

ONLINE PLATFORMS FOR CITIZEN PARTICIPATION: META-SYNTHESIS AND CRITICAL ANALYSIS OF THEIR SOCIAL AND POLITICAL IMPACTS

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ABSTRACT

The technological and communicational development of recent years has led to the creation of online platforms both by governors and by civil society sectors, with the promise of enhancing citizen participation. Despite enthusiastic discussions regarding the issue in different spheres, not enough is known about the real potential of online participation and its effectiveness in the political decision-making process. This article proposes a critical analysis of citizen participation on online platforms, their social and political characteristics and consequences. Two systematic literature reviews (SLR) are conducted on case studies – the first one exclusively in Brazil and the second one on cases all over the world – using the Web of Science, Scopus and DOAJ databases, between 1995 and 2015. Primary results indicate a significant growth in participatory platforms in Brazil and the world, however with more rhetorical than practical effects: the majority of the initiatives are promoted by top-down style governmental electronic portals, with little or no influence in the real decision-making process. This article concludes that power – and not technology – is the key obstacle for effective online citizen participation, whose barriers are nurtured by a traditional political elite with little interest in building a transparent, inclusive and collaborative democracy. A new research agenda is suggested to develop public information transparency indicators – methods to measure the social and political impact of the governmental online platforms – as well as investment in empirical studies about civil society initiatives that could promote solutions for the problems, side effects and contradictions intrinsic to online political participation.

KEYWORDS

democracy; meta-synthesis; online platforms; political participation; systematic literature review (SLR)

PLATAFORMAS ONLINE DE PARTICIPAÇÃO CIDADÃ: META-SÍNTESE E AVALIAÇÃO CRÍTICA DE SEUS IMPACTOS SOCIAIS E POLÍTICOS

RESUMO

Com o desenvolvimento tecnológico e comunicacional dos últimos anos, as plataformas online começaram a ser criadas tanto por governantes quanto por setores da sociedade civil com a promessa de aumentar o engajamento civil. Apesar do entusiasmo das discussões sobre o tema em diferentes esferas, pouco se sabe sobre as reais possibilidades de participação online e

sua efetividade no processo de tomada de decisão política. Este artigo propõe uma análise crítica sobre as iniciativas online de participação cidadã, suas características e consequências sociais e políticas. São realizadas duas revisões sistemáticas de literatura (RSL) sobre estudos de casos no mundo e no Brasil, usando a base de dados Web of Science, Scopus e DOAJ, entre 1995 e 2015. Os resultados das duas RSL são comparados e 179 plataformas são classificadas de acordo com o novo modelo de análise proposto, mensurando a participação política e o impacto decisório de cada plataforma online estudada. Os principais resultados sugerem um crescimento significativo de plataformas de participação no Brasil e mundo, porém com efeitos mais retóricos do que práticos: a maioria das iniciativas são promovidas por portais de governo eletrônico no modelo descendente, com pouca ou nenhuma influência no processo decisório real. Conclui-se que o poder – e não a tecnologia – é o principal entrave para a efetiva participação cidadã online, cujas barreiras são cultivadas por uma elite política tradicional pouco interessada na construção de uma democracia transparente, inclusiva e colaborativa. Sugere-se uma nova agenda de pesquisa voltada para a elaboração de indicadores de transparência das informações públicas, o desenvolvimento de métodos para a mensuração do impacto social e político das iniciativas governamentais e o investimento em pesquisas empíricas sobre iniciativas da sociedade civil que possam revelar soluções para os problemas, os efeitos colaterais e as contradições inerentes à participação política online.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE

democracia; meta-síntese; plataformas online; participação política; revisão sistemática de literatura (RSL)

INTRODUCTION

Taking into account the problematic legitimacy of the political and electoral models, new digital technologies have been adopted in order to modify the contemporary political scenario. The adaptation to digital media by governors and citizens has allowed the emergence of initiatives aimed at reducing the gap between civic participation and political protagonists. However, questions about the role of citizens remain, namely whether if their role is genuinely reinforced by the use of digital platforms and if the decisions taken by administrators are influenced by such online political participation.

In addition to social networks or websites, which at certain times end up constituting a stage for public debate, there are online platforms¹ exclusively created to allow and/or encourage the public to engage in political issues. They work based on people's motivations to stand up for their rights, to discuss and to vote, or by simply facilitating access to information and to the government. Such is the case of DemocraciaOS² – a free software developed in Buenos Aires to broaden public participation in political decision making, and of Code for America³ – an open-code technology and networks association to make the “government services simple, effective and easy to use” for US citizens.

The objective of this paper is to identify types of participation experienced through online platforms and the impacts of this participation in the decision-making process

¹ In this article, it is assumed that an online platform is an electronic space composed of html pages, links and resources that enable actions and interactions in the virtual environment of the internet (Jiang & Xu, 2009).

² DemocraciaOS official website. Retrieved from <http://democracyos.org>

³ Code for America official website. Retrieved from <http://www.codeforamerica.org>

of public managers. The research question is: to what extent are the political decisions taken by governors influenced by citizens' participation in online platforms?

