

We found a broad set of 22 initiatives that we qualified as policy participation. These initiatives take place at the local and the national level: no forms of policy participation were identified at the international level which is not surprising since little policy implementation is carried out by international actors.

The following categories of policy participation were constructed on the basis of an analysis of the objective and use of the websites:

- *Citizens pressure government to implement policies accurately.* The well-known British example 'Fix My Street' fits within this category. Citizens can use this website to send a signal to local governments that they should come and fix something in their street. An interesting finding was that this website and a similar Dutch initiative were both set up with government funding.
- *Citizens support each other in issues related to government policies.* The Dutch website Forum Werk (Labor Forum) is an interesting community of people discussing issues related to finding a job or getting different kinds of government support. Similar initiatives have been found relating to tax, immigration and safety policies. These initiatives provide a way to strengthen people's civic competence.
- *Citizens expose offenders of government regulation.* The website 'Voorkom die bon' (Avoid that ticket) allows users to list people who were calling on their mobile phone while driving and not using a hands-free set for their phone. Using your mobile phone without a hands-free set is forbidden under Dutch traffic regulation and annoys other drivers since it can lead to irresponsible driving. One should note that this website has been set up by a company that sells these hands-free sets.
- *Citizens report offenders to government.* Meldpunt Kinderporno (Child Porn Report) is an initiative of citizens that want to stop the spread of child porn on the Internet. Citizens can report information about child porn on the Internet anonymously to this website. The owners of the website evaluate the information and, if the information does point to illegal activities, the mention is forwarded to Dutch or international law authorities.
- *Citizens undermine the implementation of government policies.* Flitsers (Speed Cameras) is a website that provides citizens with information about speed cameras on the Dutch motorways. Citizens can use this information to make sure they only speed in areas where there are no cameras and, hence, they can avoid tickets for speeding. This website undermines the police system for motorway speeding by exposing it.

These categories show that there are several ways in which policy participation supports the implementation of government policies. Citizens can give information to government agencies or expose offenders; they can also help each other and hence reduce the pressure on agency information services; they can send signals to agencies to improve the quality of their work. The categories also show that policy participation can be annoying for agencies since they are constantly pushed into improving their performance and some initiatives even undermine their policies. A common feature of these initiatives is that they are all concrete: they relate directly to citizens' life worlds.

Most of these initiatives form an addition rather than a replication of offline practices of policy participation. A first key difference between these initiatives and offline practices is that all actions can easily be made transparent to a general public. Citizens could send a letter to their local government before with complaints about their street but through the Internet the general public can also read these complaints and follow whether governments take timely and appropriate action. Naming and shaming of offenders could take place through traditional media but this has become much easier now that reports about offenses, such as calling without a hands-free set in the car, can be published on the Internet without any cost or effort. A second key difference is that the Internet makes it possible to interact around forms of policy participation and hence form digital communities. Citizens could have formed communities before based on issues such as finding work or filling in tax forms but the costs and effort of forming such a community in the offline world are high. The Internet enables citizens to form easy accessible and open communities around policy participation.

The reporting of offenders to government can be regarded as a replication of offline forms of policy participation. The Internet makes reporting easy and the Internet is the right medium for this type of offense, child porn on the Internet, but apart from that there are no fundamental differences from traditional means to report offenders through the telephone or mail.



Some of these forms of policy participation raise important normative questions. The 'Voorkom die bon' (Avoid that ticket) website is a form of exposing of citizens by other citizens. Is that acceptable? Or should the privacy of the offenders be respected? Another set of questions concerns the uneven effects of certain initiatives. If certain initiatives are only used by Internet savvy users, the result could be that government will be more responsive only to certain groups in society. People that don't have Internet access can't use the Fix My Street website and therefore may have less means to attract the attention of government agencies to the problems in their street.

