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Guest Editorial: Towards a comprehensive approach of online political participation

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1 Introduction

This special issue of the *International Journal of Electronic Governance* devoted to online participation responds both to the increasing and diversification of the academic literature on this topic, and to an ambition of publicising some young scholars' research work. It provides an overview of theoretical approaches as well as case studies that

reflect the complexity and the diversity of online political participation as an object of research, especially in a context of development of so-called 'web 2.0' techniques (Stenger and Coutant, 2011).

This introduction is therefore an opportunity to briefly present some of the debates surrounding the definition of online political participation pointing out its complexity, variability and multi-disciplinary character. It leads to the formulation of proposals for a new, flexible definition of online political participation and a research programme for the next years, resulting mainly from the ongoing research presented in this special issue.

These questions and research programme were discussed at a conference held in Paris in June 2013 by the DEL network.¹ The DEL network, led by Gérard Loiseau and then Stéphanie Wojcik, has contributed for more than a decade to the international structuring of a field of research on electronic democracy and the political consequences linked with or accompanying the development of digital technologies. This special issue of *the International Journal of Electronic Governance* is very much inspired by the DEL conference as well as seminars organised within the network over the years. Members of DEL also have contributed to this journal issue, either as authors or reviewers of the papers. We thank them all for their involvement and the quality of the scientific discussions among the stimulating DEL academic community.²

2 Online political participation: a complex object of research

Online political participation is a multi-dimensional and challenging concept and object of research. In the literature, it often has been associated with e-democracy in the sense that e-participation and e-democracy can both be defined as "the use of information and communication technologies (...) enabling citizens to connect with one another and with their elected representatives" (MacIntosh, 2008, p.86). This normative assumption actually refers to a conception of digital technologies that is often defended by political actors as well as interest groups promoting e-democracy. In this perspective, technologies are seen as a way of (re)inventing political linkages and reinvigorating political systems heavily criticised and even rejected by citizens, especially in the most established democracies (Pharr and Putnam, 2000; Rosanvallon, 2008). The "digital agenda for Europe", an initiative of the European Commission in the 'Europe 2020' programme, reflects and operationalises this concern³ in terms of public policies.

Such a normative assumption involves three different dimensions that have been discussed and deconstructed within the social sciences, especially since the broadening of the uses of the internet in the 1990s. Interrogating these dimensions contributes to the clarification of theoretical positions that are not necessarily explicit in the academic literature. It also helps to reveal the complexity and fragmentation of the idea of online political participation.

The first dimension that can be considered is the one of participation itself, i.e., what researchers mean by participation. Classically, in political science, Verba and Nie (1972) define political participation as: "those activities by private citizens that are more or less directly aimed at influencing the selection of government personnel and/or the actions they take". Four dimensions are considered in their work: voting; campaign activity, including involvement in party activities and donations; contacting public officials; and community activities. This initial definition has been considerably enriched over time. Criticising what they consider a limited and elitist approach, Barnes and Kaase (1979)

prefer to talk of ‘political action’ rather than ‘political participation’, to analyse forms of participation previously perceived as illegitimate by governments, such as boycotting, petitioning, occupying or being involved in strikes. Progressively, these forms of participation, as well as social movement repertoires of action, have been included in participation research (Verba et al., 1995) and online activism itself has become of research interest (Garrett, 2006).

At the same time, other dimensions were discussed and opened the boundaries of participation practices, making them more and more blurred. Following the path opened by the idea of a ‘strong democracy’ fuelled by continuous citizen involvement over formal constitutional mechanisms (Barber, 1984), but also by the ‘deliberative turn’ in social sciences (Dryzek, 2000), citizen consultations (Coleman and Shane, 2012) and political discussions (Gamson, 1992; Greffet and Wojcik, 2008; Wolf et al., 2010) have been considered as significant to understand political participation, including in their online forms. Changes in democratic theory – from approaches limiting democracy to representation to more participatory or deliberative conceptions – are obviously linked with these conceptions, as pointed out by Norbert Kersting in his contribution to this issue. An attempt to establish something like a list of practices of political participation seems to be an impossible challenge. One problem is that, as van Deth (2001, p.4) puts it, “the study of political participation has become the study of everything”. In an historical perspective, it seems therefore more fruitful to consider how some social realities are constructed and defined as political participation over time, depending on the way democracy itself is considered and defined and on the practical agreements on what political participation is, rather than proposing a normative list of activities.

