

Lurkers as Actors in Online Political Communication

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Comunicazione Politica: Il perimetro della democrazia in rete. A che punto è il dibattito?

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Introduction

Citizen participation in political and societal issues is often seen as a form of giving citizens power, and requires providing the means necessary for citizens to be able to incorporate their concerns, needs and values into policy and decision processes (Arnstein 1969; Creighton 2005). Citizens and government are aware of the potential of participation, and new technologies can provide new opportunities and communication channels for political engagement and communication. Participatory innovations have taken place, facilitating two-way communication and multi-actor discussions, promoting political knowledge, enabling greater political participation and fostering egalitarian citizenship (Flew 2007; Glencross 2008). Governments and political systems have adopted different tools and forms of online communication, such as blogging, Facebook and Twitter to support the relationship between public administration, political figures and citizens, and also to encourage active citizen participation.

IT-mediated interaction has become part of the administrative and decision making processes, making it "e-participative". E-participation in one way represents the use of ICT by governments and public administrations, elected officials, media, political parties and interest groups, civil society organizations, international governmental organizations, citizens and voters in processes such as service delivery, policy-making and decision-making (Clift 2003; O'Donnell et al. 2007). This makes e-participation a tool for managers, politicians, citizens and stakeholders with which to achieve more contact points, increase the exchange of data, facilitate communication and enable more interaction (Andersen et al. 2007). But e-participation can also address other issues. It may be used to change the role of government, as public services are increasingly offered and happening outside the usual government public sphere (van den Broek et al. 2010). Governments and public administrations may employ e-participation to have more knowledge about citizens' needs, to become more transparent or to offer services effectively, efficiently and with lower costs. But e-participation may also simply be a necessity as the larger the government, the more complex the services offered and the more people are concerned with it, the greater government's need to communicate with the citizens (Andersen et al. 2007). The technology can be used to access the expertise of citizens and niche groups, making e-participation a tool with which to collect and aggregate information, knowledge and skills to achieve innovative solutions that governments may need (Mossberger 2007; Archmann 2010).

Whilst there has been a massive growth in the use of online and mobile technologies, figures of citizen e-participation are low, and it is a small, active core of participants that generates most of the visible online content. E-participation initiatives thus focus and rely on those participants who participate visibly rather than those who engage in other activities such as watching or reading. The term lurking describes a behaviour made possible by technology that allows access without having to publicly participate or be visible. Although they do not or only rarely visibly contribute, lurkers represent the majority in the online environment. Furthermore, lurkers are neither ignored nor those who don't care: they may communicate and act in ways which have not yet been recognised.

The online business community has already discovered the importance of lurkers (e.g. as potential customers, as an audience for adverts), so online political strategies need to use a positive definition of lurking, understand the reasons for lurking and how lurking impacts online political communication. But it is also necessary to consider whether reducing lurking is always the best strategy for increasing the value and impact of online political communication.

Online Participation: Active Participation?

The inclusion of the citizens' perspective in the development of policies and public services is to have benefits both for governments and citizens. Some scholars suggest that citizens want more interaction with their government, want to participate more than vote from time to time (Flew 2007; Rosanvallon & Goldhammer 2008). Polat and Pratchett (2009) and Chadwick (2006) believe that online technology allows a significant proportion of citizens to access political knowledge, be engaged and to experience political participation. E-participation initiatives aim to make the citizen an active contributor to democratic processes and public services, so that instead of just being the final user or receiver, citizens are the active contributors and key actors in the development of policies and public services (Osimo 2008; Punie, et al. 2009). For those citizens who demand more interaction and involvement, ICTs offer new ways for participation which are low-cost and easy to use. Citizens can participate and contribute through a variety of online activities such as chatting, file sharing, emailing, blogging, socializing on web meeting places, creating Wikis, allowing them to access, create and share content with others.