Hence, two systematic literature reviews (SLR) were conducted, the first had a global scope and the second limited to Brazil, in order to identify how the issue had been studied within different contexts of the scientific community, the characteristics of the cases studied, research questions, methods and conclusions reached to date. The systematic review enabled a comparative analysis between the worldwide and Brazilian scenarios, as well as allowing a meta-synthesis of the results (Nye, Menlendez-Torres & Bonell, 2016). Thus, these two reviews provided a selection of 44 articles for comparative analysis and meta-synthesis.

Subsequently, the Assessment Model for the Online Political Participation is proposed in order to measure the existing types of engagement and their consequent impacts on decision-making. This model was applied in all the case studies found in the articles of the SLRs, excluding those articles that presented a number of platforms impracticable for analysis and those that were published by the same author on the same case, thus avoiding a duplicate count of platforms. In this final assessment, after this exclusion, we considered 35 articles and 179 cases studied both in the world and in Brazil.

SYSTEMATIC LITERATURE REVIEWS IN THE WORLD AND IN BRAZIL

For this paper, it was decided to use the systematic literature review (SLR), an appropriate methodology to organise primary studies, maintaining the necessary transparency and thoroughness in accordance with pre-established criteria and definitions. Following the instructions of Brereton, Kitchenham, Budgen, Turner and Khalil (2007), all the decisions over the course of the process are reported, allowing them to be reproduced and compared in future studies using the same method.

For the first SLR, of a worldwide scope, the main collection of the Web of Science (WoS)⁴ was used as the database and some pilot tests have been conducted in the search to assess combinations of terms. The expressions defined [(*politi* participat* OR politi* engage* OR civic participat* OR democra* OR citizen**) AND (*technolog* OR internet OR platform* OR online*)], were found in 434 articles after simultaneous application of the following filters: time stamp - between 1995 and 2015, considering that internet began to be broadly disseminated in civil society in the mid-1990s; only scientific papers, which are the main sources of primary research; only in the article titles.

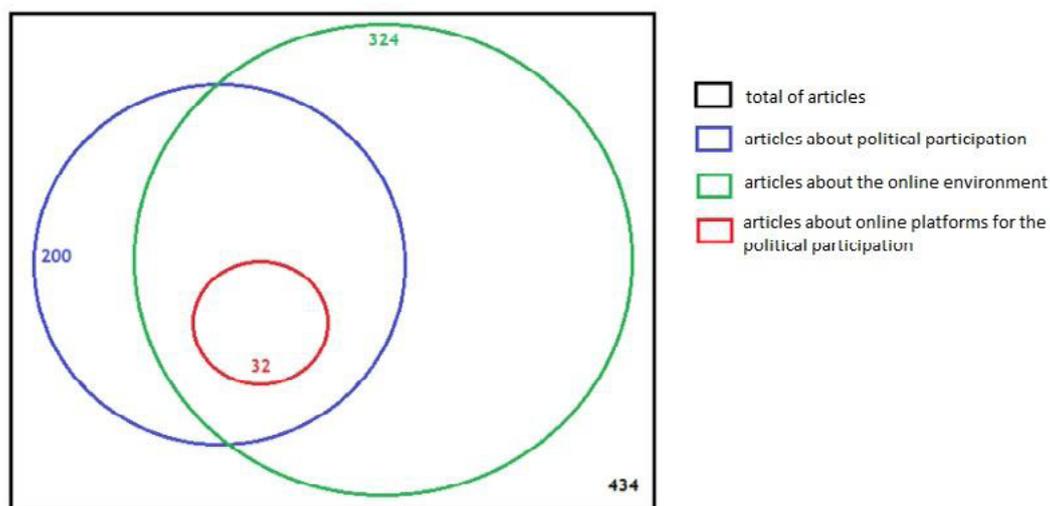
The next step involved the analysis of all 434 titles, abstracts and keywords found, assessing them in accordance with previously defined inclusion and exclusion criteria in question form. These were:

1. does the article address the political participation or engagement of citizens?;
2. does the article address online media, the Internet or ICT?;

⁴We are aware that the focus on WoS excludes publications using the book (chapter) format.

3. does the article analyse citizens' political participation using online platforms, social networks or any other online tools in general?;
4. does the article present empirical research based on one or more case studies of online platforms designed to promote citizen political participation?

By applying the criteria to the abstracts, keywords and titles of the articles, it was found that almost half (200) of the articles address the political participation of citizens, while the majority (324) address the internet or online environment in general (see Graphic 1). Those that failed to match the first two criteria deal with an array of issues related to the development of education and citizenship, newspaper content analysis, public policy theories, and consumerism or user behaviour on social networks, for example.



Graphic 1: Empirical research into online platforms designed for citizens' political participation

Where the two initial criteria overlap, which covers studies about the internet and political participation, 171 articles were found. Of those, 139 address general aspects of the usage of the online environment or social networks, which corresponds to the third exclusion criterion. In the end, 32 articles were defined as pertinent to this study, presenting empirical research into online platforms designed for the political participation of citizens.

