

## Networks for Citizen Participation (CP-Network)

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March 31, 2017

### Citizen Participation nowadays and the use of the Net and the social media

**Citizen Participation (CP)** has reached a new dimension and multiple meanings in the Internet era. Easy access to the Internet and the networks that are created in it, fast, simple and instant communication in virtual communication platforms, the availability of information of all kinds generated by many public and private organizations, groups and individuals, are, among others, factors that contribute to promoting a series of aspects that are at the root of so-called citizen participation. Participation is extensively and mainly studied by a set of the social sciences headed by Sociology and Political Science. Yet, in spite of its increasing importance, especially over the last three decades, **Networks for Citizen Participation (CP-Network)** has been ignored by most academic disciplines. In one form or another **CP** or **CP-Network**, has changed the discourse of the role of the citizen in modern society and has stirred up many of the traditional forms of social and political representation and intervention. At the same time, it has deployed a new range of activities that are still in full "adolescence".

Some of the most notable consequences of these changes are:

- .- The call for greater transparency in political activity through the use of bi-directional informational technologies.
- .- The social pressure that is exerted through social media supported by bi-directional virtual communication platforms.
- .- The real possibility of actively intervening in decision-making processes using these technologies.
- .- Public support for controversial political measures that affect, directly or indirectly, citizens' welfare.

- The emergence of new areas of participation that, either because of their complexity or the resources they needed, simply did not really arise before the Internet.

In this context, the **CP-Network** has been running in different ways:

- Frequently, processes of this type have been undertaken by the pressure of demands not always clearly formulated,
- Multiple experiences have been generated and different technological resources have been used in different ways,
- Knowledge, tools and arguments have been applied but not always in a way that is relevant to the technological contexts,
- or transpositions were forced between radically different contexts.

Therefore, the results obtained were not usually the expected ones, either by their promoters or by citizens. And, in addition, assessment of these results could hardly be attributed in most cases to so-called "**CP-Network**".

### **Why using such simple structures for so complex projects**

In fact, in the case of **CP** via the Net a series of problems and peculiar difficulties arise that are not always taken into account, but which are fundamental (why they are not taken into account, we will see later):

- 1.- Establishing objectives to be achieved as specifically as possible,
- 2.- In what type of virtual structure this should be done,
- 3.- What knowledge we have about methods and processes of **CP-Network** in virtual environments, how they have been validated and what we know about the relationship between the results obtained and the objectives set.
- 4.- And finally a point that should not be here, but that is increasingly important: How to work with real results and not just settle for any result obtained justified by the usual marketing slogans.

All this has to do with two aspects that are typical of the current way of working on the Internet:

- The simplicity of the elemental use of Internet tools contributes to the idea that anything can be done, even if the circumstances are always different from those in the real world, thereby losing the nuances of each particular case.
- If we work in virtual network structures, we are talking about new areas of knowledge and the need to develop new skills. Especially with skills that allow us to work on the relationships among people, mediated by technology. And the generation and management of information and knowledge on the network. The Internet is not a picture, a still one, but a process of information

generation and management in constant evolution. If this elementary Network principle does not apply to projects, then the objectives are usually elastic, to be attained only by arms or by prayer.

This knowledge sometimes (most often) is not there, does not apply or does not exist. And the knowledge originated from previous experiences has often not been systematized, however useful such experiences may have been. This happens because either there hasn't been continuity, or because the technical knowledge necessary to evaluate and discriminate the essential elements in each case in a suitable format for their transmission, is not there. As in so many other facets of life, it is necessary to dedicate time, effort, research and method to gathering this new knowledge, to evaluating it, to classifying it, to organizing it, to systematizing it, to spreading it, to teaching it, to learning it and to preparing it to be applied again. The problem is not solved with clever slogans as if a perfume were being sold.

This, although it is a widespread problem in working in virtual networks, is even more pressing in the case of the **CP-Network** because it is assumed that, in these projects, it is the results that determine the value of the participation processes. And without interpretative work like the one mentioned, the results are always necessarily random and not indicative of what has been achieved, how and for what. In fact, to put it bluntly, in these circumstances, any result is almost always adjusted to what was expected, because nothing specific was expected either.

On the other hand, the simplicity mentioned in the use of the most basic resources of communication on the Internet, has put two principles, which would be impossible and unthinkable in any area of daily life, on a pedestal, although increasingly important like the worst self-help advice: We all can do everything and we all know how to do everything. Both are the pretty gift wrap that now surrounds practically all **CP-Network** projects (and not just these).

But no. Life is not that beautiful or simple. We know this despite wanting to transgress in such an unusual way from our own daily experience. To know what we need to know about citizen participation in virtual network structures and generate what we could call "propitious states for decision making", both by those who promote the initiative and those who participate in it, at least the following steps are necessary:

1. Definition of the objective of the project with the greatest possible precision. We are not good at this, here or practically in any other country. It is the key element in companies, entrepreneurship, public administrations, even families. That is why there are so many business schools dedicated to it, despite which their lack of success is the basis of social irritation and the source of so many failures in collective initiatives or of their survival so distant from the objectives they set out to fulfil. In the case of the **CP-Network** we do not share the same interests, in the same way and at the same time. The Network creates the illusion that this is possible, that *tabula rasa* makes sense, but this is not so. Hence, when things do not work, it is often blamed simply on "lack of participation".
2. Design, development and management of an online virtual working area, that is a knowledge network, are essential to achieving these objectives, by debating, creating resources, applying relevant methodologies, formulating strategies and extracting the new knowledge generated on the basis of the PC-Network specific processes. In other words, participation is built technologically, it is a complex technological construction. Without it, it is difficult (and complex) to have **CP-Network**.