The e-participative environments can be used for health, education, transport, culture, networking, business and entertainment, yet there are also scholars who are more critical, believing that citizens may well want interaction that is limited to casting a vote every few years or only when they have to (Archmann 2010; Williamson 2010). Whilst there certainly has been a massive growth in user-driven applications, figures of active citizen e-participation are low and it is only a small core of participants that generates most of the visible online content (Tapscott & Williams 2006; Charalabidis et al. 2010; van den Broek et al. 2010). Millard (2009b) suggests that the number of contacts between government and citizens is 3 per year. Dalakiouridou, Tambouris, and Tarabanis (2008) note that although initiatives and measures seem to provide citizens with more

opportunities to be informed, citizens still feel scarcely able to shape their future and remain passive. Research in the EU shows that the majority of e-participation initiatives focus more on one-way communication and information-provision rather than real participation and collaboration (Millard 2009a; Panopoulou et al 2009; Charalabidis et al 2009). In the US, slightly less than 50% of the US population is prepared to participate, either because the majority is still (hardly) connected or because only the top 15-20% of the population is actually involved in knowledge-based activities on the web. Furthermore in the USA, 52% of the population is defined as "inactive" and 33% as spectators (Forrester Research 2010).

Yet it may be that online participation may also occur in ways that are not immediately or obviously visible, defying the usual definitions of online activity. E-participation certainly offers the opportunity for citizens to be active, but focusing on a narrow understanding of active citizenship may lead to problems in understanding the potential, the expectations and impact of e-participation.

Lurkers and Lurking

Most e-participation initiatives rely on the small core of participants who actively and visibly participate rather than those who engage in other behaviours such as watching, reading, listening, forwarding, teaching, or engaging in a myriad of other possible behaviours. Such behaviours are often labelled as lurking. Lurkers represent the majority in the online environment, they do not seem to or only rarely visibly participate, yet are known to be online and read regularly (Nonnecke & Preece 2000; Takahashi et al. 2002; Preece & Shneiderman 2009).

A Definition

The term lurking usually describes those who do not visibly participate in the online environment, a behaviour made possible by the technology that allows access without having to publicly participate or be visible (Joinson 2001b; Nonnecke & Preece 2003). Lurkers are one of the 'silent majority' in an electronic forum (The Jargon File 2010), posting occasionally or not at all, but are known to read online postings and content (Nonnecke and Preece 2000). They can make up over 90% of the online group (Nielsen 2006), although this varies with the community. Lurking is a popular activity, and some people spend many hours lurking, knowing the topics of the conversation and key players (contributors) well. Lurkers can become so immersed in the online discussions that they feel they know the participants or belong to the community even though they have never posted and in spite of their bystander behaviour (Nonnecke and Preece 2003).

Lurking represents various types of online and offline behaviours, and often has a negative connotation such as someone who hangs around, a free-loader (Smith & Kollock 1999), someone who wants something for nothing (Nonnecke & Preece 2000), a cyber-trickster (OECD 2003), is sinister, annoying, or an eavesdropper (Webopedia n.d.). Since the goal of most online communities is

discussion and interaction, there may be some justification for this view of lurkers. The success of the community is often defined on the basis of active participation and contributions, enticing current members back and new ones to join. Furthermore, lurkers seem to get the benefits of belonging without giving anything back. Online communities try to organise themselves to prevent lurking, as lurkers are seen as threatening the online group and its activities: "the existence of 'lurkers' may lead to (the) group fading, as some active participants may be disheartened to continue with the discussion when they fail to get any feedback, verbal or non-verbal, from others" (Cher Ping & Seng Chee 2001).

Why Lurk?

Lurkers are often thought of those who take without reciprocating, yet the vast majority lurk for other reasons, even altruistic ones, and are often unaware of the impact of their behaviour on others.

Lurking involves a complex set of behaviours, rationales and activities, and is influenced by a variety of factors found in both the offline and online context, such as social loafing, information overload, bystander effects, the diffusion of responsibility or personal decisional styles (Jones et al. 2001; Butler et al. 2002; Spears et al. 2002; Yechiam & Barron 2003). Social and psychological factors impact online users in their decision to participate or to lurk, how to use the available online resources, how to interact with others and what goals are to be achieved e.g. to communicate, to gain information and support, present oneself or achieve a certain status in the community (Ellemers & Barreto 2000; Douglas & McGarty 2001; McKenna 2008).