For the second SLR, with a nationwide scope, some of the criteria were maintained and others were altered in order to suit the specific characteristics of the Brazilian scenario. An initial search in the same database of the previous review, the main collection of the Web of Science (WoS) brought rare examples of Brazilian cases. Therefore, the search was expanded to all its collections, which includes the SciELO Citation Index (SciELO CI) (Packer, 2014), as well as Scopus⁵ and the DOAJ (Directory of Open Access Journals)⁶.

⁵ Scopus: *Quick reference guide*. Retrieved from https://www.periodicos.capes.gov.br/images/documents/Scopus_Guia%20de%20refer%C3%Aancia%20or%C3%A1pida_10.o8.2016.pdf

⁶ Directory of Open Access Journals. Retrieved from <https://doaj.org/about>

These pilot tests were conducted separately in each database, as they have different search processes and, therefore, the same term expression could result in different number and quality of papers. In the WoS, the analysed expressions were identical towards the first SLR, filtered for Portuguese language, between 1995 and 2015 and only articles. In the Scopus and DOAJ search, it was necessary to include the search terms not only of the titles, but also of the abstracts and keywords. Unlike the tests in the WoS, the expression that brought the highest number of pertinent articles was that with reduced terms: [(*politi** OR *participat**) AND (*internet* OR *online*)], a language filter for Portuguese, only articles, between 1995 and 2015.

Gathering all the documents selected from each database, five from each, and excluding those that were found in more than one database, there were 12 pertinent articles obtained in total. The data extracted from the articles analysed in the two reviews are presented and compared in the following section.

COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS AND META-SYNTHESIS

The results of the two SLRs, one covering Brazil and the other worldwide, revealed some differences and similarities between the global and national contexts, in relation to both their research characteristics and the platforms found (Table 1):

	FIRST SLR (SLR 1)	SECOND SLR (SLR 2)
Scope	Global	National (Brazil)
Database	Web of Science Main Collection	Web of Science, Scopus and DOAJ - all collections
Total Pertinent Articles	32	12
Research Areas	Communication (12), Government and Law (eight), Sociology (five), Information Science (four), Computer Science (four), Studies of the Area (four), Public Administration (three), Engineering (two), International Relations (one), Urban Studies (one)	Communication (three), Government and Law (one), Sociology (four), Public Administration (three), Political Science (five), Economics and Business (three)
Origin of Platforms	Governmental (13), Mixed (10), Non-governmental (nine)	Governmental (11), Mixed (one)
Initiative Model	Government Portals (nine), Governmental Discussion Forums (four), Non-governmental Discussion Forums (seven), Opinion Consultation (three), Participatory Platform (five), Online Poll (two), Online Petition (one), Voting Advice (one)	Government Portals (four), Governmental Discussion Forums (three), Opinion Consultation (four), Participatory Platform (one)
Research Questions	Citizen-Platform (21), Government-Platform (two), Platform-Government-Citizen (six), Platform only (three)	Citizen-Platform (five), Government-Platform (one), Platform-Government-Citizen (six)
Research Methods	Content Analysis (25), Comparative Analysis (15), Questionnaire (nine), Interview (four), Experiment (two)	Content Analysis (12), Comparative Analysis (five), Questionnaire (one), Interview (two)

Table 1: Comparative analysis between first and second SLR

The first discrepancy emerged in the data search, requiring a more in-depth analysis, in addition to the main Web of Science collection, in order to find a significant number

of Brazilian journals. This reveals a question of knowledge policy: either the cases from Brazil are not being studied by the international community and/or Brazilian authors are failing to achieve deep penetration in one of the world's biggest databases. The quantity and relevance of Brazilian cases are limited, as well as the capacity and inclusion of Brazilian researchers in the WoS main collection. According to Packer (2014), the Brazilian scientific community still needs to promote major efforts to enhance quality, especially in its journals and research funding agencies, in order to attain greater international exposure.

By analysing the publication data, it is observed that 10 documents published between 1995 and 2005 were selected in the worldwide SLR. The Brazilian SLR generated only one article, considered relevant in the same timeframe of analysis. However, the increased production on this subject is clear in both reviews, with 14 articles in the first SLR and seven in the second, published between 2010 and 2015.

Regarding the research agendas, other differences can be highlighted. The first SLR presented no articles in the areas of Political Science or Economics and Business, whereas the second brought a majority of articles in these two areas. No Brazilian article was found in the areas of Information Science, Engineering or International Relations, while more than three articles from the first SLR fell into each of these areas. Furthermore, Government and Law is one of the most frequent areas in the first review, but in Brazil there is only one article included in this field. Other areas such as Communication, Sociology and Public Administration are found in both reviews.

The origin of the platforms is the other divergent piece of data when comparing Brazil to the rest of the world. While in the first SLR we found a balanced distribution in the case studies, with 13 government platforms, 10 mixed and nine non-governmental platforms, in the second review, 11 were governmental, one mixed and none of the platforms were created by sectors of civil society alone. As to the initiative models, both present a majority of governmental models – nine in the first and four in the second SLR – followed by discussion forums and public opinion consultation.