## 5.2 Types of political participation

We qualified a broad set of 26 initiatives as forms of political participation. These initiatives take place at all levels: local, national and international. The variety of websites is enormous and our selection can never be considered to provide a comprehensive overview of all forms of political participation. Nevertheless, we did manage to construct a set of categories on the basis of our sample which provides a first idea of the variation in types of political participation.

- *Citizens protest against a specific proposal or policy.* A large group of websites is devoted to organizing protests against certain proposal or policies. A (typically) Dutch example of these websites is Red de Paddo (Safe the Magic Mushroom) which is devoted to organizing protests against a proposal to make the selling of magic mushrooms illegal. An international example is Bilaterals.org which aims to stimulate awareness of and protests against bilateral agreements between countries when these agreements could have a negative impact on less-powerful groups within a country and the environment in general. These websites mainly have a single-issue character: they focus on one issue and this issue may be short-lived.
- *Citizens use a website to organize political action.* These websites also focus on specific issues but the primary goal of the website is not to debate issues or provide information but rather to organize a collective effort. The 'Petitions' website in the UK is such an example. Citizens can propose a petition and aim to attract enough votes to make the petition successful. 'Make Poverty History' is another example. The initiative was launched to influence world leaders gathering at the G8 meeting in Edinburgh (July 2005). The website of Make Poverty History has made selling the well-known white armband with the text 'Make Poverty History' one of its main goals. Both initiatives use the potential of the Internet to organize masses of people around the world (see also Bennett, 2007).
- *Citizens hold a plea for broad political changes.* The difference between this type of website and the previous type is that these initiatives are not connected to specific decisions or policies. They organize citizens in their pleas and actions for a world with peace, no poverty, a clean environment, and so forth. A well-known international example is Stand Against Poverty which aims to make people stand up and speak out to demand a more urgent political response to the growing crisis of global poverty and inequality.
- *Citizens discuss political issues within their own social networks.* Not all websites aim to achieve some kind of change through protests or actions. Many websites merely provide platforms for discussing political issues within certain social networks. An example is the leftist website Red Pepper, 'a magazine of political rebellion and dissent', which provides information about access to discussions about feminism, environmental issues, etc. Another example is the extreme right website Stormfront which enables members to discuss issues such as, primarily, immigration and integration. An interesting feature of these websites is that especially websites on the political extremes seem to lead to lively debates and discussions.
- *Citizens discuss political issues in the public sphere.* Although most political C2C initiatives connect like-minded spirits, some important initiatives are about bringing different people together to discuss political issues. These initiatives are sometimes connected to news programs on television. 'Een Vandaag' is a Dutch news program which triggers heated debates on its website. Other debates have a local character (e.g. Groups Google Stad Utrecht about the Dutch city of Utrecht) or focus on specific political questions (e.g. Talk Politics European Union). Successful websites, however, are connected to mass media or are well-known information websites. Less known websites seem to result in debates of kindred minds.
- *Citizens provide assessment tools for voting decisions.* Several websites on the Internet help citizens to choose between political parties and candidates. 'Wie Kies Jij' (Who do you choose?) is a website that presents users with a list of ten questions that can help them choose the candidate of a party that suits their preferences best. There is a wide variety of these websites and they have already been investigated by several researchers (Boogers and Voerman, 2003).

These categories provide an interesting overview of forms of political involvement. They show that political participation can range from discussing issues with members of the same political party to voting on electronic petitions and finding out what the right candidate for you might be. The list also shows that extremists have found the Internet to be a useful platform but political participation is not only about discussing issues with people that have the same opinion. The trend of 'Balkanization' of political discussions and interactions (Putnam, 2000; Bovens, 2003) is not confirmed by our research since it shows that some important initiatives create platforms for debates between various groups which otherwise might not have directly interacted with one another.

Some of these online forms of political participation can largely be regarded as replications of offline practices. Websites are used to protest against specific proposals and policies or hold a plea for broad political changes. These initiatives do not seem to be much different from similar initiatives through traditional media. An interesting difference, though, is that websites operate on an international scale whereas there are very few traditional media that have global coverage. The organization of collective effort through websites is also a replication of the use of traditional media to organize protest, but the major difference seems to be that the cost of the use of the Internet is much lower than the cost of using traditional media (Bekkers, 2004).