Participants' psychological profiles can influence their and others' online behaviour (just as they do in other aspects of life). In any medium, certain people learn to dominate and groups tend to move in directions driven by dominant personalities (Wallace, 1999). Some participants are more impulsive, others more cautious, some don't feel the need to make themselves be heard when others represent their opinions, some feel shy or that they get what they need without intruding.

Results from a study by Nonnecke and Preece (2003) suggest that participants lurk to satisfy personal and informational needs, to maintain privacy and safety, as a response to group dynamics, and to act within constraints. In some circumstances, lurkers may want to post, but they do not feel comfortable to do so or do not feel the need to. Reasons may also be altruistic, that is, lurkers try to be helpful by not posting and not adding to the confusion on an online site or discussion (Haythornthwaite 2009).

A later study by Preece et al. (2004) found that participants and lurkers go online for similar reasons, usually to improve or increase their understanding of a topic, but differ in the expectations as to the outcomes and the benefits of online participation. One of the main differences between lurkers and posters is reflected in their attitudes to the community: many potential users decide that one look may be enough, then decide not to return, and even fewer start to

contribute. Lurkers may actually not intend to lurk from the onset, implying that lurking may be due to the style of interaction they see or experience.

Lurking may also occur if participants do not have the tools, skills or the time necessary, do not understand what they are expected to do, or are not aware of their responsibilities (van der Laar 2010). High levels of connectivity, frequent usage, the availability of and access to information does not mean that online users will necessarily be more social or more knowledgeable (Hargittai 2008). Haythornthwaite (2009) suggests that lurking is the result of information overload. Online participation requires processing capacities – and people only have finite resources for processing. The availability of too much information and social information has measurable impacts both on individual behaviour and social cohesion. The economy of online interactions is likely to lead to an “attention economy” (Davenport & Beck 2002) where the value of attention is given a price and altruistic behaviour is rationed.

A More Positive Definition of Lurkers

Since the goal of most online communities is discussion and interaction, may there be some justification for such a negative view of lurkers? The success of the community depends on active participation and contributions, and measures are often employed so that lurking can be prevented. Yet lurkers often represent the largest portion of an e-participation initiative or community, and may provide key activities, resources and information as well as represent potential future users (Ridings et al. 2006; Preece & Shneiderman 2009; Gossieaux 2010).

Whatever the reasons lurkers have for not participating, it is important to come away from the ever popular definition “selfish free-riders” coined by Smith and Kollock (1999), as ignoring, dismissing, misunderstanding them distorts how we understand online life as well as leading to mistakes in the way sites are designed and policies for increasing participation.

Re-defining lurkers in a positive way requires a clear distinction to be made: lurkers are not non-users. Non-users are those citizens who do not use any information and communication technologies due to reasons such as a lack of financial resources, poor education or lack of skills, emotional reasons (such as technophobia) or simply because they resent using it (Livingstone 2004; van Dijk 2005; Selwyn 2006; Martin & Robinson 2007). Lurkers are not non-users, they do use technology, they do visit sites, but choose to behave and contribute in a different way to the online environment.

Lurking is not only not pejorative, it can actually be a positive and helpful behaviour, to see whether participants concerns are relevant to this community, to receive help and support without having to disclose themselves. Lurkers do have opinions, ideas and able to provide information of value, they may be waiting for the right moment to contribute. Lurking can be seen as acceptable or beneficial, and encourage it as it provides a way for potential new users to get a feeling for how the group operates and what kind of people participate in it.

Lurking can actually be desirable for very busy groups; if all subscribers to a group were to participate actively, it could cause repetition of queries and result in an overload of postings.