It is important to stress out that no examples of non-governmental discussion forums were found in Brazil, whereas seven were found in the global SLR. Cases of online voting, petitions and voting advice were also only found in the first review. This reveals that political participation platforms based on diverse kinds of origin and models are studied around the world, whereas in Brazil non-governmental cases are not studied by academics or simply do not exist in numbers comparable to governmental platforms.

In terms of the research questions identified in the articles, both reviews found a majority of analyses about the relationship between citizen and platform, the characteristics and use of technological tools to favour civic participation, or the relationship between platform, government and citizen, in terms of interaction between political representatives and citizens through online initiatives. Another similarity between the two SLR relies on methods: content analysis is the most common methodology in the selected articles. The second most frequent method is comparative analysis.

In addition to the comparative analysis, it is possible to identify advantages and disadvantages of online platforms according to their impact on political engagement, uncovering more similarities, differences and even complementary characteristics between the cases studied in the two reviews. Both globally and in Brazil, governmental websites seem to view the citizen as a simple consumer of information and public services (Liste & Sorensen, 2015; Polat & Pratchett, 2014; Saylan, 2009), establishing a government-to-citizen type of relationship and a model that bears little or no traits of being participative in a largely unexplored digital democracy (Pinho, 2008; Rossini, 2014; Silva, 2005).

State surveillance and control, with government websites reinforcing political propaganda, was only highlighted in the first review (Jiang & Xu, 2009; Polat & Pratchett, 2014). Moreover, studies from both reviews are beginning to glimpse advances in participation, as websites are being increasingly designed to look after citizens' needs (Welp, 2008), as underlined by Marques (2010) in the case of the Brazilian Chamber of Deputies' web and its variety of participation mechanisms available to users.

Some advantages are found in the cases of online discussion forums in studies both in Brazil and abroad. The erosion of spatial, temporal and financial barriers seems to facilitate citizen participation and debate in the digital arena (Klein, 1999; Westholm, 2002), while subjects closely related to those that directly affect the lives of citizens can help in the deliberative process (Sampaio, 2012). Shen and Liang (2015) identified that most users of the forums studied stand more as information consumers, than they actively contribute to the debate, while Miola (2009) highlights the existence of individual and hierarchized dialogues, focused primarily on the state-citizen relationship and barely on the citizen-citizen one.

As Musso, Weare and Hale (2000) point out, both types of communication should be encouraged: vertical, with access to political representatives, and horizontal, with interaction between users. In an overall perspective, online discussion forums studied around the world produce a low level of deliberation among users (Hung, 2003; Loveland & Popescu, 2011; Strandberg, 2008), yet in Brazil, cases with a high degree of argumentation and respect were identified, representing a good indicator of deliberation (Sampaio, 2012).

Online public opinion consultation involves the same advantage in both reviews: the possibility of connection and partnership between governors and citizens, with greater exposure to the democratic principles and civic education (Balla, 2014; Mendonça & Amaral, 2014). However, one of the most troubling aspects is revealed in the case of the Belo Horizonte Digital Participatory Budgeting, where the consultation results were not taken into account, the meaning of the tool was lost and the loss of credibility caused by its ineffectiveness led to diminished participation (Abreu & Pinho, 2014).

In the cases of participatory platforms, several advantages were found in both contexts. Pickard (2008) believes that they enable the practice of different forms of democracy, while Wells (2010) identifies greater levels of attraction among youths to the models of free interaction. Penteado, Santos and Araújo (2014) consider that the influence

of citizens in political decisions relies on networked models by such participatory platforms. This is the case of the *Rede Nossa São Paulo*, a civil society movement that uses digital technologies to interact and develop projects with its members and partners. Working with both public and private sectors, it plays a decisive role with political representatives. Studies also highlight that, from the first SLR, most the platforms studied are not the result of collaborative effort between citizens and public agencies (Desouza & Bhagwatwar, 2014) and few are bidirectional tools, in which citizens actively participate in decision making (Steinmann, Krek & Blaschke, 2005).

Furthermore, digital exclusion is still considered one of the main problems in terms of its effect on civic participation in online platforms (Desouza & Bhagwatwar 2014; Maia & Marques, 2010; Oliveira & Rodegheri, 2012; Sampaio 2012; Saylan, 2009; Welp, 2008). Another limiting aspect for the inclusive dimension of participation deals with the dominance of privileged citizens, who have higher levels of education, income or political interest in the online platforms (Balla, 2014; Mambrey, Neumann & Sieverdingbeck, 1999; Mendonça & Amaral, 2014; Ribeiro, Costa, Costa & Ribeiro, 2013; Sani, 2004; Sopol, 2001; Strandberg, 2008; Tettey, 2001; Westholm, 2002).

Considering the quantitative and qualitative aspects of the studied online platforms, there is a noticeable need for more in-depth critical analysis of the effective impacts of citizen participation on the deliberative process and on political decision-making. The next part of this article considers some of the existing assessment models of political participation and a new model is proposed for subsequent classification of the data found in the reviews.

