

Pre-electoral Discussion in a Digital City The Case of ComunalMilano2011.

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ABSTRACT

This article uses the Social Shaping of Technology (SST) as a framework to analyze the case of ComunalMilano2011, an Italian web platform, which gives the opportunity to candidates in local elections and generic citizens to discuss public issues within online spaces. The case study identifies and discusses the social groups of participants and the patterns of use of the platform. The evaluation of this experience through quantitative (statistics) and qualitative (content analysis) methods constitutes the essence of the research. The studied example directs attention to questions about the appropriation of the virtual spaces during the electoral campaign by different groups of participants. The paper concludes that the patterns of use remain open to potential creativity and depend mainly on the particular needs of participants.

Keywords

digital city, appropriation of technology, e-participation, online campaigning, patterns of use

1. INTRODUCTION

An electoral campaign is one of the crucial moments in a democratic systems based on representation. From the perspective of political communication, it is a period of “symbolic overheating” (Gerstlé 1993: 69) in which lots of political discourses are pronounced. The political campaign is usually closely linked to physical spaces such as town squares, markets, or schools in which candidates can meet their potential electors. In a digital city, online spaces like forums or candidate's websites give a similar opportunity as well. We prefer referring to them as 'online spaces' rather than 'tools' seeing as, according to (Winograd 1996), we believe that “Software is not just a device with which the user interacts; it is also the generator of a space in which the user lives.” Therefore “Software design is like architecture: [...] People are thought of as inhabitants rather than as users of buildings [...] focusing on how they live in the spaces the designers create.” Physical or virtual,

these spaces are synonyms of 'meeting places' between the candidates of public functions and citizens. Using these spaces establishes a gateway for dialogue, for which the essential condition is to create a link, to create an occasion, to create a feeling of proximity (Lefebvre 2001). De Cindio, Di Loreto and Peraboni (2008) show that municipal elections are a specific period during which a dialogue about the city is likely to be established, and helps to trigger participation at the urban level. Elections are an occasion for populating the digital city with active and concerned digital inhabitants. The challenge is to keep the attention alive after the electoral period.

The paper presents the patterns of use of a web platform designed by the RCM Foundation¹ as an opportunity for a public dialogue between citizens and candidates in the occasion of municipal elections in Milan, the second biggest Italian city. This case has been chosen for a variety of reasons. Firstly, the wealth of the platform (in terms of contents and functionalities), is rooted in a well established online context. It provides the possibility of a comparison with an analogous previous experience, carried on in the occasion of the Milan municipal elections held in 2006, analyzed in (De Cindio, Di Loreto and Peraboni, 2008). Moreover materials gathered during the electoral period (May 2011) are rich enough to identify alternative forms of expression and participation of citizens and candidates.

Secondly, although websites created and used during the political campaign have already been studied by many scholars (e.g., among others, Bentivegna, 2002; Talbot, 2008), most of them were interested in the websites or platforms created by the candidates themselves as part of their campaigning strategy. As a result of the existing analysis of candidates' websites and the ways in which they promoted citizens' and electors' interactive participation in the campaign, the citizen

1 The RCM (Rete Civica di Milano) Foundation is a non-profit body promoted in 1998 to manage the Milano Community Network and several initiatives budded from it (De Cindio, Ripamonti and Di Loreto, 2008)

participation was often referred to as « participatory initiatives » symbolically denying the distance between politicians and citizens, but reaffirm it in practice (Lefebvre, 2007)

Studies of the participative platforms created and managed by institutions not engaged in the campaign are instead infrequent.

The innovation is an uncertain, not just a rational-technical 'problem-solving' process because it also involves 'economic and political' factors in building alliances of interests among different social groups, around certain visions of technologies (Edge & Williams, 1996). That is why we have chosen as framework of our research a large set of theoretical work called Social Shaping of Technology (SST) from the famous book by MacKenzie & Wacjman (1985). SST claims that technology does not develop according to an inner technological logic but is a social construct conditioned by its creation and use. Following this idea, we present in our paper a transformation of the web platform between the initial conception, the application, and the appropriation by the participants. We particularly focus on the process of the appropriation of technology in its creative aspect.

This analysis is not merely 'academic': it relates to a real digital city experience and participatory democracy objectives.

2. THE EXPERIENCE

According to the experience discussed in (De Cindio, Di Loreto and Peraboni, 2008), the municipal elections are an effective opportunity for promoting online public dialogue among citizens and between citizens and local institutions at an urban level. Namely, it is a context suitable for triggering participation of the political actors – candidates, who, if elected, will become citizens representatives – which are usually reluctant to get involved in public online conversations. According to this assumption, the RCM Foundation decided to undertake the development of some new tool for the municipal elections scheduled for Spring 2011 (in the sequel, the project will be referred as CM2011).

