

Local issues discussion forums in comparative perspective: whose voices are heard?

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- .Session II: Patterns of Use of the Internet and E-Government Among Different Groups
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This exploratory study responds to two of Millard's research needs

- **Ethnography of user behaviour**
 - *(though only online)*
- **Role of intermediaries, champions, activists, support groups**, in supporting (disadvantaged) users, developing a user & community voice, etc.

3 types of intermediation

- Social (friends, family as proxy users)
- Professional (civil servants as agents)
- Civic networkers ('super-users' as advocates, social entrepreneurs and organic intellectuals)

Discussion forums

- *Supply*: probably the most commonly-employed eParticipation tool in Europe
- *Demand*: almost all 'under-utilised' by target audience

•(Peart & Diaz 2007)

Discussion forums

- General discussion forums used by 33% of European Internet users, representative apart from age (Eurostat 2006)
- Less than 1% of UK Internet users had taken part in online *political* discussion in 2002
(Gibson, Lusoli & Ward 2005)

Political discussion forums

- Only for a civic and social elite?
- Or is there more to it than counting heads?
- eGovernment for disadvantaged groups should use not just skills and access measures but flexi-channelling and intermediation (Millard 2006)
- Why not apply the same principle to eParticipation?

**Can a citizen *benefit* from an
eParticipation tool like a local
issues discussion forum
without actually *using* it?**

Clarity about objectives

- Importance of numbers and target audience will depend on:
 - definitions of social inclusion (recruitment only or respect, diversity and cohesion?)
 - models of democracy (participative, representative, deliberative, consultative, etc.)

Local issues discussion forums

- Online interactive public sphere
- permanent deliberative debate – vertical and horizontal
- Geographically bounded jurisdiction, usually municipality
- Sometimes authority-hosted, sometimes arms-length
- Minnesota model applies real names only policy, others allow pseudonyms

Approach to case studies

- Long-term ethnographic study
- Cross-cultural comparison
- Non-intrusive methods
- Exploratory / preliminary
- Reading discussions for exclusionary and inclusionary practices, diversity
- Focus on thread initiators and high-volume users

Usage rates

- Large English city – less than 0.1%
- Medium-sized Czech town – 2.2%
- Small Slovak town – 2.6%
- (contributors as % of population)

Types of advocacy

- Forwarding of letters and messages from others
- Opening a discussion about a problem faced by known others
- Defence of group interests
- Speaking out from 'social conscience'

Common group identities

- Neighbourhoods and streets (Czech and Slovak cases)
- Transport user groups (all cases)
- Commuters (English and Slovak cases)
- Leisure interest groups (Czech and Slovak cases)
- Small business interests (Czech and Slovak cases)

Self-disclosure as social positioning

- Convention to reveal 'where you come from' even in anonymous forums
- Social status, age group, arrival stories
- Social positioning enables locally-relevant political dialogue: contributors explore context, creating markers for readers with tacit knowledge
- Social positioning self-regulated

Mediating between social positions

- When conflicting social positions are clear, mediators often emerge
- Mediation often occurs offline
- Discussion can produce new solutions to community tensions

Cross-cutting themes

- Issues that are less stratified by class or race (e.g. transport, urban development, public space, environment, public safety) get 'fairest treatment' (most commonly raised, wider range of perspectives, search for common goals)

Group interests

- Issues that have clearly-defined user groups get aired if:
 - members of group online (e.g. public housing tenants in Czech and Slovak forums)
 - advocates for offline others act out of social justice (e.g. public housing in English forum)

Absent voices

- Social service user groups
- Older people
- Ethnic minorities (Czech and Slovak forums)

Banal conclusion

- Intermediation occurs in eParticipation!
- So why such little attention?
- Research should ask: do eParticipation tools make it any *more effective*?

- *References*

- Gibson, R., Lusoli, W. & Ward, S. (2005) 'Online Participation in the UK: Testing a "Contextualised" Model of Internet Effects' *BJPIR* 7: 561-83.
- Millard, J. (2006) 'eGovernance and eParticipation: lessons from Europe in promoting inclusion and empowerment' paper presented at *UNDESA workshop*, Budapest.
- Peart, M.N. & Diaz, J.R. (2007) *Comparative Project in Local e-Democracy Initiatives in Europe and North America* University of Geneva: e-Democracy Centre report.