The forms of political interaction identified, within a certain group and within the public sphere at large, also seem to be replications of offline interactions. An interesting difference, though, is that the Internet enables small and dispersed groups to form political communities on the Internet. One could claim that this is the political version of the 'long tail' (Anderson, 2004) possibilities the Internet has to offer: individuals or small groups of people who's interests can be seen as representing a niche are, through the Internet, able to interact with each other on a world wide scale without being hindered by time, space or high cost.

The last form of online political participation we identified, citizens provide assessment tools for voting decisions, has few equivalents in the offline world. This initiative builds upon similar initiatives in the commercial world that provide consumers tools to choose between various alternatives. The Internet provides an interesting addition to consumer democracies by providing cheap and accessible tools for comparison of political candidates and parties.

Do these forms of political participation contribute to a 'strong democracy'? Many of these C2C initiatives seem to strengthen the capacity of citizens to organize political action and channel debate. In that sense, these initiatives indeed contribute to democratic processes by involving more citizens and by creating more venues for political participation. Some of the initiatives also show the risks that political participation poses to democracy. Terrorist websites were not included in our sample but some of the extremist websites also present a risk to core elements of our modern day concept of democracy (e.g. protection of minorities). A further in-depth investigation and analysis of these initiatives is needed to understand and evaluate the impact on democracy.

### **5.3 Types of social participation**

We qualified a set of 20 initiatives as forms of social participation. Social participation takes place at the local, national and international level and varies from discussing issues online with the people in your street to building networks of friends around the world. Again we want to emphasize that our overview can never claim to be exhaustive and we do not aim to achieve more than to provide a first map of the diversity of social participation on the Internet. We constructed seven categories of social participation.

- *Citizens maintain contacts with other citizens in the same area.* These initiatives form a digital extension to social networks in neighborhoods but may also help people to build new networks. 'Bergpolderweg' is a Dutch website which tries to bring together citizens in an area of the city of Rotterdam. The amount of people who participate in these local initiatives is very limited. This can probably be contributed to the fact that they are not well-known to the larger public.
- *Citizens maintain network contacts within their social networks (bonding).* Various forms of bonding take place on the Internet. Bonding may be organized around student clubs (such as the Dutch student club Biton) but also, more interestingly, around ethnic or religious backgrounds. Maroc.nl and Hindi.punt.nl are interesting and well-visited websites of respectively Moroccan and Hindustan communities in the Netherlands. Various issues are discussed on these websites, ranging from questions within the private realm, for example about dating non Hindu girls to more public question about the Koran and political issues.

- *Citizens build networks of friends.* Social networking websites are at the core of Web 2.0. Citizens use websites such as Facebook to contact their friends but also to extend their social networks. Extensions are especially interesting when it comes to more functional social networking sites such as Linked In. These extensions can be expected to take the form of bonding but further research will need to be done to see whether forms of bridging with people from other social networks also takes place on these websites.
- *Citizens help each other through support or concrete advice.* The variety of support websites on the Internet is enormous. There is a wide variety of patient groups and groups of people who support each other with all kinds of psychological problems. Some interesting examples are parents supporting each other with advice (Ouders Online (Parents Online)), anorexia patients supporting each other (Anangel), visitors to prostitutes exchanging information about the price and quality of prostitutes (Hookers.nl). Some of these websites have a limited number of participants but the meaning of these sites to them seems to be substantial (judging by the number and length of the posts).
- *Citizens exchange (digital) goods and service.* The Internet is a giant market place and often citizens provide each other with goods at a low price or even for free. Internationally, e-Bay is the market leader when it comes to citizens buying and selling products to each other and 'Marktplaats' dominates commercial exchanges in the Netherlands. The photo website Flickr is also an interesting example of citizens exchanging products. These websites provide social capital since they enable citizens to help each other. Additionally, some of these interactions may result in the extension of social networks.
- *Citizens develop public goods together.* This is probably one of the most interesting new forms of social participation since there are not many equivalents in the offline world. The LINUX and Wikipedia examples are very well known and show how citizens around the world can cooperate to develop products and information services. The literature on these forms of cooperation is extensive but rarely focuses on the contribution of these initiatives to social capital as a byproduct of cooperation.
- *Citizens form social networks in a virtual world.* Second Life is the best known example of a virtual world where people meet and interact. The interesting thing is that people do not meet 'as themselves' but rather as 'avatars'. These avatars create new connections and result in what could be called 'virtual social capital'. This virtual social capital creates cohesion in the virtual world and helps the avatars to achieve things. The question whether virtual social capital is isolated from or connected with offline social capital provides the starting point for interesting research

