"Online political participation and its critics"

Call for papers (Ph.D students and young researchers)

"Online political participation and its critics" is the conference organised by young researchers as part of the international symposium of the Research Network DEL. Its goal is to understand the current outlines of "electronic democracy". Given the multiplicity of discourses and the plasticity of political and social experiences claiming "electronic democracy" its very definition has been challenged for more than fifteen years.

In parallel, the technical developments of the Internet and the terms used to designate them - web 2.0, social web, participatory web, and so on - encourage questioning "electronic democracy" in its ability to identify theoretical and epistemological practices of digital networks based on the idea of increasing participation in democratic processes.

Specifically, the aim of this conference is to examine the discourses and political practices of the Internet, and the concepts used for their analysis from three axes that follow.

Axis 1. Theoretical and ideological debates on political participation online

From the 1980s, the information and communication technologies have given rise to a plethora of political discourses. Generally oscillating between revitalization of democracy and economic benefits expected from divers experiments, they have been the subjects of numerous studies based on various theoretical approaches.

Given the current development of digital networks, their increasing appropriation by people and their institutional recognition through specific public policies, this axis examines firstly, the ideologies and norms that underlie online initiatives of political participation and secondly, the debates and theoretical models built to analyse such initiatives.

1. Ideologies and norms

Although many considered electronic voting as able to fight the widespread abstention in most of the Western countries, this belief was contradicted by almost every empirical research study on its rare and well-publicized experiments. The current uses of digital technologies seeking to change or challenge the conditions of exercise of power seem to exert a similar fascination often far from any questions about their ideological or normative bases.

For example, the current enthusiasm for the open data movement, which is embodied - at least in France - in scattered initiatives carried out by local authorities, questions once again the relationship between transparency and opacity that has always structured the functioning of the State. Both in stakeholders' discourses and in public policies set up in various countries, are we witnessing a reactivation of the *technicist* belief in transparency and "openness" as solutions of disaffection with politics, in addition to economic benefits that they are supposed to raise?

Also, this axis aims at examining, more generally, ideologies, conceptions of the State, politics, democracy, citizenship and participation underpinning various initiatives supported by digital technologies – whether they are public or private, formally organized or not – aiming to change or challenge the current conditions in the exercise of power.

2. Theoretical models and new concepts

Beyond the initial research focused on the "impacts" of information and communication technologies on democracy, many models and theoretical frameworks have questioned how various forms of political participation could be supported by the digital practices of information and discussion. This continually increasing range of practices - especially related to the development of social networks

and platforms of collective production of content - raises a series of questions and stimulates a reflexion on a possible need for new concepts to analyse political phenomena that could find their source online.

So, is it still possible to study political participation online with the concepts used for "traditional" political participation and within the frontiers of such disciplines as, for example, political science, or the sociology of the media, both reticent to examine politics or the sociology of mobilization still somewhat reluctant to study digital phenomena? To what extent could studies based on, for example concepts such as "digital cultures" be useful to understand the political practices taking place on the web?

More generally, should we consider "electronic democracy" as a simple variant of "participatory democracy"? In that case, to study electronic democracy, should we use the traditional dichotomy between "participatory democracy" introduced from above, which includes increased access to information and participation in the development of norms at the initiative of public institutions, and "contra-democracy", especially characterized by continuous monitoring of representatives by the represented? This two-tier approach of participation refers to various conceptions, sometimes divergent, of digital technologies and more particularly of the Internet, which cannot be considered simply as an instrument of representative democracy. More precisely, what references and what categories of analysis should be used to grasp the technical dimension of political phenomena while some of them seem to occur only through digital networks?

Axis 2.New forms of political discourse, new spaces of politicization?