There are a number of reasons for seeing lurking as normal behaviour or a form of communication with wide-reaching consequences (Nonnecke & Preece 2003; Takahashi et al. 2003). In addition, people lurk because that is what they enjoy doing.

The Implications for Online Political Communication

E-participation offers the opportunity for citizens to be active, but a narrow understanding of active citizenship and participation may lead to problems in understanding the potential, expectations, impact of e-participation. Katz (1998) pleads that although lurkers are not heard or seen, they should not be disenfranchised as they are the largest group of online users, yet e-participation initiatives and research tend to focus on the visible participation rather than on lurkers (Bishop 2007). In e-business every lurker is a potential customer, may represent potential future users and be the ones who provide key activities, resources and information (Ridings et al. 2006; Preece & Shneiderman 2009; Gossieaux 2010). Lurkers are not citizens who ignore or don't care, and knowing more about lurkers may lead to tools, initiatives and policies that are able to support and citizens with different needs.

Developing De-lurking Strategies

If active participation is the only way that e-participation is deemed as being successful, then de-lurking strategies may be necessary: lurkers as participants may be an initial, certainly easier step requiring less effort than trying to reach the non-users or those who are not at all interested in participation, the "ignorers" (Edelmann & Cruickshank 2011). Understanding the reasons for lurking may lead to different strategies that are able to reduce lurking or make active participation more interesting for lurkers.

Although the online environment has become an accepted part of the lives of internet users, participation depends on the type of people that use them (Hargittai 2007). Psychological research on online behaviour can provide insights which may help increase online participation and successful government interaction between citizens, government and politics. Genuine public participation, deliberation and collaboration can often be impeded by dysfunctional social-psychological processes (Ho & McLeod 2008), including coercion by the majority, reluctance of minority members to speak out because of the fear of other participants' reactions (Noelle-Neumann 1993), communication apprehension and opinion dissonance. Noelle-Neumann's spiral of silence theory postulates that individuals scrutinize their environment to evaluate the climate of opinion before offering their own. Individuals who perceive their opinion to be in accordance with the more popular view are more likely to give their opinion than those who believe their opinion not to be shared by the majority. Over time, this leads to a spiralling process where the perceived

minority is less likely to speak out, whilst at the same time establishing the perceived majority as the dominant one. The social and psychological influences of the group on the individual and the minority need to be recognised and overcome so as to encourage productive social interaction among citizens (Sunstein 2006).

There are different types of users in the online environment, and assumptions made about one group of users should not be generalised onto other groups of users (or all users). Internet user studies have begun to focus more on particular online behaviours, rather than considering all online actions to be uniform (Howard & Jones 2004), but categorizations of online activities have remained relatively broad, making it difficult to understand who does what online, why, and how this influences people's lives (Hargittai 2007). Users need to be identified on the basis of their activities, e.g. Kim (2000), who suggests:

- Lurkers: those who don't post;
- Novices: were once lurkers, and are now members who need to learn about the community;
- Regulars: were once novices, but are now established in the community and are comfortable participating;
- Leaders: the volunteers and members that keep the community running and eventually become elders;

Preece and Shneiderman (2009) use such a classification for the "Reader-to-Leader Framework", which acknowledges different forms of online participation and can be implemented to develop strategies that encourage online participation and collaboration. Each type of user participation is characterised by certain behaviours which (may) need to be changed, encouraged or supported, although users may choose to stop for a variety of reasons (and these are not always known!). Reading (user-generated) content posted by other participants may be the first step towards more active participation. Getting individuals to return is a major, and probably the most difficult step before encouraging them to make a contribution. Acknowledging, recognising, and rewarding contributions can encourage online contributions and brings value to the individual and to the community. Preece and Shneiderman believe that active participation is based on prosocial behaviour, which needs trust and empathy; altruism, reciprocity are also major motivators and need to be encouraged. Identity and name recognition contribute to reputation, which in turn can also encourage altruistic or active "collective" behaviour and participation.

