

# Deliberative Community Network: enriching e-Participation by supporting e-Deliberation

Fiorella De Cindio, Antonio De Marco

University of Milan, Dept. of Informatics and Communication  
via Comelico 39, I20135 Milan (Italy)  
fiorella.decindio@unimi.it, antonio.de.marco@rcm.inet.it

Community networks -- as conceived of in the 1990s (Schuler, 1994), i.e., as virtual (or online) communities whose shared focus of interest are 'public affairs' in a given territory -- have provided a framework for collecting civic intelligence (Civille, 2000; Schuler, 2001), for developing people projects (De Cindio, 2004), and for promoting public dialog among citizens themselves and between citizens and local institutions. They have been quite successful in creating a public square fostering participation, they often failed to make an actual impact on local institutions' decision-making process (Luisi, 2001). Among the others, three reasons behind this difficulty have been:

1. Local governments often prefer to see city sites or portals as a further channel for distributing information and offering interactive services (e-government) rather than as a shared platform for supporting and enhancing a direct relationship with citizens and their involvement in the decision-making process;
2. There is a lack of software solutions conceived and designed to support e-participation;
3. Participation is burdensome and time-consuming. When not adequately compensated (especially in terms of being listened to and being taken into consideration), it brings frustration, saps motivation, and leads people to give up..

However, theoretical studies as well as empirical evidence, motivate the shift from government (and e-government) to governance (and e-governance): the complexity of modern society cannot be managed, even at the local level, without direct involvement of all the elements of the local society (see, among the others, OECD, 2001; Riley and Riley, 2003; Censis, 2003; and Bobbio, 2004).

Although the political willingness to involve citizens in the deliberative processes still remain the key factor for the success of any participatory processes (this was for instance the clear outcome of the field research performed in preparation of the "Call for selecting projects to promote digital citizenship (e-democracy)." issued in 2004 by the Italy's Ministry for Innovation and Technology; see De Pietro et al., 2004) the role that the appropriate use of appropriate software tools can play should not be underestimated. . Indeed it seems that (see, e.g.: ECe-govUnit, 2004; De Cindio and Sonnante, 2004), the complex social process of people participating in public decision making has typically been supported by software solutions often conceived and designed for different purposes and for a different audience (e.g., more familiar with computers). E-participation seems so complex that people have so far tended to use well-known and consolidated applications in order to reduce risk. As a result, the support that ICT might offer for managing participation often gets lost and the vision that the net could support a sort of 'contamination' of representative democracy with elements of direct democracy is, by consequence, questioned.

The goal of the work we have undertaken is to contribute to overcome this situation. Instead of supporting participation by reusing existing software, we have undertaken the development (i.e., the design, implementation and testing) of a socio-technical, computer-enabled, trusted environment for e-participation enriched with deliberative tools.

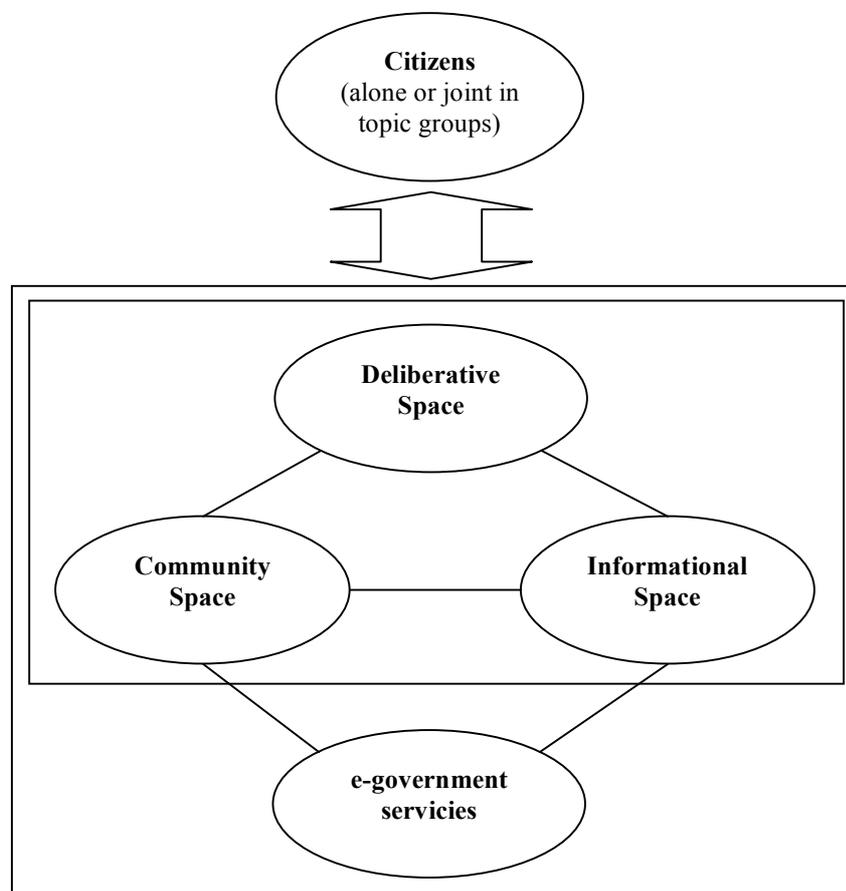
We call such environments *deliberative community networks* (DCN for short), so as to stress that their main goal is to overcome the limitations of community and civic networks by introducing deliberative facilities that provide support for the decision-making process. DCN are designed to foster the evolution of the classic e-participation concept, essentially based on a community- network driven environment, into a new consultative-deliberative paradigm, designed to finalize the discussion to produce a shared position among the participants.