ASSESSMENT MODEL FOR ONLINE POLITICAL PARTICIPATION

In general, the assessment models found in the articles of the SLR (Arnstein, 1969; Gomes, 2005; Jiang & Xu, 2009; Smyth, 2001) have very few stages of participation, with a limited scope and few theoretical definitions. Moreover, they were developed from a governmental perspective and, therefore, fail to comprise bottom-up participation, from the citizens to the government.

The format for classifying political participation, which has become established in academic and institutions circles, should not be seen in a rigid or definitive manner. Considering their restrictions and flaws, a new assessment model (see Figure 1) was developed with the aim of standardising the studied cases and analysing them in accordance with a single and non-hierarchical, more complete, realistic and critical indicator:

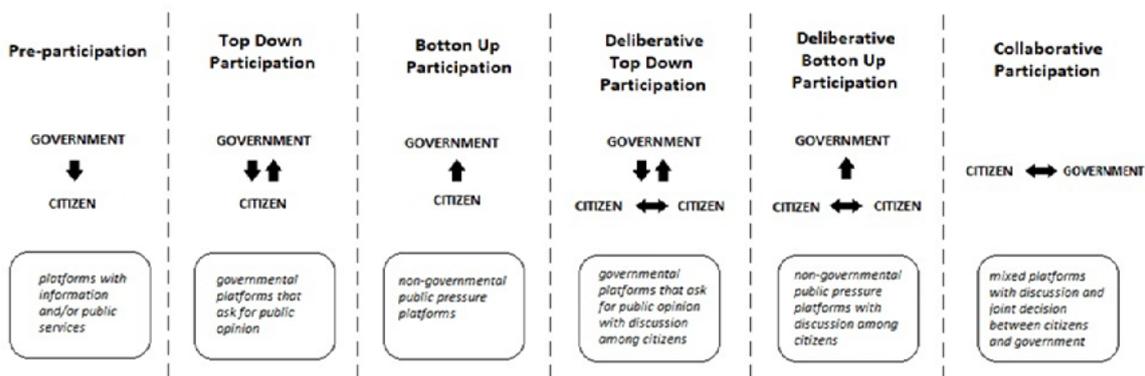


Figure 1: Online political participation assessment model

Based on the cases studied in the two SLRs the online political participation assessment model includes categories that are entirely compatible with the platforms found, thus ensuring that no types of participation were found to be superficial or merely theoretical. The forms of participation are presented in a non-hierarchical perspective and may differ according to the origin of the platform: created by the governmental sector, represented in the model by the term “government”, or by the non-governmental sector, with the latter covering all layers of civil society, social movements, NGOs, private institutions and the common citizen himself, represented in the model by the term “citizen”. The flow of information between the two segments is demonstrated by the arrows, both vertical and horizontal, unidirectional and bidirectional.

The model presents six categories of participation: pre-participation, in which the citizen is informed and does not actively participate; it is primarily represented by government portals that present news of government actions and programs in a vertical, unidirectional manner, as well as supporting access to public services; top-down participation, with a vertical, bidirectional flow, where the citizen participates in reaction to government request, expressed in the cases of online public opinion consultation; bottom-up participation, in which sectors of society have the autonomy to create an online platforms, such as online petitions, collections for campaigns or legislative bills resulting from popular initiative; deliberative top-down participation, in which the government asks for public opinion with spaces for online discussion, following a simultaneously vertical and horizontal flow, in publicising the platform and in the citizen debate process; is represented by governmental discussion forums and online participative budgeting; deliberative bottom-up participation, similar to the last category, but with initiatives promoted by sectors of civil society, involves an horizontal flow of discussion among citizens to subsequently lead to possible feedback to the government; it is represented by non-governmental online discussion forums that allow users greater freedom to create topics, participate and deliberate; finally, collaborative participation, as partnerships between segments of civil society and the government are created, having in mind platforms for horizontal and bidirectional information flow, with the decision-making power split between them, such

as in the cases of mixed participatory platforms, organised by public institutions, political representatives, academics, activists, experts and other interested citizens.

The main distinction found in this model deals with the separation between governmental initiatives and citizen-led ones, highlighting the autonomy of societal sectors in different formats of participation, including deliberative participation. Citizen autonomy and deliberation, essential aspects that characterise participation (Prieto-Martin, 2010) are clearly represented in the proposed assessment model. Nonetheless, there are some recognisable limitations, such as the difficulty in evaluating social, cultural and economic dimensions of the participation. As it is based on the cases found in the two SLR, the model also tracks the limitations of the review method used, not allowing for a complete coverage of all the platforms in the world or in Brazil – the model might be considered insufficient for classifying other platforms that were not studied by the articles reviewed in this research.

RESULTS

Unlike the analysis conducted in the SLR, the evaluation proposed in this model considers all identifiable cases studied in the articles. There were limits to this analysis, because of the excessive number of platforms and the lack of specific information about each one, such as in the article by Musso et al. (2000) about 270 municipal portals in California or in that by Shen and Liang (2015) about the 103 political discussion forums from 75 different countries.