In the context of e-participation, Ferro and Molinari (2009) also identify four types of individuals in the online environment: the "activists" who spend most of their spare time responding to political issues and often create and share their own agendas using blogs, wikis etc.; the "socialisers", who use multimedia extensively but display low interest in politics as such; the "connected" who, are not interested in any of the Web 2.0 activities, due to lack of time and possibly also concerns about privacy and security of personal data; and the "unplugged", typically people with low income, poor education, or marginalized status (immigrants, disabled, elderly), or living in isolated locations (rural areas). This last category still represents a significant part of the European population, with

peaks of 54% in Romania and an average of 40% for the EU. Their research shows that on the one hand that digital inclusion is still an important issue, and on the other hand, that the online world is characterised by heterogeneous behaviours. Furthermore, online tools and applications are only part of the solution: tools need to be embedded in strategies that suit different types of users.

The tools and services need to consider the different kinds of users, the different forms of online participation possible and encourage those elements that facilitate social interaction and reciprocity. De-lurking strategies in e-participation initiatives will need to consider the different roles citizens may want or need to assume.

The Active Lurker

An alternative approach may be to focus on seeing how lurkers are active in the online environment and how this impacts the e-participation initiative. Studies show that the lurker might be not a passive reader, a failure, or a free rider, but a positive participant (Perkins & Newman 1996; Takahashi et al. 2003).

Technology certainly plays a role in shaping the experiences of e-participation, offering opportunities to participating in ways that may not necessarily be visible, yet still have an impact. Active citizenship needs to be viewed in broader terms, including behaviours that are not immediately visible or understood, making citizens who take the time to e.g. read as "active", rather than passive, invisible, unsociable.

This approach views lurkers as being active rather than passive, as goal-driven and employing strategies (what to read, what to save, what to forward, what to delete). Such strategies help the lurkers deal with the information available, identify important messages, decide whether to read or not, decide which threads to follow, and to maximise return on effort (Nonnecke and Preece 2003). Lurking becomes a strategic activity that is more than reading posts: as it can include editing and organising messages for later or others' use, lurking can also be understood as "situated action". As a strategic activity, lurking is driven by the individual's needs and background, their own reasons, needs and type of membership, so that there are different ways of lurking as well as different lurking strategies. Such reasons can be personal (entertainment, curiosity and learning), to satisfy information needs, learn about the group, to maintain privacy and safety, to reduce noise and exposure on the site, to act within constraints and to act in response to group dynamics.

Lurking can be beneficial to the online and offline environment. The invisible activities may have effects outside the online communities and lurkers act as indirect contributors of the online community's influence on its outside environment (Takahashi et al. 2003). Lurkers propagate the topics in an online community to others, use the information or knowledge gained in other environments or for other activities (Nonnecke and Preece 2003).

Willet (1998) and Takahashi et al. (2007) go beyond a simple differentiation between posters and lurkers, and develop the notions of 'active lurkers' and 'passive lurkers'. For Willet, 'active lurkers' are those who make direct contact with posters in an interactive environment, propagate the information or knowledge gained from it, whilst 'passive lurkers' read for their own use only. Based on the assumption that lurkers have a strong and wide influence outside the online community, Takahashi et al propose a method of classifying lurkers based on the actions lurkers take outside the online community, and how the online community may affect their work and thoughts. Lurkers may use information or knowledge for their own activities, decisions and work, and they also represent a resource which propagates information or knowledge gained to others.

Public posting may be one way the community may benefit, but represents only one way of communicating. Lurkers may take something from the community and pass it along to others using different channels, making the active lurkers the hidden asset in online communities (Gossieaux 2010). The lurker is a useful participant, capable of supporting e-participation and contributing to innovation. A clearer understanding of these participants will enable an online community or initiative to occupy a more important position as a resource.

Should De-lurking Always Be the Aim? The Benefits of Lurking

Shirky (2010) emphasises that any activity and any form of participation should be encouraged, as any "banal use" of the online environment (he mentions posting YouTube videos of kittens or writing bloviating blog posts) is "still more creative and generous than watching TV. We don't really care how individuals create and share; it's enough that they exercise this kind of freedom"(quoted in Garber 2010, no page ref). Virtual communities may need a sizable number of members for sustained participation (Blanchard & Markus 2004), and encouraging participation is one of the biggest challenges for any online community.