This list of forms of social participation on the Internet illustrates that there is a great deal of diversity; varying from digitally meeting people from your neighborhood to new interactions in a virtual world. This shows that social participation on the Internet may be a simple replication of offline interactions in digital form but that some forms also constitute a totally new form of interacting with others (in whatever form). Whereas the use of the Internet for neighborhood interactions eventually aims to contribute to more social capital in the offline world, interactions in Second Life create forms of virtual social capital. It would be interesting to analyze the meaning of virtual social capital of frequent visitors to virtual worlds such as Second Life.

The distinction between replication of offline practices on the one hand and additional digital practices on the other hand becomes especially relevant when it comes to the social networking sites. These sites are a replication of offline practices when sites such as Facebook are used to connect to people met offline. However, these websites are also used to form new social networks and therefore they also form an addition to offline practices. This is an interesting difference with other media such as the telephone and letters which are (almost) exclusively used to contact people met face to face. When Facebook would be used to form social networks across traditional boundaries between groups, it could be an important medium for 'bridging'.

Interesting forms of mutual support are identified on the Internet which partly form a replication of offline practices (e.g. patient groups) but also form a relevant addition. 'Hookers' is an interesting initiative since one could not imagine an initiative with a similar amount of active users in the offline world. The anonymous character of the Internet facilitates interactions on themes that are not commonly accepted in society.

The production of public goods is also an interesting feature of the Internet. Offline production of common goods does take place on a small scale, e.g. when neighbors collectively take care of a garden in a public place, but offline examples on a global scale do not exist (as far as we know). Wikipedia and LINUX form fascinating examples of citizens not only providing each other with information and support but actually developing products which can potentially make life easier for everybody.

When we take this analysis back to Putnam's 'bonding' and 'bridging' (2000) an interesting question can be raised. It is clear that the Internet supports 'bonding' but we still do not know to what extent 'bridging' takes

place. To assess the contribution of these C2C initiatives to 'bridging' we need to find out to what extent social networks across different groups are being created and, also, we need to find out to what extent various digital interactions (selling products at e-Bay, working on Linux, meeting people in Second Life) actually contributes to offline social capital.

#### **5.4 Result of this mapping exercise**

This mapping exercise has resulted in the following overview of categories of public participation:



**Figure 2:** Overview of categories of public participation

This map – or maybe we should call it a tree – can facilitate discussions about public participation on the Internet by enabling researchers and practitioners to stipulate explicitly which types of public participation they are investigating or supporting. This map can also help researchers to make decisions about research design and the selection of cases for in-depth studies of public participation.

Moreover, the mapping exercise results in a discussion of the extent to which Internet replicates offline practices or forms a new addition to practices of public participation. Although many replications of offline practices were found, the findings also showed that certain characteristics of the Internet may lead to new practices of public participation. We identified 'transparency' and 'interaction' as important features facilitating new forms of policy participation; the 'long tail' and 'calculability' were identified as interesting features of the Internet facilitating new forms of political participation; the 'long tail', anonymity and 'virtuality' were identified as important characteristics of the Internet facilitating new forms of social participation.