The design of such environment draws inspiration from actual participatory experiences. Two are the main source of inspiration: firstly, Bobbio's (Bobbio, 2004) report on inclusive public policy; secondly, the deep analysis of the main steps of a local Agenda 21 process undertaken for submitting the e21 project ("e21 for the development of digital citizenship in Agenda 21" to enrich established local Agenda 21 participation processes by using a suite of ICT-based applications) then funded under the above mentioned Italian Call.

Deliberative community networks (whose logical architecture is presented in the Figure) allow citizens, who join together in well-defined **topic groups** where a particular issue or a specific problem is brought up, to use tools that conceptually belongs to different spaces:

- **community space:** tools to communicate and carry on open-ended discussions which facilitate the rise of mutual trust;
- **informational space:** tools to facilitate information sharing, including facilities for collecting information provided by citizens to support group activities;
- **deliberative space:** tools to foster the creation of a shared vision position among the group members.

On this basis we have designed DCN logical architectural according to the figure outlined above.



The *deliberative space* represents the core of the participatory system. Experience shows that, especially when inclusive policies are to be put into practice, the participatory process will need to rely on a variety of interdependent tools, which involve different groups of social actors. All these tools have the following constituents in common:

- **Defining the actors**, i.e. the citizens who are to take part in the deliberative process;
- **Framing the issue** by collecting informational material to support the deliberative process;
- **Producing a shared position** that summarizes the outcome of the deliberative process.

The DCN platform, in its first implementation, consists of five deliberative tools, i.e. five deliberation modules, each of which meets different needs:

- **Deliberative brainstorming** fosters the germination, the refining, and the selection of ideas and proposals.
- **Online deliberation** is used for structured debate that is regulated by a pre-established protocol suitable for formats such as a consensus conference.
- **Group-decision support** supports group decisions with mathematical algorithms for choosing a proposal within a set of alternatives under consideration.
- **e-Consultation** polls the opinion of a relevant number of people allowing them to choose among a set of pre-established alternative possibilities.
- **News board** keeps track of the participatory process when it 'leaves' the system.

Since a participatory process is unlikely to take place entirely within the confines of a single session and using only one deliberation method it is therefore necessary to have the chance to create outright *structured participatory processes*, divided into clearly distinct phases, each of which relies on a specific deliberation tool. The **deliberative process-building module** is designed to serve this purpose, allowing the creation of *deliberative workflow* by applying the tools provided in the three service areas. This allows those who set up the participatory process to rely on a flexible environment that can be molded to the specific features of the issue being dealt with.

A first implementation, of a subset of the functionalities provided by DCN has been used for supporting public discussion in the occasion of the Municipal elections scheduled in Milan in Spring 2006. The lessons learned during this quite successful experiment (De Cindio and al., 2006) provide interesting hints for discussing research issues on e-deliberation as well as for evaluating its concrete feasibility.

## References

- Bobbio, L., ed. (2004) *A piu' voci - Amministrazioni pubbliche, imprese, associazioni e cittadini nei processi decisionali inclusive*, Edizioni Scientifiche Italiane. (in Italian). Available at [http://www.cantieripa.it/allegati/A\\_piu\\_voci.pdf](http://www.cantieripa.it/allegati/A_piu_voci.pdf)
- Censis (2003) *7th Report on Digital Cities in Italy*, February 2003. A summary is available at <http://www.censis.it/censis/ricerc.html>. (in Italian)
- Civille, R. (2000) *Community Networks Get Interesting: A Synthesis of Issues, Findings and Recommendations*. Report of the Art Portalis Project Strategic Planning Retreat. Center for Civic Networking. Available at: <http://www.civic.net/ccn.html>.
- De Cindio, F. (2004) "The Role of Community Networks in Shaping the Network Society: Enabling People to Develop their Own Projects," D. Schuler and P. Day (eds.), *Shaping the Network Society: The New Role of Civil Society in Cyberspace*, MIT Press.
- De Cindio, F. A. De Marco and L. Sonnante (2006) "The election period as an opportunity to increase e-participation in a local community," to be presented at *Toward e-Democracy: Participation, Deliberation, Communities*, Mantova, October 24th-26th, 2006.
- De Pietro, L., F. De Cindio, and A. C. Freschi (2004) *E-democracy: modelli e strumenti delle forme di partecipazione emergenti nel panorama italiano*, FORMEZ (in Italian).
- EC e-gov Unit (2004) *Seminar Report eDemocracy*, organized by the eGovernment Unit, European Commission, Febr. 12<sup>th</sup>-13<sup>th</sup>, 2004, Available at: [http://europa.eu.int/information\\_society/programmes/egov\\_rd/doc/edemocracy\\_report.pdf](http://europa.eu.int/information_society/programmes/egov_rd/doc/edemocracy_report.pdf).
- Luisi, P. (2001) "Tre buoni motivi per considerare finita la rete civica (così come l'abbiamo sempre conosciuta)," P. Luisi (ed.), *Le reti civiche in Italia. Punto e a capo*, Quaderni di Comunicazione Pubblica, CLUEB, Bologna (I) (in Italian)
- Riley, T.B. and C.G. Riley (2003) "E-Governance to E-Democracy: Examining the Evolution," Prepared under the auspices of the Commonwealth Secretariat and co-sponsored by the Telecommunications and Informatics Program, Public Works and Government Services Canada. Available at <http://www.electronicgov.net>.
- OECD (2001) *Citizens as Partners: Information, Consultation and Public Participation in Policy-Making*, OECD Publishing.
- Schuler, D. (1994) "Community Networks: Building a New Participatory Medium," *Communications of the ACM*, 37(1): 39-51.
- Schuler, D. (2001) "Cultivating society's civic intelligence: patterns for a new 'world brain'," *Journal of Information, Communication and Society*, 4(2).