

eParticipation needs to be carefully integrated into the complex world of existing participation processes

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*While technical problems can sink eParticipation initiatives, the core challenges are on the social side. **Ella Taylor-Smith** discusses what eParticipation actually means and how it should be evaluated.*



In November 2011, the Scottish Government's [Digital Participation Charter](#) was launched at the misnamed GovCamp Scotland. As a researcher in eParticipation, I was eager to hear the Government's plans. It's not been a strong point to date. The early promise of groundbreaking participatory initiatives, such as The Scottish Parliament's (to be continued) ePetitions system and (discontinued) citizen forums, has not been met by the Parliament or Government.

[A 2005 review](#) of the Parliament's use of technology cautions us to reduce expectations around *participatory* eDemocracy. Since then, while the Government (and previously the Executive) have encouraged and supported eParticipation for young people (through Dialogue Youth and Young Scot), using the Internet to increase people-in-general's involvement in Scottish democracy has stayed on the horizon: Hence the initial excitement about the Digital Participation Charter and hence the resulting disappointment.

Participation has a wide range of definitions and, even when used by the Government, it may at times *not* refer to civic or democratic participation. This proved to be the case with the Charter, which focuses on access: "Digital participation describes people's ability to gain access to digital technology, and understand how to use it creatively. Increased digital participation can improve people's quality of life, boost economic growth and allow more effective delivery of public services".

In January this year, the reports [Digital Participation in Scotland: A Review of the Evidence and findings](#) were picked up by international tweeters and bloggers. My disappointment returned –about the missing concept of civic participation, not disappointment with their research or strategy.

This level of promise, disappointment and misnaming led to a lively discussion on a number of email lists, segueing into discussions about what eParticipation actually means and how it should be evaluated.

The term eParticipation turned up about six years ago to describe eDemocracy activities that were not e-voting and to provide a little distance from concepts of direct democracy, enabled by the Internet. Ann Macintosh provided a good working definition:

"Use of information and communication technologies to broaden and deepen political participation by enabling citizens to connect with one another and with their elected representatives".

eParticipation was identified as an emerging research area and became the subject of networks and literature reviews.

The European Commission seized on this user-friendly term, sponsoring it through their eParticipation Preparatory Action. Their definition is understandably a little more gov-centric:

“eParticipation is about reconnecting ordinary people with politics and policy-making and making the decision-making processes easier to understand and follow through the use of new Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs).”

However, eParticipation has invaded an already busy area – participation – with its own collection of research, practice and definitional discussions. Participation experts at *Involve* give a definition of participation which is a handy starting point:

“Participation is everything that enables people to influence the decisions and get involved in the actions that affect their lives”.

They do not name legislative bodies, recognising that relevant decisions and actions come from many places. Over the last 50 years, concepts of democracy have increasingly highlighted the importance of power structures nearer to people and/or extraneous to government.

Participation research has developed theoretical frameworks and best practice guidelines in this context. The [Pathways Through Participation](#) project uses three broad categories:

- **Public participation** is the engagement of individuals with the structures and institutions of democracy.
- **Social participation** is the collective activities that individuals may be involved in as part of their everyday lives.
- Finally, **individual participation** are the choices and actions individuals make, sometimes referred to as ‘everyday politics’.

While these categories work well in the context of the PTP project, they are worryingly broad and we are in danger of semantic imperialism. [Dahlgren and Carpentier](#) prioritise participation’s “material and actionist dimension” and argue that “participation is strongly related to the power logics of decision-making, whether it is explicit or implicit, formal or informal, minimalist or maximalist and egalitarian or not”.

So, eParticipation doesn’t seem to have derived directly from participation, but definitional relationships are possible. As an academic area, it’s an interdisciplinary field, including contributions from political science, public administration, sociology, information systems, and more.

EParticipation implementations include a wide range of stakeholders: citizens, citizen groups, NGOs, public authorities, technology providers, sponsors and often academic partners. Each brings their own expectations, inspired by their understanding of eParticipation. Project teams need to discuss their goals and priorities in the troublesome arena of democracy in practice, where values and reality struggle to connect, using team members’ different vocabularies and conceptual frameworks.

These difficult discussions need to take place early: a project may begin with diverse paradigms, but promotion requires a shared picture and evaluation requires all objectives to be made explicit. In my experience, citizen-participants prioritise actual change, as their preferred outcome, while decision-makers prioritise representative demographics of participants. Both are interested in good quality ideas.

Moves to consolidate the field take the form of structured literature reviews, networks and the

search for evaluation frameworks that can work with stakeholders' diverse objectives. However, the relevance of the field is challenged by its relationship with participation.

This is conceptualised as "it's not about the e". While technical problems can sink eParticipation initiatives, the core challenges tend to be on the social side. For example, consider the work of local council community engagement workers. This is hard work and skilled work, in difficult contexts: those in power define the topic and processes, but may remain vague about their objectives; citizen participants need to fit in or butt out. EParticipation needs to be carefully integrated into participation processes, a tool, medium or method *within* the complex work of participation. Computerising participation is not a realistic option.

The other challenge to eParticipation's relevance comes from the increasing integration of technology in our everyday lives. The artificial separation of the virtual from the "real" harks back to postmodern ideas about abstraction, alienation and disembodiment, when it's time to look more seriously at technology as part of politics.

Maybe eParticipation is the result of our enthusiasm for the digital age. We look for technical solutions to social problems. From the European Commission's point of view, eParticipation provides a shiny and fashionable way to show that they are actively working to increase democracy. Perhaps the Scottish Government are missing a trick here. Perhaps the *raison d'être* of eParticipation is to [look behind the curtain](#).

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Note: This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of the British Politics and Policy blog, nor of the London School of Economics.

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