For similar cases published by the same author in different articles or with similar results, only one of the cases was assessed to avoid any double counting of platforms. From the worldwide SLR, we should highlight the following articles: on the public opinion consultation about China's health system reform, analysed and published by Steven J. Balla, in 2012 and 2014; on the online voting process in the Arizona primaries, published by Solop (2001) and Gibson (2001); on the online participative budgeting forum, in Belo Horizonte in 2008 (Sampaio, 2012; Sampaio et al, 2010). This was the only one considered in the assessment of the Brazilian articles. The three different editions of the same budgeting forum in 2006, 2008 and 2011, studied by Cunha, Coelho and Pozzebon (2014) and Abreu & Pinho (2014) were considered once. After applying these exclusion criteria, 25 papers were collected from the first review and 10 from the second, to assess a total of 134 platforms from around the world and 45 from Brazil.

All the 179 platforms were then categorised in accordance with the online political participation assessment model. However, the mere organisation of the platforms into different types of participation would not *per se* suffice to allow for the evaluation of the consequences of each participatory intervention in the political decisions:

since the political institutions develop virtual participation platforms to enable interaction between representatives and those they represent, control and monitoring of political activities, it is pertinent to ask whether this

opening up of the institutional political structures to participation of the civic sphere is effective, in the sense of ensuring to the citizen the opportunity to influence various decision-making processes. (Rossini, 2014, p. 119)

For this study, the analysis was conducted to determine if the proposed assessment model works, enabling the distinction between those platforms that integrate citizens' participation and those that actually apply such suggestions to the decision (public consultation, the execution of projects voted for in participatory budgeting, or the application of solutions developed by citizens in discussion forums).

The following tables show the quantitative results of the assessment, taken from the articles of the two reviews – SLR1 (Worldwide) (Table 2) and SLR2 (Brazil) (Table 3) –, the types of participation based on the proposed model and the decision-making impact of each platform. The platforms that influenced the political decision were classed as “yes”, those that had no influence were counted as “no” and when the impact was not evaluated by the authors or not clearly exposed in the article, it was defined as “N/A”.

	CASES FROM SLR 1 BY CATEGORY OF PARTICIPATION	DECISION MAKING IMPACT: YES	DECISION MAKING IMPACT: NO	DECISION MAKING IMPACT: N/A
Pre-participation	37 (27,6%)	0	2 (5,4%)	35 (94,6%)
Top down participation	30 (22,4%)	1 (3,3%)	1 (3,3%)	28 (93,3%)
Bottom up participation	2 (1,5%)	1 (50%)	0	1 (50%)
Deliberative top down participation	28 (20,9%)	6 (21,4%)	1 (3,6%)	21 (75%)
Deliberative bottom up participation	35 (26,1%)	3 (8,6%)	0	32 (91,4%)
Collaborative participation	2 (1,5%)	2 (100%)	0	0

Table 2: Assessment of cases from SLR 1 (Worldwide) according to the online political participation assessment model and the identified decision-making impact, in amount and percentage

	CASES FROM SLR 1 BY CATEGORY OF PARTICIPATION	DECISION MAKING IMPACT: YES	DECISION MAKING IMPACT: NO	DECISION MAKING IMPACT: N/A
Pre-participation	35 (77,8%)	0	34 (97,1%)	1 (2,9%)
Top down participation	0	0	0	0
Bottom up participation	0	0	0	0
Deliberative top down participation	20 (9%)	0	2 (22,2%)	7 (77,8%)
Deliberative bottom up participation	0	0	0	0
Collaborative participation	1 (2,2%)	1 (100%)	0	0

Table 3: Assessment of cases from SLR 2 (Brazil) according to the online political participation assessment model and the identified decision-making impact, in amount and percentage

In both cases, pre-participation is supported, representing 27,6% of the total articles from the first review and 77,8% of the articles from the second. The decision-making impact of the vast majority of the platforms from around the world was not demonstrated in the respective article and only two cases were assessed as having no influence on the political decision: the national and municipal governmental electronic portals of Turkey, through which citizens cannot participate in the decision-making processes (Saylan, 2009). In the articles from the Brazilian authors, only one did not have its impact confirmed. According to the analysis of the Presidency of the Republic's website, it was not possible to find "sufficient elements to assert the existence of artifices aimed at encouraging the political engagement of citizens in the discussion or even in the production of decisions about public policies" (Marques, 2010, p. 128). Official websites from Brazilian state capitals (24) studied by Silva (2005) have shown few possibilities for citizens' participation and influence in public decisions.

In the category of top-down participation, 30 platforms were found in the first SLR, the majority of which were not analysed by the authors in terms of impact on decision-making. This is the case with an article which evaluates all the governmental portals of the 18 Latin America countries and considers seven of them (Argentina, Bolivia, Brazil, Chile, Colombia, Panama and Peru) as the most advanced in terms of symbolic spaces for interaction with the government, but without identifying the political results of participation in those platforms (Welp, 2008). In the case of online voting in the 2000 Arizona primaries, concurrently, there seems to have been a direct impact on the decision, contributing toward increasing the active influence of the city's citizens (Solop, 2001). In the studies of the second SLR no examples of top-down participation platforms were found.