In designing such a new tool and the corresponding online space, the following constraints and context conditions had to be considered:

- the existence of the public dialogue site www.partecipaMi.it, follow-up of the analogous initiative undertaken in the occasion of the Milan municipal elections in 2006;
- the impact that the President Obama's 2008 campaign (Talbot, 2008) had on politicians, especially in terms of the use of the most popular social networks, namely Facebook;
- a limited amount of resources to invest in the development.

2.1 PROJECT TIMELINE

After some preliminary study of the last online electoral campaigns, worldwide (e.g. Smith, 2008) and in Italy (e.g. Formenti & Mele, 2010), during the design phase, three focus groups have been organized involving active participants of the *partecipaMi* web site:

- 1st focus group on Jan. 30th, 2010, mainly involving generic citizens;
- 2nd focus group on May 15th, 2010, involving generic citizens as well as some prospective candidates;
- 3rd focus group on June 12th, 2010, mainly involving prospective candidates.

The electoral web site www.ComunaliMilano2011.it was opened to the public in June 2010; the space Problems&Proposals managed by the new tool was opened and launched on October 20th, 2010. In the meantime, the election had been scheduled for May 15th, 2011. The space for candidates and lists was opened and launched on April 7th, 2011, a week before the deadline for presenting the candidates lists. In the sequel, we will distinguish two periods: the initial period, and the electoral period, respectively before and after the presentation of the candidates lists. As the participants' account did not change, but a flag "candidate for..." was added, the behavior of prospective candidates can be analyzed during the initial period too.

2.2 THE DESIGN PRINCIPLE BEHIND THE NEW TOOLS AND SPACES

The design of the tools and spaces for supporting the 2011 Milan municipal elections (held on May 15, 2011) took place in continuation with the design principles for supporting online deliberation presented in (De Cindio & Peraboni, 2010); therefore:

- *partecipaMi* is kept running as **community space** in which citizens and the representatives already actively carry on free discussions on city issues. Even though it was not initially planned, the need for a space for carrying on free discussion on electoral issues within the site itself, also arose. When, at the beginning of March 2011, five referenda of civic initiative had been accepted by the municipal Guarantee Committee, and one month after they had been scheduled on June 12th, the site administrators decided to open a further free discussion section about them;

- the new tool Problems&Proposals -not far from how it is designed by (Klaus P., 2009) - supports purposeful conversations within the so-called **deliberative space**: it allows citizens to gather constructive proposals (a proposal is constructive if it solves at least one problem); other citizens can discuss problems and proposal in different ways:

- 1 citizens can agree (thumbs up) or disagree (thumbs down) on a certain problem; in this way the most heated issues should emerge;
- 2 three actions are available on proposals:
 - (a) citizens can agree (thumbs up) or disagree (thumbs down) on a certain proposal;
 - (b) one can sustain a certain proposal: in this case, her/his name will appear in the the proposal subscribers list;
 - (c) one can argue pro or contra the proposal.

Problems and proposals are classified in six thematic areas (environment; traffic; school and culture; social services, security and solidarity; urban planning; innovation and research); for sake of resources, it has not been possible to have tags. Problems and proposals are presented:

- 1 through a graphic representation, created with HyperTree, one of the JavaScript InfoVis Toolkit (available at <http://thejit.org/demos/>);
 - 2 through a geo-referential map, managed with Google® maps;
 - 3 through a list which can be ordered by date, number of related problems (resp., proposals), reached consensus.
- The actions performed by participants (i.e., registered users) contribute to each one's **personal space** (in its recent activity section) which also contains a more static profile (info section). It is worth noting the special meaning that the activities concerning proposals have when performed by candidates. Adding a proposal, as well as the actions (b) of sustaining someone else's proposal, and (c) of supporting it with positive arguments, mean that the candidate commits herself to support the proposal if elected.

Candidates can add a further page for electoral purposes (candidate section), containing:

- 1 an information-oriented space containing basic information such as: the list name; the public office for which they candidate; the motivations for offering; a personal curriculum; email and web site;
- 2 a thread in the public forum of the www.ComunaliMilano2011.it site: here, each candidate can meet citizens who are interested in discussing their electoral program with them;
- 3 a candidate who wishes a wider space in order to meet citizens interested in voting for him can ask to open a dedicated area which may include more discussion threads, namely one for

each specific point of her electoral program. This further space is the only one not for free: the candidate has to become member of the RCM Foundation (30€) ² and pay a fee (200€) which includes the service of moderation operated by the RCM community manager(s) according to the site rules of conduct. The same dedicated discussion area can be shared by several candidates, thus reducing the cost per person (500€ + membership).