This axis is about the online "political discourse" in its diversity and within multiple digital spaces (websites, blogs, social networks, etc.) whether they are managed or not by institutions.
On one side, institutions and politicians build new online practices that lead to reconsidering how the contents of public actions initiated by local, national or international authorities spread. How do such practices participate in the transformation of political discourse? How do they act on the discussions between politicians and citizens or between citizens themselves, and on the unequal sharing of powers and knowledge among them? What does it show about the ranges and the forms of contemporary public and political communication? On the other side, politics have now entered digital social spaces, both through politicians and individuals who produce and share various contents. How do digital social networks contribute to keeping citizens informed, to their politicization, or to the constitution of an online "public"?
More generally, to what extent are these evolutions in public and political communication transforming political participation?

1. New forms of political discourse
The way discourse is made public is evolving. As well as forms of online presence now being considered as traditional (such as website) politicians and institutions are facing new communicational challenges. For example, they have to manage the growing pressure imposed by the necessary adaptation of their communication strategies to these online environments. But they also need to be able to manage the resources that such environments offer. Politicians have to adapt their strategies to face their need for reactivity in order to be "visible", and to stage their initiatives, their projects or themselves in order to be in people's discussions and disseminate their ideas. At the same time, the release of raw data linked to governmental activities, and the growth of groups able to process it, take part in the evolution of how the results of public policies -at every governmental level-have entered into the public sphere.
How do the messages of politicians and institutions spread into the various digital spaces? How does the integration of constantly changing digital services (Facebook, Twitter, Tumblr, Flickr, Pinterest,

Youtube, Dailymotion, Spotify, Foursquare, etc.) into their repertoire of actions affect its content and the public it is addressed to?

How can the constantly growing amount of data and information circulating online (visualization, mapping, computer graphics) be made accessible to interpretation, therefore to criticism? Has the web become a crucial source of information for citizen (if yes, which ones)? Are we facing new forms of political participation and information?

2. Politics elsewhere

Since its definition by J. Habermas, many debates, criticisms and new definitions have been generated by the concept of "public sphere". Various authors have underlined the multiplicity or the fragmentation of spaces in which forms of public expression progressively occurred, forms that cannot be reduced to simple procedural conception. Others consider that there are various arenas where public issues can both emerge and be constructed.

Regarding the development of digital networks, questioning forms of public expression other than the rational-critical discussion seems necessary, as well as considering that "counter-discourses", or even "counter-publics" can emerge. Indeed, the increase of "web 2.0" technologies, with its numerous spaces for interpersonal conversations, allows contents produced by users to circulate. These new environments for discourse appear in various static or dynamic spaces where private conversations are mixed with public discourses, multimedia resources of the web with traditional textual, audio or video contents. Even if they were never established for good, how can the boundaries of politics be established when those between public and private spheres are constantly affected by the evolutions of these digital devices? Could this give rise to new forms of politicization of individuals? And in what conditions could they occur? For example, discursive forms using humor, cynicism and irony, but also new visual and more creative ways of individual or collective expressions: do they represent ways of access to a political universe? Is it a sign of citizen empowerment? To what extent can visiting such digital social spaces lay individuals open to -or lead them to be interested in politics?

Axis 3. New actors, new reconfigurations of political power ?

This axis questions the place of digital networks, both within existing organizations of the public sphere and within new types of movements which have recently emerged. Indeed, citizens, activists groups with varying degrees of formalisation, or even certain new types of political parties with uncertain territorial binding make good use of digital opportunities to promote their ideas and to express critical views against institutional and partisan organizations that have embodied political engagement until now.

1. New actors, new *go-betweens*, new cooperations?

Partisan organizations and political or administrative institutions have integrated digital technologies into their communication and action *repertoires* in order to arouse citizen interest and to mobilize their voters . This calls into question the place of expertise, the division of roles within these organizations and the professionalization processes that can be generated. The development of applications and services based on the "web 2.0" requires firstly rethinking information circulation processes within these organizationsn and secondly appealing to external agents - from the business or the non-profit fields or even to citizens - , thus possibly leading to new forms of collaboration.