The next category – bottom-up participation – is the least represented in the first review, with only two cases: the online petition promoted by Italian newspaper *La Repubblica* (Vaccari, 2011), in which the media initiative is seen as an extension of its editorial campaign and the decision-making impact is not assessed. Move On, a platform created in the USA, considered by Pickard (2008), as effective in giving voice to an under-represented electorate and influencing specific policies, with popular direct actions such as anti-war petitions and collections for pro-peace policies. Once again, there was no Brazilian initiative for this category of participation.

Examples of deliberative top-down participation were found in both reviews, with 28 cases worldwide and nine in Brazil. There are examples in eight governmental websites of Chinese provinces, which offer chat platforms and discussion forums (Jiang & Xu, 2009) and in one Virtual Legislative Community of the E-Democracy portal, of the Chamber of Deputies of Brazil, which allowed people to debate and contribute to the development of a legislative bill about the *Marco Civil* (Freitas, Lima & Lima, 2015). Only two studies present the decision-making impact of the platforms. The first one, the online discussion forum of a US Transport Department agency, which opened a planning process to citizens and, at the end, enhanced its action strategies based on the participants' comments (Stanley & Weare, 2004). The second one is the article about the lack

of decision-making impact in the public consultation of the Minas Gerais Legislative Assembly in 2011, which served more to fuel public debate on a relevant issue than to “subsidise members of parliament in a decision” (Mendonça & Amaral, 2014, p. 197).

For the deliberative bottom-up category, no cases were found in Brazil, while 35 cases from the first SLR presented civil society initiatives involving online discussion. Most of the analysis missed on the impacts of the participation on the decision-making, such as in the 18 participative platforms of US cities, where the citizens create and interact with one another to discuss problems and find solutions. In this case, Desouza and Bhagwatwar (2014) highlighted that the decision to implement the solutions remains in the hands of the public, without exposing any effective influence on the decision. Whether in the case of the online forum created by an association of citizens from Boston, Klein states that it was likely that decisions taken by local representatives had been “influenced by the fact that the local citizens had organised themselves in relation to the issue, attracted substantial public interest and pressured the legislators” (1999, p. 218).

Finally, the category of collaborative participation is represented by two cases in the worldwide SLR and one case in the Brazilian SLR. In the paper by Desouza and Bhagwatwar (2014), only two of the 25 platforms analysed in the US cities were classified by the authors at the final stage of the collective intelligence model, where the information flow is bidirectional, and the solutions developed by citizens are implemented in partnership between them and their governors. Whereas, in Brazil, Penteado et al. evaluated numerous examples of actions by the *Rede Nossa São Paulo*, and concluded that despite the limitations of pressure actions on the State, “it can influence the agenda, the implementation and evaluation of public policies” (2014, p. 229). Collaborative participation, as a category, involves a great importance to the democratic process, bearing in mind that analyses of all its examples confirmed some influence in the political decision-making. Nevertheless, the platforms represent a very small sample when compared to the other categories. It is possible to assume that this category is far from being important in modern society or simply academics do not feel attracted in this study.

The few examples of bottom-up participation in the first review also reflect the lack of studies of, or initiatives for, direct civic participation, such as petitions and other formats of public pressure without prior discussion. The high number of platforms that enable deliberative bottom-up participation may indicate that citizens are more focused on promoting discussions and debates rather than pressuring the governments to promote citizens’ deliberation.

In the assessment of the Brazilian studies, the categories of top-down, bottom-up and deliberative bottom-up participation were not represented by a single platform, whereas those classified as pre-participation were the majority among the studies. Moreover, the types of participation repeated among the papers are: four analyses of the Digital Participatory Budgeting of Belo Horizonte and another four about the Chamber of Deputies’ portal. Hence, it is observed that the few governmental initiatives that go beyond Pre-participation offer spaces for discussion and interaction between citizens and/

or governors, yet these are limited to very few cases. Non-governmental platforms, on the other hand, seem to have been neglected by academia or do not exist in sufficient number for analysis.

The standout point in this evaluation is the lack of analyses by the authors regarding the decision-making impact of the investigated platforms. As we know, the influence of one action on another should not be measured only by using a positive or negative category, but the purpose of this simplified questioning is precisely to check that the impacts of the civic engagement on the political decision-making are being assessed. The effectiveness of participation is ultimately evaluated by the authors' judgement, rather than sustained on ground-based conclusions. Those evaluations seem to be superficial and tend to be followed by an explanation about the government's decision-making power: "the decision to respond to or incorporate the viewpoints of the citizens relies in the political decision makers and the politicians who can choose whether or not to be receptive" (Tettey, 2001, p. 144).

Few articles tried to establish a relationship between social aspects of participation and government actions in this regard. Platforms are not studied in-depth. Most of the articles seem to convey the authors' perceptions, rather than a well-defined set of parameters of evaluation. Despite the complexity of the study towards the decision-making process, there is an urgent need for more critical evaluations. It is also fundamental to avoid naïve assertions about increased political participation and to support the construction of assessment indicators with a level of participation that is more compatible with their actual impacts.