Neither of the two points are achieved or work in the **social media** we already know. Participation in social media is built as an open, ephemeral activity, without prior clearly defined objectives, subject to the "ups

and downs” of personal opinions, where information is difficult to recover and rarely substantiated and documented.

### **Structures for participation, debate, communication and action**

The participation that is intended through citizen intervention for decision making should use **social media** only as a complement to communicate the results of participation built as an activity subject to specific objectives with a vocation of permanence, referenced by opinions sustained by documents, verifiable, recoverable and reusable for different purposes. In the **social media** a bias prevails: “we know, we can do everything” and “we all know how to do everything”. In other words, both the objectives and the process of participation in such networks is not built and there aren’t ways to build it from the virtual structure itself. It is not possible to attain goals, whatever they may be, through preaching, however formidable it may be, or through the propagation of categorical imperatives, however formidable they may be. The **CP-Network** is not the result of an appeal or a mandate, but of the understanding of what is sought and the context that guides the citizens' activity.

Therefore, it is imperative to implement training processes in **CP-Network**, particularly at the municipal level, aimed at elected officials, technicians and civil servants; to train professionals who wish to be trained in the generation of network participation dynamics; to train researchers about the participation processes in online structures, among others.

**CP-Network** is a thermostat of the quality of a society's democratic relations, whatever field it applies to. It opens the doors to nothing less than the democratic quality of decision-making processes, which implies a social reorganization of unpredictable consequences. According to our research, the repeated failure to reach a satisfactory temperature is almost always due to significant deficits in the design and execution of projects of this type following the points mentioned.

Since 1999, we have worked with virtual knowledge social media (**VKSN**), virtual structures of collective work online, designed on the above- mentioned principles, and managed by personnel specially trained for this task, in order to reach the proposed objectives.

This is the basic schematic composition of these networks:

- **Debate** Zone, where all members of the network express their opinions.

- .- **Context** Zone. These opinions are confronted with the state of the art, whatever it may be according to the project, through the provision of documents, reports, interviews with experts, experiences, opinions, follow-up of R & D lines referring to the topics dealt with, relevant cases , critical literature, etc. This work is carried out by the network management team. But as it progresses, network members themselves see the essential value of their opinions, and then they are the ones who take on the management of the network by enriching its content aimed at the objectives set.

- .- **Recovery** Zone. Internet is a numerical (digital) structure and the "natural" way of organizing information and knowledge (I&K) is chronological. In the case of the **VKSN**, its design allows recovery of the generated I&K in different ways, in order to work on it and transform it so it

becomes part of the network knowledge management processes, either by developing new thematic documents, relationships and result maps, new strategies for decision-making, long-term process evaluations, strategic alliance orientation, relationships among network members based on input and interventions, etc. This work is also done, especially at the beginning, by the **VKSN** management team. These products, moreover, are usually made in such a way that they can be applied to other purposes or to other networks ("repurposing").

.- **Results Dissemination Zone**. In fact, it is the means of communication of the **VKSN**, where the outside is informed of discussion processes, the relevant documentation, outstanding interventions, the progression in decision making, etc. The main purpose of this communication media is to create peripheral networks that allow for increasing the impact and learning of the processes of each **CP-Network**.

Underlying this therefore is the organization of the flow of information that constitutes the foundation of what we call the construction of network participation.

### **New professional profiles for new needs**

The **VKSN** requires something fundamental of what is incessantly spoken about, but is not specifically dealt with: the need to have new professional profiles, the professional profiles of the networks era. Along with guaranteeing access to so-called Information Society Technologies and promoting projects of this type, it is necessary to promote the formation of new professional profiles capable of designing virtual structures of network tasks to manage projects such as those mentioned, and to extract the knowledge generated there, as well as to develop, experiment and apply the appropriate methodologies for each project.

The combination of all these aspects guarantees the four pillars of activity in virtual collective networking areas:

\* *Continuity*, or eliminating the leap from the ephemeral to the persistent. In this way the variable of the participants dedication to the projects of collective work online is reduced considerably.

\* *Sustainability*, to minimize the impact of the degree of dedication and the different levels of knowledge of the participants, regardless of when they first acceded to the **VKSN**, applying proven management methodologies, context creation, the production of synthesized materials about what has been done on the network and, above all, the organization of information and knowledge flows in the virtual structure.

\* *Interaction*, to ensure that feedback of ideas, experiences, cases, lines of research, new contributions, etc. are adequately reflected and combined in the debates, in the participatory intervention to create contexts and in the elaboration of knowledge products to obtain applicable results in function of fixed objectives.

\* *Visibility* of everything that is done, both for members of the network and for citizens interested in accessing the materials contributed or created through the network's communication media to apply them to their own circumstances. What you don't see, it does not exist.

In all the **VKSN** we have organized, the participation of network members has never been a problem. The marriage between "goal setting" and "CIN citizens" has always proved to be unbeatable. What are **CIN** citizens? **C**oncerned, **I**nterested Citizens, who **N**eed to reach agreed objectives to solve the issues raised.

Which is the same thing as saying that if the citizen is the main character in the generation and management of information and knowledge, in the definition, creation and evaluation of the policies in which they are involved, then they are part of the decision-making process. As a result, we will have overcome the difficulty of the technological barrier for starting to explore the possibilities and potential of information society technologies (ISs) as part of the **CP-Network**.

### **Citizen participation and social innovation**

At the same time, we will have experienced first-hand that the much-vaunted social innovation is actually the realization of projects conducted by the citizens themselves, for those interested, to enjoy the results, without the need for mediation by external agents who determine how and when to achieve what is intended. If we accept this definition, **VKSNs** are, and function as, authentic machines of social innovation.

In the coming weeks we will examine projects that we have worked on in **VKSN** since 1999, projects which we are currently developing and projects based on knowledge networks in other parts of the Internet planet.

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conocimiento.