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Tensions in online communities for eParticipation

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Introduction and Motivation

A vast majority of eParticipation studies focuses on the use of ICT-based services in conjunction with traditional communication channels (Criado, Sandoval-Almazan, & Gil-Garcia, 2013). Only few of these eParticipation initiatives have achieved their intended aims (Sæbø, Flak, & Sein, 2011), and many remain local or small-scale (Medaglia, 2012). In this landscape the Italian Five Star Movement's (M5S) use of Online Communities (OC) to encourage direct citizen participation in politics represents an exceptional example, where more than 35,000 participants are engaged online in daily collective activities and decisions (Federici, Braccini, & Sæbø, 2015). Using OC is a common strategy to involve citizens in political decision-making, allowing groups of people to easily connect on-line, cooperating on common and shared interests (Faraj, Jarvenpaa, & Majchrzak, 2011).

OC are under the effect of internal and external forces. The literature uses the concept of tension to describe the conditions that these forces produce on the OC (Faraj et al., 2011; Kane, Johnson, & Majchrzak, 2014). Tensions are inevitable for an OC, being produced and reproduced by the very nature of OC themselves (Kollock & Smith, 1996) through the continuous co-presence of both the individual and the communal dimensions (Hutter, Hautz, Füller, Mueller, & Matzler, 2011). Resources flow discontinuously inside communities, and at any moment there are alternative competing possibilities for decisions, objectives, aims, and actions in the OC (Faraj et al., 2011). Being inevitable, tensions cannot be resolved permanently, but have to be managed (Faraj et al., 2011). Since few researchers have addressed the issue of governing tensions in OC (Faraj et al. 2011; Huang et al. 2015), and none did that in the eParticipation domain, we identify and discuss in this paper tensions within OC for eParticipation purposes. Our work is motivated by the following research question: *which tensions affect OC for eParticipation?*

Theoretical Background

An OC is a persistent collection of people who share common interests and goals, and who mainly communicate through the Internet (Preece, 2000). In an OC members cooperate on, if, and when, they agree that this is better for them and for the OC itself (Olson, 2009). The communication flows ongoing

over the digital channels used by the OC to enable the collective action of members (Ostrom, 2000). Structuring and managing the community to stimulate a group action and avoid the adverse outcome of independent actions is challenging (Ostrom, 1990). Inside the community there is a coexistence of an individual and a collective rationality (Kollock & Smith, 1996), which poses challenges to the collective action of the community.

The organization of communities for collective action is usually an uncertain and complex undertaking, in which boundaries and internal characteristics must be established (Ostrom, 1990). To obtain outcomes out of a collection of people communicating through the Internet, the community shall be organized and coordinated accordingly (O'Mahony & Ferraro, 2007). A governance structure is required to establish a good climate for contributors (Markus, 2007). Various roles are represented (Butler et al., 2002) and change dynamically throughout the process (Faraj et al., 2011). OC rely on new channels to connect with stakeholders (Ren et al., 2012) and provide venues for social discussion.

The concept of tension is used by the literature to identify challenges, internal or external to the OC, that have to be managed for the community to reach the intended aims (Ågerfalk & Fitzgerald, 2008; Hutter et al., 2011; Kozinets, Valck, Wojnicki, & Wilner, 2010). Tensions will lead the OC in unstable conditions, oscillating between two different and competing states, and need to be managed to ensure community survival over time (Faraj et al., 2011). When used for eParticipation strategies, the openness of OC frictions with the strictures of institutional participation processes. Specific tensions arise that should be carefully managed (Federici et al., 2015).

Research Design

This work is part of an ongoing research project started in July 2013, focusing on collective action in OC. The empirical setting investigated is that of the M5S, an Italian political movement born from an OC that uses this OC to involve citizens directly in the action of political institutions.