Also it has appeared that beyond participation activities themselves, participation is linked to other elements, such as political competence which is unequally distributed depending on social positions (Gaxie, 2007). In the digital world, the way people use techniques varies considerably depending on their ability to efficiently and effectively find information. That is why it has been suggested that there might be a “second-level digital divide” (Hargittai, 2002), combining internet connection difficulties with online skill inequalities. This digital divide might actually reinforce the civic gap, i.e., the inequalities in terms of political competence and political knowledge (Delli Carpini and Keetter, 2003). Participation is also related to information exposure. In this field, numerous empirical studies exist regarding the internet. In the USA, Tolbert and McNeal (2002) and Mossberger et al. (2008) have for instance demonstrated that people with access to the internet and online election news were significantly more likely to report voting in the 1996 and 2000 US presidential elections. Working on a bigger range of studies, Boulianne (2009) also concludes a slight but positive effect of the internet on political engagement. Recent studies, such as the one by Lev-On and Adler (2013) on online communities of the Israeli Ministry of Social Services examine even more broadly what they call ‘passive’ participation, i.e., the most common behaviour of net-users consisting of reading without actively taking part in an online device.

This very brief approach of the variety of practices and meanings associated with participation shows that it is not always easy to distinguish between participating, discussing, engaging and other activities such as reading, particularly, but not specifically, in an online context. Participation is no longer limited to some kind of volunteer actions towards the political; it can be passive, such as in the case of reading some documents or watching a video. Also, depending on the authors, political participation has different meanings referring to different conceptions of democracy and

the role of citizens (Dahlberg, 2011). This does not mean that more authoritarian political contexts should be entirely excluded from the scope of online political participation, as net-users in these countries also express political views and can be politically active over the web (Arsène, 2011). But it means that what is considered as online political participation should be precisely defined in any research, and maybe clearly divided into different activities, e.g., information, discussion, deliberation, interaction, political expression or mobilisation.

A second important dimension when exploring online political participation is the one of technology. The different words used, such as e-participation or more recently digital participation show to what extent online participation is an object of research linked with the development of technologies. Scholars in social sciences have varied in their uses of these words. As an example, in the 2000, the research network Demo-net had called attention to the use of 'e-participation' as a concept rather than the one of 'e-democracy', which at this time was considered as too narrow and linked with the one specific technology of e-voting (Rose et al., 2007).

Similarly, the conceptions of the relationship between technology and participation have changed over time. At an early stage of the study of the uses of the internet, there were quite radically opposed visions of the political consequences the development of technology might have on democracy and political participation. Either it was assumed that the growing use of the internet would lead to a growing power devoted to citizens, owing particularly to the decreasing of the participation costs (Becker and Slaton, 2003; Lévy, 2002), or that it might result in a replication or even a reinforcement of social and political inequalities observed offline (Davis, 1998; Margolis and Resnick, 2000 for instance). According to the first thesis, political participation would be increased for all; in the second, it would only benefit those most interested in politics and/or those most familiar with technology, the civic divide intertwining with the digital divide (Norris, 2001).

These initial visions have been transformed, especially given the increase of online spaces and devices that imply different uses and potentially different participation practices. As Blanchard et al. (2013) point out, online political participation can now include many digital traces, such as tweets, Facebook comments or 'likes'. This multiplies the opportunities of participation. As an example, the French-Quebec project *webinpolitics.com*,⁴ undertaken during the French and Quebec electoral campaigns 2012, was testing more than 30 indicators of online and offline political participation, whereas the number of indicators was <10 a decade ago (Gibson and Greffet, 2013). In other words, even though the relationship between participation and technology is not *a priori* determined, it cannot be excluded that "changing the *infrastructure* that supports participation can alter the *patterns* of participation" (Hindman, 2009, p.16).

That is why recent research emphasises new forms of 'expressive participation' defined as "a form of political participation that entails the public expression of political orientations" (Rojas and Puig-i-Abril, 2009, pp.906–907) and that is specifically observed online. This has opened a debate on the meaning of these kinds of participation, either a possible channel to other political activities and a broader redefinition of citizenship (Coleman and Blumler, 2009), or as a costless and 'feel-good mode' of so-called participation, with no consequences at all on politics, except maybe preventing citizens from efficient activism (Morozov, 2011).