FINAL REMARKS

Although internet has provided different expectations, in terms of its political impact, this paper seeks to assess the possibilities of political participation through online platforms and its real impact on decision-making processes. The growing adaptation of governors and citizens to digital environments has allowed the creation of various platforms with the promise of increasing civic participation in political matters. However, it is pertinent to question to what extent the use of these platforms is truly capable of broadening the political role played by citizens and influencing the decision making of the authorities.

Two systematic literature reviews were designed to map the empirical studies about online platforms for civic participation around the world and in Brazil. From the 434 articles found in the first SLR, 32 were selected for quantitative and qualitative analysis, as were 12 papers selected from the Brazilian review. From these, 179 platforms analysed by the articles were categorised according to the new online political participation assessment model revealing its impact on the decision-making process.

Considering the results, it is observed that most of the platforms found in the two SLRs are governmental initiatives that foster a top-down information flow (Liste & Sorensen, 2015; Polat & Pratchett, 2014; Rossini, 2014; Saylan, 2009), with some possibility

for interaction and discussion between citizens and governors (Balla, 2014; Marques, 2010), but little or no influence on the political decision-making process. Taking into account this sample, 8% of the cases in Brazil and the world were evaluated as having some impact on the final decision, whereas 22% had no apparent impact and 70% were not analysed by their authors in terms of influence on decisions. On one hand, the evident lack of impact analysis hinders assessment of the initiatives and, on the other, such analysis is limited by the lack of feedback from governors and transparency in the results of the participation, thus complicating the researchers' efforts to correlate citizen demands to the decision of the political representatives.

Thus, one of the most crucial aspects of this article deals with the argument that participation represents little more than opportunistic rhetoric on the part of political representatives. Several online governmental initiatives communicate a promise of promoting civic participation, but are, in practical terms, complex, closed platforms, controlled and monitored by their managers and with very little or no feedback about the result of the participation, characterizing a kind of "participation washing". Furthermore, behind the so-called participatory processes, informal hierarchies and other disguised power structures can be hidden, acting in an authoritarian manner and in the interest of small groups. The rhetoric of participation promoted by governors may result in an environment of elitist citizenship, a false politicization, and an example of manipulative participation and the rise of a new kind of populism.

There is another problem for civic participation in politics: the lack of total transparency of public data. It is only possible to participate efficiently in political matters if the information related to the public sphere is fully available and accessible for citizens to use and understand. However, governors seemingly have yet to accept the commitment to be held accountable by society for their own actions. In the 2001 second Global Forum, the government's role should go beyond creating technology-enabled websites with basic services and information (Jardim, 2000). Investment is required to increase genuine transparency of public information and political education in order to instil a greater understanding of citizenship and create a culture of broad and conscientious participation. Undoubtedly, such investments involve complex planning and considerable financial outlay for the state, both in the implementation of new technologies and staff training for information management, and in the educational projects for the whole population. The problem, however, seems to go beyond the financial conditions; it lies in the governors' interest in opening political processes to the citizens.

According to Jiang and Xu (2009), online structures are not naturally participative tools; they rely directly on the political and cultural environment in which they are involved. In this regard, with an authoritarian, conservative political model still in force in Brazil, new technologies have not been used to their full potential and the best experiments have been those aimed at increasing tax revenues ((Pinho, 2008; Sampaio, Maia & Marques, 2010). This lack of governmental incentive for online platforms to enable civic political engagement is explored in the studies of both the reviews. These analyses

conclude that government representatives, in both Brazil and the rest of the world, appear averse to creating and maintaining such initiatives. Citizen participation in decision-making signifies power sharing, a diminished role exercised by those public agents and the loss of control over the public agenda (Freitas et al., 2015; Marques, 2010; Stanley & Weare, 2004).

The results of this study indicate that online political participation is not only a technological question, but also a question of power. The efforts to enable effective political participation in online platforms go far beyond the creation and implementation of new digital platforms. On the government's part, it is necessary to create control and audit agencies to guarantee transparency and accountability of political acts; to shape the financial conditions for the development of political education; and, primarily, to renounce the rhetorical discourse and share decision-making powers with the citizens. As for the citizens, they need to encourage the creation of bottom-up initiatives and counter-power mechanisms; to acknowledge their responsibility to press governors for transparency in the decision-making process and control government actions; to disseminate information and develop interest in political issues so that they can claim their democratic rights.

The scientific community also has a fundamental role to play in the development of online political engagement: It must apply a research agenda that encompasses analytic and critical studies of the practices, uses and concrete results of citizen participatory platforms, especially of the platforms created by the sectors of civil society. The need arises to create methods and indicators, which can measure the effectiveness of the online participation in political processes around the world, in their different contexts. It thus becomes even more urgent to develop empirical studies into the transparency of public information and the uses of the technology itself to generate fraudulent results, among other possible strategies to manipulate online participation for the self-legitimation of political agents in the light of the crisis of representativeness and authority that characterises the modern world. ✍

Translation: Rose Marie Santini and Hanna Carvalho

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