The empirical setting was investigated through a qualitative research strategy with semi-structured interviews (approximately 13 hours of recorded material) and archival data (internal documents, web pages, and observations of online platforms). The interviews were conducted with nineteen members of the OC, distributed across the following stakeholder groups:

- Eight M5S *representatives* among parliamentarians and local-councillors;
- Eight *certified subscribers* of the M5S;
- Three *voters* who declared to have voted for the M5S in the 2013 elections of the national parliament.

All of the semi-structured interviews were recorded, transcribed and analysed individually by the authors, who iteratively discussed the results of their individual analyses to compose a mutually agreed-upon interpretation. Interviewees were asked to report on difficulties within the M5S OC, and in the interplay between such community and the organizational setting of the institutions (e.g. councils of municipalities, regional parliament, national parliament) in which representatives of the M5S sit and operate. Archival data and observations data were also included and triangulated (Eisenhardt, 1989) to strengthen the relevance of the knowledge gleaned from interviews, archival data, and used ICT tools.

Following this interpretative approach, the research team identified tensions letting them emerge from the data without adhering to any *a priori* constructs. The resulting ideas were later analysed in light of current related literature to identify how the study added to existing research.

Case context

The OC that in 2009 gave birth to M5S emerged in 2005 around the blog of Beppe Grillo, one of the founders and prominent member of the movement (Sæbø, Braccini, & Federici, 2015), and grew up throughout the years connecting an increasing number of people.

The M5S OC is formed by people who subscribed to it: subscription is a voluntary process performed online, and is mandatory to fully participate to the collective action of the OC. Applications are evaluated and approved by the M5S staff. Upon approvals applicants are 'certified' and have full access to the M5S OC. Applicants who are 'not yet certified' have their subscription on a pending status, and have limited access to the community in the form of restricted actions they are entitled to perform online. At the time of the

data collection the M5S OC connected about 100,000 certified subscribers, with 700,000 more subscriptions on a pending status, and with an average of 30,000-40,000 members regularly participating. People inside the community are organized in groups active across Italian territories, and continuously interact with representatives, contributing to their work. Representatives are at the same time OC members, and also sit in institutions: since they are strictly obliged to follow OC decisions, they are named internally ‘spokespersons’.

Discussing preliminary findings

Based on the analysis, we identified eight tensions. They are briefly introduced in table 1 and further discussed below.

	Tension	Definition
1	INERTIA vs ACTION	OC can be in the tension between the inertia (when people are not acting or doing nothing), and action (where instead people are taking actions in the community).
2	CONTENT vs GARBAGE	Interaction among members in the OC is targeted to achieve a specific outcome (i.e. a decision, the production of a knowledge asset). In any given moment, the community can rely on useful contents and then it moves towards this target, or be immersed in loads of useless contributes (garbage) and it drifts without a specific route.
3	PUBLIC vs PRIVATE ACTION	The use of internet technologies allows OC to reveal information to the external environment or not. Hence, there is a potential tension related to the level of openness (public actions) and the level of confidentiality (private actions).
4	GROUPS vs WHOLE	OC are not monolithic entities but are composed by sub-groups. These sub-groups live inside the community sharing the same environment, but may also create micro-environments. It arises a tension when norms, values, processes or tools of the OC clash with that of the sub-groups.
5	SPEAKER'S CORNER vs CONFERENCE	The tension is about the possibility to allow anybody to participate to the OC in contradiction to the possibility of restricting the participation due to selection processes.
6	TRANSPARENT vs OBSCURE	In OC there is a tension between transparency, where information on roles, rules and activities are communicated openly and explicitly to everyone, and obscurity, where such information may be only implicitly, indirectly and vaguely communicated.
7	LIQUID vs SOLID	The tension here arises by the contrasting needs of keeping the OC liquid – by maintaining flexibility to dynamically adapt roles, rules, processes, and allowing exceptions from such if needed –, and of reaching a solid state, where such regulations are stable and recognisable over a long period of time.
8	US vs THEM	When OC interact with external institutions (e.g. other communities, governments, political parties), it either receives/put pressures from/to the environment, producing a tension which in the end may make the OC re-ensemble the environment/institution, or the other way around.