This debate refers to normative views on what online participation is and means. Maybe such assumptions will be re-evaluated in a few decades, which might lead to

distinguishing between forms of online actions that would have a political sense, and other ‘light’ forms of this so-called participation. Already, the intertwining of online and offline participation varies depending on what type of activity is considered, which opens the perspective of completely different types of participation. For instance, the data collected by Cantijoch and Gibson in the UK in 2010 (Gibson and Cantijoch, 2013) reveal that what the authors call ‘targeted participation’, i.e., participation relating to actions designed to influence representative institutions, converges online and offline, whereas news consumption (passive participation) appears to diverge and take a different form online and offline.

The third dimension of online political participation is the one of ‘the political’. As pointed out by Leca (1985), the available nouns, either ‘the political’ as a general term, ‘politics’, qualifying specifically the political competition, ‘policies’ referring to public authorities actions, or polity as the form of government, cannot be precisely defined. Each political theory has its own definition of each term, depending on its ‘universe of meaning’ (Leca, 1985, p.55). However, a number of objects can be included into a minimal list of ‘political activities’, even if they are not necessarily considered that way by the societies or actors involved. Indeed, whatever the society and the symbolical or institutional constructions that exist concretely within it, the political can be perceived through norms, mechanisms and institutions that allocate authority, appoint leaders, solve conflicts that threaten the internal unity and go to war with the external (Leca, 1985, p.58).

When it comes to participation, this list of what is ‘political’ might appear as quite narrow. As Carpentier (2013, p.1) puts it, referring to Mouffe, some authors have reverted “to civil society, the economy and the family as sites of political practice”. Feminists for instance have focused on the extent to which the couple relationships and domestic activities are spaces of power, despite their belonging to the ‘private’ sphere. Major controversies –such as nuclear power or global warming – have also progressively moved from the specific social sphere of science to the political. Furthermore, according to Carpentier, participation can be identified in very different social fields such as urban planning or cinema. Does this mean that participation is actually political, whatever the field it exists in?

As guest editors of this issue, we are keen on establishing a theoretical point of view that makes us able to distinguish between political and non-political participation. This distinction should not be too firm, since the process of construction of what is ‘political’ is always being redefined by citizens and the frontiers of the political do not exist as such. But it could make it easier to undertake empirical research.

3 The need for a comprehensive approach and contextualised studies for further research

We therefore define online political participation in a broad sense as: any type of online activity, either individual or collective, which expands the involvement of people in politics and/or questions politics, whether this is linked or not with a direct effect on public affairs. By doing so, we are aware to both expand and reduce the scope of political participation. Expand since we include aspects such as online collective organisations or political discussions within online political participation, even though they have not necessarily an immediate effect on political affairs. However, we also limit the scope of

online participation, since we would not include all possible kinds of participation, not in terms of practices *per se*, but in terms of what these practices actually mean for the people who undertake them and more generally for society. Even though politics might emerge on ‘third spaces’ (Wright, 2012) and therefore have a place in the analysis of online political participation, any type of collective online activity cannot be considered as online political participation as such. It should only be considered as such whether it has a *political* meaning for the participants and if they state so, in particular if they publicise it, either in their digital traces, or more rarely in surveys or testimonies. This *political meaning* is linked with politicisation, i.e., with a “retraining process of various social activities, retraining process that results from a practical agreement between social agents who tend, for various reasons, to contravene or question the differentiation of the spaces of activities”⁵ (Lagroye, 2003). As a consequence, the absence of a politicisation process in participation activities means it is not political. Therefore, our conception of online political participation is a bit more restrictive than the one of Monnoyer-Smith (2011) who pleads for the integration of numerous digital expressions and practices within the scope of political participation. Graham considers after Mansbridge (1999) that two criteria define a political discussion: “(a) participant makes a connection from a particular experience, interest, issue or topic in general to society, which (b) stimulates reflection and a response by at least one other participant, were advanced to stage two” (Graham, 2008, p.22). Our definition is close to his but also a bit narrower. As a matter of fact, we consider online participation as political when a politicisation process can be identified. In other words, the connection to a societal issue or the presence of some digital expressivity is not sufficient; it should be associated with some kind of questioning of the political order and of the differentiation of politics within society, i.e., some kind of legitimisation, either immediately or later on, by the participants – and more generally the public – of the political character of what is said. As Lagroye (2003, p.367) comments, politicisation also results in a retraining process of the aims of action, of their expected effects and of the justifications they receive. It *converts* something that was social into political through the discourses and interventions of various actors.

We therefore defend a comprehensive approach of online political participation, which includes some kind of recognition process by the participants or other actors of the political nature of what is done. This implies several dimensions of online political participation that outline a general frame for a programme of research on this topic.