The authentication and moderation policy, have been also inherited from *partecipaMi*, according with the design principles presented in (De Cindio & Peraboni, 2010).

2.3. DIALOGUE-ORIENTED AND INFORMATION-ORIENTED SPACES

As we can see, some online spaces are more dialogue-oriented while others are more information-oriented (I. e. one-way communication with some possibility of commenting). The sections *Problems&Proposals*, *Forum*, *Referendum* can be classified as spaces for informed dialogue. On these pages generic citizens can discuss some issues among themselves or/and with candidates. The information-oriented spaces include a section that list candidates for mayor, candidates for city council and those for district councils. Then, there is also a section dedicated to events linked to the campaign and finally a section where news regarding campaign are published. Both events and news allow comments.

As the aim of our research is to analyze the patterns of use in the context of the local political campaign, in the paper we will focus on two dialogue-oriented spaces: *Forum* and *Problems&Proposals*. The reason why we have decided not to consider the third one, *Referendum*, is that this participation space is not directly linked to the political campaign, so its political context is different and thus might confuse our analysis and conclusions.

3. ONLINE SPACE APPROPRIATION

The activities in www.ComunaliMilano2011.it are tracked through a standard statistics tool for monitoring Apache web servers³. Some of the tools in www.ComunaliMilano2011.it have detailed log files⁴. These are the basis data for the analysis of the experience, carried on by one of the authors as

- 2 i.e., it can be seen as a service provided by the RCM Foundation to its members
- 3 Analog, <http://www.analog.cx/>
- 4 Unfortunately, this is not the case for the *Problems&Proposals* tool, because of lack of time and resources in the development phase. However, by direct inspection of the statistics of the Apache server, most of the relevant data for the analysis are available.

an independent observer. Both, quantitative (statistics) and qualitative (content analysis) methods have been used. The ongoing research permits to outline some pattern of use made by two main groups of participants: candidates and citizens.

3.1 GENERAL PATTERNS.

Comparing the website CM2011 with the analogous site managed in 2006, an interesting evolution can be noticed especially in case of candidates. In 2006, they only used the platform to gain visibility, i.e., they only created their electoral page without participating in the forums. In 2011 this attitude changed. Candidates became more aware of citizen participation and dialogue and of the possibilities provided by ICT in this arena. This change could be caused by various factors. As discussed in (Formenti & Mele, 2010) success of famous web campaigns (e.g., the Obama's campaign in 2008, and, in Italy, the campaigns before the European (2009) and the regional (2010) elections) probably contributed to this evolution. Also, the growing popularity of social networks sites as well as the experience on the well established local online participation platform *partecipaMi* could influence candidates' attitude.

However, also in 2011 the appropriation process has been complex. Before the official presentation of the electoral lists of candidates only 35% of messages within dialogue-oriented spaces were posted by prospective candidates, while after the presentation of the electoral lists this score reached 70%. The candidates participated online mainly in the electoral period. However, this appropriation trend was not the same for all the candidates, as will be discussed in sequel.

Unlike candidates, the citizens seemed to be dialogue-oriented from the very beginning of the project: they used the platform in order to seek an online space that encouraged public discussions on issues relevant to the city life. In the initial period they were the most active group of participants initiating forum threads (78% while the candidates opened 22% of the threads). In the electoral period, these scores were reversed (citizens initiated 32% of forum threads while candidates initiated 68% of them). This could be explained by an appropriation and hyperactivity of candidates during the campaign rather than sudden passivity of citizens. Citizens indeed continued to participate in the forum discussions. Moreover, according to the statistics, citizens also continued to go back to the online space and followed the discussion. Out of 10 participants with the highest score of log in, 5 were generic citizens while the other 5 worked on the platform. The first candidate in this score was 11th. Another difference in the appropriation of two dialogue-oriented spaces can be observed. Citizens were more likely to participate in the discussion on

the forum than to contribute to the section *Problems&Proposals*. There was not a large quantitative difference between the threads and items in *Problems&Proposals* (262 threads to 194 problems and proposals) but a qualitative difference could be noticed. The threads on the forum were longer and more complex, and interactivity between the participants could also be observed. In the *Problems&Proposals* section, on the contrary, the messages were rarely commented on or voted for. It seemed also to be difficult for the participants to formulate a problem not accompanied by a proposal and that is why the proposals are often re-phrased problems. This observation will be further developed in the presentation in the context of potential difficulties to which participants were challenged using the argumentation tools.

Finally, it is worth noting that the platform has been appropriated by participants to stimulate other participants to take part in the discussion. This behaviour could easily be observed in case of candidates, whose participation was often stimulated by generic citizens who seemed to encourage them to leave the facade⁵ of the official discourse and to explain some issues from their programs. A good example of this pattern was the thread « Who are the candidates? Where do they come from? » which will also be analyzed in the presentation.