Table 1: Tensions in OC for eParticipation

An OC can at any given moment, be in a state resulting from the tension between Inertia and Action. People inside the OC might act to achieve the objectives of the community, or they might do nothing resulting in an OC remaining silent and inactive.

The activity of the community is subject to the influence of the tension between Content vs Garbage. OC are goal-oriented entities. When they are in motion and actions take place, such actions could generate targeted and useful contents in relation to the goal, or contents of no use for the aim of the OC (here defined as Garbage).

Furthermore, production can be targeted to fulfil the OC needs in general, or to fulfil particular needs within the community itself, not necessarily aligned, or even contrasting, with those of the whole community. To this regard, the actions of the OC are subject to the tension of Public vs Private actions. In a community oriented to Public actions, contents are available for everyone, inside or outside of the OC. In a community oriented to Private actions, contents are available only inside the community, often only in specific areas or for specific groups within the OC.

Action takes place in the OC and its sub-groups. If sub-groups are present, their actions may proceed according to common rules and using the same tools of the entire community, or instead the sub-community may adopt its own rules and tools. To this regard OC are subjects to tension between Groups vs Whole.

Contents production may be open for everyone to contribute, when everyone being interested may contribute to OC action. In this case, the community works just like a speaker's corner: whoever has something to tell may do so. On the contrary, OC may have rigid rules and standard procedures for allowing members to contribute, where members are required to fulfil programs and procedures before their contributions are accepted or added to the community's actions. OC are hence impacted by a tension we have named Speaker's Corner vs Conference.

Information and procedures involving issues like how to join the OC, which roles and responsibilities are present, and how to contribute may be transparent and clear to all members (and potential members) of the OC. On the contrary, working dynamics and rules existing in the OC might be ambiguous and difficult to identify, making it more demanding for members do not know exactly what to do and how. OC may then experience the tension of Transparency vs Obscurity.

Internal processes and routines may be rigid and enforcing, leaving OC members with no other alternative than to fulfil them before being able to take actions. On the contrasting side, processes and routines may stay flexible and liquid, allowing for freedom to bypass or dynamically change existing rules, or to create new ones. The OC is therefore under the influence of the Liquid vs Solid tension.

OC have boundaries and external environment, and works specifically to distinguish between what is part of the OC and the what is external to the OC. The OC are related to external entities, such as government organisations, political parties and/or other OC. These relationships involve exchanges through communication and actions. Here, there may be differences in how the OC work in relation to the external entities. While the OC need to communicate externally, they are still in need for creating and defending an identity being different from that of other institutions in the environment, to make it recognizable. Therefore, the OC are influenced by the tension of Us vs Them, describing how the community relates with external entities and the environment.

Conclusion and further work

The M5S use of OC is a peculiar unit of analysis to understand eParticipation studying how communication services addressing a huge potential number of citizens (like OC), may create more participatory, open and transparent political discourse. Our study shows that the action within an OC and its interplay with the surrounding environment create challenges and tensions. These tensions arise from the differences among values, rules, and routines internal to the community and those of the organizational setting the community has to interoperate with.

Our results need to be confirmed by further studies, to elaborate on our knowledge on how eParticipation services can be designed to achieve the intended aims, knowing that tensions are there. From the literature we learned that technologies used on OC have action capabilities that allow to achieve desired objectives (Faraj et al., 2011). An interesting avenue for further research is to investigate if and how mechanisms based on such capabilities influence tensions, by either reducing or increasing their impact. Future studies are also needed to better articulate how such studies on tensions may inform research on digital governments. Issues to explore include more knowledge on how tensions compare and contrast with what we already know about dynamics of online communities, to contribute thorough knowledge on digital government. On the same route, it will be important to focus on the identification of implications for practice and research, including discussions on how to balance these tensions within eParticipation projects, from technological as well as organizational points of view.

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