First, such a comprehensive and flexible approach might be useful for researchers to analyse political participation in various countries. The five papers presented in this issue involve specific countries (Australia, Israel and South Korea) as well as a supranational organisation (the European Union) and a transnational social movement (Occupy). To explore this diversity, a very strict and normative definition of online participation would not be an adapted framework since it would not be flexible enough for empirical as well as theoretical research.

In the last decade, several researches monitored online activities using criteria based on normative theoretical definitions of deliberation or participation, which resulted in a juxtaposition of different and somehow incompatible definitions. The way authors use and refer to these normative definitions in this special issue is slightly different depending on the papers and it confirms the need for a new and adaptable definition. In their paper titled ‘The cultural meanings of Israeli *Tokbek* (talk-back online commenting) and their relevance to the online democratic public sphere’, Dori-Hacohen and Shavit present an ethnographic and empirically grounded approach “independent of

the presuppositions of any democratic theory”. They intend to analyse how comments on Israelis’ online newspaper political articles participate in shaping their countries’ democratic system. Thus, they cannot start with a normative definition and risk excluding characteristics and forms of political participation specific to this political and cultural context.

The inclusion of original and context-specific forms of political participation also shapes the work of Park, ‘Political carnivalism and an emerging public space: examination of a new participatory culture on Twitter’, which is about the use of Twitter during the Seoul 2012 mayoral election. Instead of monitoring the use of such a social media regarding the theoretical definition of the habermassian public sphere, he considers ‘carnivalistic’ forms of political participation, i.e., “humour, satire and parody” and analyses how they meet political participation and contribute to redefine the concept of public sphere in the specific Korean context. The idea in these papers is to discuss normative theoretical definitions through the analysis of the way participation on political issues actually develops online in diverse socio-political situations. Obviously, this does not mean theoretical approaches are to be avoided.

The second aspect of this research programme based on our comprehensive approach of online political participation is the role of technical devices. All of the papers in this issue deploy specific methodological tools to grasp digital traces and analyse online activities. Three of them gathered large quantities of Twitter messages (*tweets*), selected using specific keywords related to a specific political event. This network is very much used in recent research, not only because of its novelty, but also because the ‘conversations’ are more visible to the researchers. They therefore allow approaching closely and precisely online political participation.

In the case of the Seoul mayoral election (Park), the collected tweets were those including the names of the candidates as well as ‘vote and election’. In their study of ‘The #OCCUPY network on Twitter and the challenges to social movements theory and research’, Beraldo and Galan-Paez have collected all the tweets containing the hashtag #occupy, to be able to associate it with some information about the geographical origin, the actors involved and the specific temporality of the mobilisations registered on Twitter. Highfield, when working on “Twitter and Australian political debates” has chosen two hashtags, #auspol about national political topics and #wapol, which provides a case study of state politics in Western Australia. The analysis reveals two very different structures of the online political debate depending on the political level considered.

The two other papers focus on institutional devices offering participation abilities to web users: comments on Israelis’ newspapers websites (Dori-Hacohen and Shavit) and the European Commission’s Youtube channel in the case of the study of Da Silva ‘Joining the online video conversation? Discourse and practices of European political institutions and politicians on YouTube’. These authors use various methodological tools. *Tokbekim* – plural for *tokbek*, Hebrew name for online article comment – have been approached through an ethnographically constructed corpus of online articles and comments; the videos of the EU channels also have been completed with an ethnographic study of videos, websites, online pages of news media and blogs, to improve the perception of audiencing practices.

This shows the growing ability of social science researchers to develop mixed-research designs and to bring together tools from external research fields, especially computer science. By doing so, the common idea of these papers is to take into consideration the technological dimension of online political participation. The authors

mainly refer to the devices not as a specific medium to be analysed or evaluated, as it was the case in previous research, but as a methodological tool to access and assess broader political, cultural and social activities. Analysing the use of online devices can thus be fruitful to characterise specific forms of web users' political expression (e.g., humour or bashing ritual). It is also efficient to understand how such devices are used by various institutional (e.g., European Commission or politicians) as well as non-institutional (e.g., Occupy activists) political actors. This also reminds how devices cannot be separated from the power relationships they carry and reflect (Monnoyer-Smith and Wojcik, 2012), but also from the people using them.