3.2 SPECIFIC REMARQUES.

In the above paragraph, we have identified some general appropriation pattern. However, the participants of *ComunaliMilano2011* were not a homogenous group which could be analysed as a whole. Among the citizens we can identify the representatives of associations and the generic citizens with diverse socio-economical characteristics. Among the candidates there were those well and those less known; those who had many or limited resources to their disposal; those who belong to well organized political parties or movements, and those who belong to lists set up just for electoral purposes; and so on. As a consequence, during the analysis some specific cases are drawn to our attention.

We focus in this section on the candidates, because the data concerning generic citizens are being gathered through a questionnaire and will be analysed soon. Firstly, the less known the candidate was, and the less resources he had, the more active he was within the dialogue-oriented spaces, while the most known candidates considered the platform as a way to address people towards their own electoral websites, where the communication could be more easily managed by their staff avoiding double activity, and where citizens were informed

5 The concept of the facade is used in the meaning of E. Goffman.

rather than having the opportunity to communicate⁶ with the candidates. These well-known candidates saw the platform as one of the many broadcasting arenas for self-presentation and were willing to use the spaces provided by CM2011 for this purpose. They did it by filling the sections “Why do I apply”, adding a personal profile in the section “More information [about me]”, and by inserting their electoral events and a link towards their own web site. However, they were very reluctant to appear in the dialogue-oriented spaces⁷. This pattern was well evident in the case of candidate mayors: the current mayor, as well as her two stronger competitors were not active on the site, while weaker candidates posted messages and get involved in dialogue.

The well-known candidates aimed to be present on the site, because it was perceived as a kind of electoral portal where potential electors can compare the programs and attitudes of candidates. On the contrary, the weaker candidates disposing of less resources and less support by organized parties or movements tried not only to be present, but also to be noticed. In order to gain visibility, they were more likely to participate in all the sections of the platform: besides presenting themselves in the personal space, they started threads in the forum and published events (which let their photo appear in the thread/event list), exposing themselves to the opinions of other participants on a peer-to-peer basis. Those who did, seldom started the discussion, as they preferred to respond to the threads already initiated. It might also be a sign of the strategy of information control during the electoral campaign. If candidates resigned to this strategy and initiated the thread, their aim was to present their point of view and to set some information about their program. However, there were exceptions to this behavior, and sometimes a candidate did openly ask other participants' opinion. Examples of this pattern (e.g., « First point of the Partito Italia Nuova's program – what do you think about it? ») will be discussed in the presentation.

Up to now, we have discussed appropriation, but we also observed a fully negative case, i.e., the case of a space that was not appropriated at all. This is the case of the personal dialogue space, free or payed (described in section 2, point 3 of the personal

space). The free space was appropriated only by one single candidate who used it as a weblog. His choice was clear to the other participants who adopted the typical blog style: they neither wrote any comments nor started any discussion on his page. The payed personal dialogue space was arranged by three candidates and one single list, but all of them used the space in a very poor way. In fact, the candidates posted messages directly on the forum or in Problems&Proposals, where they could potentially and more easily find their eventual electors rather than addressing them to their personal dialogue site.

CONCLUSIONS

This paper presents a first evaluation of a recent experience carried on to foster participation at the urban level. The research focuses on the possibilities offered by a dedicated web platform to different social actors, namely generic citizens and candidates, and on the actual use by them of these possibilities. The analysis demonstrates to which extent a platform designed by a Foundation external to the political arena can create an online space of informed participation and discussion. It also outlines the main patterns of use that can be already identified after the first part of the research. The data shows that the local politicians, often reluctant to the idea of citizen participation, become increasingly more dialogue-oriented. At the beginning candidates were much more information-oriented than the citizens, but over time they sought citizens' opinions and were willing to present their proposals to the citizens' judgment.

Some of them are also inclined to open dialogue with citizens in the digital public square (Forum). This might suggest that the appropriation of a new participation space is a complex, time-consuming and heterogeneous process. Different groups of participants appropriated the platform in various ways and some designed functionalities were rejected by most of participants, while others perceived the platform as a portal of self-presentation. The issue is now to which extent the awareness and skill acquired by candidates during the electoral period will be kept now that they are elected and participate in the city government.

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6 We refer to Gregorio Arena who, » in his book «Cittadini attivi», explores the difference between «to inform» and «to communicate». He claims that «to inform» comes from «to give form» and «to communicate» comes from the word «community». In other words, «to inform» refers to modeling and «to communicate» to discussing.

7 This can be easily checked through the “Latest Activity” section in each candidate’s personal profile

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