On the basis of this mapping exercise we were able to raise relevant normative and empirical questions concerning policy, political and social participation on the Internet. We posed normative questions about privacy and representation regarding policy participation, we wondered to what extent new forms of political participation contribute to a strong democracy and we asked empirical question regarding the extent to which digital forms of social participation contribute to 'bridging'. In that sense, this mapping exercise forms the first step in a broader investigation of public participation on the Internet and sets out directions for subsequent research.

#### **6. Reflections on public participation**

New forms of public participation are being created on the Internet. Citizens find ways to use the Internet to realize common goals and strengthen the common good and, therefore, C2C is a crucial component of new forms of e-governance. These forms, as we have shown, are both replications of and additions to traditional forms of public participation. In terms of the structuration framework we presented: social structures both form new practices and are formed by these new practices. On the basis of our explorative research, we presented a map of forms of public participation on the Internet and this map forms the answer to our research question. In this concluding paragraph, we will reflect upon the meaning of these new forms of

public participation for the administration, politics and society. In these reflections we focus upon the possible beneficial effects of participation for government and society in terms of increasing 'strong democracy', improving the implementation of government policies and supporting social capital in society.

How can these new forms of political participation on the Internet strengthen democracy? Representation is an important shortcoming of all identified initiatives and the quality of debates generally does not reach as high a level as debates in newspapers. There is no direct and urgent reason for governments to react to these forms of political participation. That does not mean that these websites have no democratic value. An interesting opportunity these websites offer is that they enable governments to gauge sentiments in society. A common shortcoming of modern governments is that they often seem to have lost touch with citizens. A digital 'thermometer' can be used by politicians to get a better feeling of how citizens care and think about what goes on in the public sector. Governments do not necessarily have to react instantaneously to these sentiments but can use them as additional input for decision-making processes. Politicians and administrators can assess debates critically, interpret the value of the various positions and evaluate the possible meaning for policies. Especially when it comes to groups of citizens that are difficult to reach such as drug users or visitors to prostitutes, a digital thermometer may enhance the sensibility of governments to society and thus enhance the governments' legitimacy.

Can these new forms of participation on the Internet support policy implementation? The overview shows that, as we already know from theory, the implementation of policies does not only depend on government efforts but should be conceptualized as the outcome of interactions between various actors. Some citizen initiatives clearly support the attainment of government objectives but others undermine government policies or apply means to support government objectives that are questionable. The Internet offers new opportunities to create alliances in favor of government policies but also against them. Governments will have to get involved in strategic games on the Internet to mold strong alliances and, at the same time, they need to develop responses to alliances which undermine the attainment of policy objectives.

Do these new forms of public participation help to build social capital in society? The importance of websites such as Hyves, YouTube and Wikipedia should not be neglected since these initiatives create frameworks for everyone. These common frameworks can facilitate other social interactions and make it easier for different groups in society to interact. At the same time, the level of interaction on these websites is limited and hence the contribution to building social capital may be limited. Based on our research we have found that initiatives with more interactions generally have a more stratified group of users and contribute more to 'bonding' than to 'bridging'.

These three forms of public participation have been discussed separately but they overlap since they all concern aspects of governance. History seems to repeat itself. Different forms of participation took place in Habermas' coffee houses in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century where citizens would discuss their social lives but also public and political affairs. Websites can be seen as the coffee houses of the information age and also integrate various forms of participation. YouTube, to name and example, contains private and political movie clips and combines social and political interests of citizens. Citizens visit YouTube to see the latest music clips and see the films that were posted by their friends but, while visiting the website, they may also start watching political movie clips and even films about policy implementation. A quick search led to the example of a film about all the garbage in New Bedford (Massachusetts) (<http://nl.youtube.com/watch?v=w7qn05koQhQ>, [14 Jan 2008]). A new domain of public participation is being constructed by citizens to fit the new routines of the information society.

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