Further research has to go beyond devices themselves, to include studies on who users politically and sociologically are, and to consider the way they define their own activities. The comprehensive approach of online political participation framing this research programme is able to include various forms of participation through the political meaning given to such activities by the people involved. Online activities thus have to be embedded in a system of meanings and symbols that can be understood from the users' point of view. Further research on online political participation has to meet other research traditions, especially the ones based on sociological and anthropological conceptions of human activities. This implies the diversification of the scope of methods to be able to confront quantitative data collected online vs. qualitative data on users' participation, based for instance on observation and interviews.

Another important perspective regarding the role of the theoretical dimensions as well as the devices is suggested by the invited paper in this special issue. Norbert Kersting's contribution classifies forms of political participation, both online and offline, into the four main categories of participation identified by the literature: representative, direct, deliberative and demonstrative. By doing so, he shows that many online devices used for political participation mix several theoretical models, which were mainly defined based on offline activities. This work emphasises the importance for researchers not to separate online and offline activities and devices, as it is assumingly not separated in day to day citizen political actions.

This leads to a third consequence in terms of a research programme, already visible throughout this special issue. Analysing one common notion – online political participation – using the same devices (social media, websites...) in various countries or territories interrogates its adaptability and the risk of 'conceptual stretching' (Sartori, 1991). How could we compare online political participation among various countries, i.e., various political and cultural contexts? How can we manage to grasp at the same time local specificities and worldwide political or social movements? Two different perspectives are suggested by the papers in this issue, which are complementary if considered from a heuristic point of view. The first direction, which opens this special issue, is to focus on transnational phenomena, either at a non-institutional or at an institutional level. Internet devices represent an opportunity to easily access various contemporary political movements or devices. Beraldo and Galan-Paez use Twitter to understand how the Occupy movement spreads over various countries. On the other side of the institutionalisation of politics, Da Silva shows how Youtube represents a unique opportunity even for established political authorities such as the European Commission, to interact with transnational audiences, even if facing common difficulties with national institutions in achieving such objectives. The idea in these two contributions is to use the analyses of devices to understand how institutions or activists participate across borders. The second direction of research, which follows in this special issue, is to focus on

specific territories. Online participation then has to be replaced in a peculiar political and cultural context. In this perspective, Highfield compares two political contexts within Australia, at a federal level and in a specific state. He shows how Twitter is used in different ways by citizens and politicians at both levels. Dori-Hacohen and Shavit refer to the way the word *tokbek*, Dori-Hacohen and Shavit refer to the way the word *tokbek* is defined and how it characterises Israelis' culture, is defined and how it characterises Israelis' culture and democratic system through the tension between *lefties* and *rightists*. Park focuses his contribution on the online and political version of carnivals to describe how Korean citizens participate in political issues, even if neither on institutional participation devices or under institutional participation forms, using jokes and satire on Twitter. These three contributions use the devices to access very local and specific forms of participation, whether they are linked or not with political institutions.

These different but complementary approaches emphasise the need for geographically situated research, comparative studies and transnational analyses. Some work has already been done in this field especially among western democracies (Chadwick, 2012; Åström et al., 2013), but several issues still challenge research. The comparison of online participation in heterogeneous political systems remains problematic, in particular because the meaning of participation, for citizens as well as for politicians, may remain radically different. This becomes especially sensitive when it comes to 'young' democracies or non-democratic countries, in which online participation exists, more or less related to politics, and may have great impact as shown by the recurrent reference to Arab Springs in the recent literature on online political participation. The latter example emphasises the action of online activists and protesters who achieved to overthrow authoritarian regimes. By going beyond the ability to impact political decisions and rules, the comprehensive approach we plead for invites to include online activities in non-democratic regimes as soon as web users refer to it as political.

Opening this programme of research, we hope that the papers in this special issue of *the International Journal of E-Governance* and the work of DEL members' it reveals will contribute reinforcing research on online political participation in its various areas. One of the main challenges, which is obviously already being faced by researchers, remains the ability of studies to decompose and operationalise the range of participation forms that may occur online (Wojcik, 2011) on various political, social and cultural contexts, as well as their meaning and the way they are included in a larger set of political activities, both online and offline.

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Notes

¹<http://www.reseaudel.fr/en/>

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³<http://ec.europa.eu/digital-agenda/>

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⁵The original quote is: "la politisation est une requalification des activités sociales les plus diverses, requalification qui résulte d'un accord pratique entre des agents sociaux enclins, pour de multiples raisons, à transgresser ou à remettre en cause la différenciation des espaces d'activités" (Lagroye, 2003, pp.360–361).