How do people learn to interact, participate, collaborate and reciprocate online? From the beginning the internet has presented individuals with new rules of social behaviour (Rafaeli, 1986) which not only need to be learned first, but also change over time and with technology. Guides on how to use the tools, how to behave and interact have always accompanied the online technologies, e.g. Spafford's (1993) guide "A Primer on How to Work With the Usenet Community". Such guides help to use internet tools and describe how users, visitors and members are expected to behave, interact and contribute. The community can lose by ignoring lurkers and letting them remain passive, but is the technological assumption that the availability of convenient, instant and inexpensive contact can change the way individuals choose to relate to one another, public administrations and governments? Research on lurkers has provided some suggestions on how to change lurkers' behaviour, but reducing lurking may not always be the best strategy for increasing the impact of online political communication.

Nielsen (2009, no page ref) states that participation inequality cannot be overcome, and that “the first step to dealing with participation inequality is to recognize that it will always be with us. It's existed in every online community and multi-user service that has ever been studied.” Differences in levels and types of participation are always to be expected, and has its functions, as “an artificially enforced even spread of active contribution would definitely result in information overload” (Rafaeli, Ravid, and Soroka 2004). Increasing the number of active posters could cause large amounts of information, at the cost of reading, understanding, and sorting. The shift from lurker to poster is not always the most important or most convenient way to make an online community or an e-participation initiative more valuable. Increasing the number of active lurkers rather than posters may be a more effective approach for increasing the value of an online community. According to Tapscott and Williams (2006), internet participation and collaboration, based on individuals engaging in loose voluntary associations and using internet-based technologies, lead to shared outcomes, but also change the way people interact, business models and government services. Activities such as peering, sharing, socialising, collaborating provide rich and engaging experiences and relationships that encourage the development of innovative communities as well as being beneficial to others. Online participation, communication, production and lurking too will continue to grow with increased access to computing power, transparency, democratisation of data, knowledge and skills. Public posting may be one way of communicating, but lurking may provide valid alternatives.

At the same time, it is important not to fall into the trap of technological determinism. Tools and technology are in part able to sustain online interaction, but is social behaviour that “makes” interaction and participation. Participants choose the tools to be used, recruit others, engage in communication (or not), and promote the behaviour desirable in the community. Participation involves a number of activities, including generating messages, but also reading them and responding to them, organising discussion, offering other(online/offline) activities. Research on lurkers may not necessarily lead to higher levels of visible participation, but reveal how lurkers’ activities may have benefits for democracy and society.

Conclusion

Digital technologies may be able to enhance traditional political participation procedures using for example feedback forums, blogs managed by public sector organisations, e-government portals and mobile government, or e-petitions (Huijboom et al. 2009; Millard 2009b). But it relies on definitions that are too narrow, e.g active citizens as “those who use the Internet regularly and effectively—that is, on a daily basis”(Mossberger 2007) or those who post publicly.

On the premise “that everyone is likely to lurk at least some of the time and frequently most of the time” (Nonnecke and Preece 2003), research on lurkers reveals different styles and levels of online participation, but also the need to

address lurkers, and to investigate their behaviour(s) and impact(s). There are many ways to improve online experiences, some solutions require improved software and better tools, better moderation practices and strategies for facilitating social interaction. In addition, e-participation must allow and acknowledge further online behaviours, forms of interaction, communication, contribution and collaboration. When considering the role of lurkers it is necessary to consider some other issues too. Investigating lurking requires the development of appropriate metrics which go beyond solely capturing visible activity and focus for example on achieving efficacy, needs and individual and community goals. In addition, a number of questions need to be raised such as how active citizens are expected to be? What is the maximum number of participants so as to avoid a messy, cluttered and confusing site? Who deals with all the user-generated content and how?

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