For instance, are political parties becoming "firms" run by marketing concepts and practices, or citizen organizations revitalized by an active online participation? Or even "cyber-parties"? Symetrically, activism lines seem to be blurring : are boundaries between party members and sympathizers dissolving? More generally, to what extent could hierarchies and roles within traditional organizations be challenged by these new individuals sought after because of their know-how and expertise?

At the same time, "*fact checking*" practices are being renewed and new forms of journalism based on "*data telling*" are appearing, as well as other forms of cooperation between "former" and "new" actors in the production, dissemination, circulation and the criticism of political information. In addition to being reactive (when posting a comment or a tweet) and autonomous (when feeding their own blogs), connected citizens are now able to challenge traditional media by being "curators" online. A broad range of new curation tools (storify, scoop.it, paper.li, etc.) thus contribute to blur the frontiers between journalists, citizens, experts and amateurs. What are their sociodemographic profiles and their career backgrounds? Are they a new form of critics? How do such practices disturb the traditional *gate-keepers* of the political and media space?

2. The digital, the ballots and the Street

The use of the Internet by various groups and movements in order to make visible their social initiatives or to question public authority is not a new phenomenon, as was seen in the alternative globalization movement in the early years of the 21st century. However, and without judgment on the 'real' effects of the use of social networks in the Egyptian, Tunisian, Libyan and Syrian revolts, the question can nevertheless be raised on the real likelihood of changing the decision-making of a country or its political regime through contestation that is organized on a wide range of digital spaces.

Through the variety of genres and formats used (pictures, videos, diaporamas), the notion of "transmedia" campaign could be analyzed with the help of case studies or of theoretical discussion. This new kind of campaign is not a multi-media declension of a traditional campaign (*cross-media*): the message is initially generated around different media and formats (mobile, website, online social networks, video, pictures, applications, etc.). Does the *transmedia* trend constitute a structural evolution of campaign patterns? Does this definition also work for other revolt movements, like the "*Indignados*" movement in Spain in 2011? Was the "Occupy Wall Street" movement not conceived in this "global" perspective? The *happening,* announced ahead of time on the media and on online social networks, then happens live – in front of microphones and cameras but also through online live-stream, live-tweet, through geo-location on Foursquare or Facebook – before being restituted.

Among the "non-traditional" organizations that this sub-section could examine, we can also mention the American *netroots,* these online activism networks with a transnational focus (*Avaaz, Change.org, All Out, Move on,* for instance): these somewhat light structures relatively unknown by the general public whose activities are found principally in the digital space and nevertheless count millions of members. They follow the American tradition of the *community organizing* culture and lead to effective changes in public policies. In spite of their media coverage, these recent examples have been relatively overlooked in the academic literature, even in the USA. To what extent do these new structures collaborate or compete with traditional organizations?

To submit a proposal
This call for papers is addressed to young researchers: doctoral students and researchers who have graduated in the last five years.

The proposals (between 10 000 and 15 000 signs) with an abstract (1500 signs) should be sent to stephanie.wojcik@u-pec.fr

Papers can be written in French or in English. Proposals should be submitted by **September 17th 2012**.

The authors will be notified of the results on **October 22 2012**. The final papers should be sent by **April 5th 2013**.

The final paper (between 40 and 45 000 signs) with an abstract (2000 signs) can be written in French or in English. The papers presented during the conference will be published.

International symposium of the DEL research network - June 2013

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Schedule
Deadline for Proposal : September 17, 2012
Notification to authors October 22, 2012
Final version of the papers : April 5, 2013
Symposium : June 19-20, 2013

Contact
Stéphanie Wojcik (stephanie.wojcik@u-pec.fr)
University of Paris Est Créteil / CEDITEC (France)
Research network on electronic democracy (DEL) http://www.certop.fr/DEL

Scientific committee

Eva Anduiza (Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona, Spain); Nick Anstead (London School of Economics, UK); Frédérick Bastien (Université de Montréal, Canada); Gersende Blanchard (Université Lille 3, France) ; Robert Boure (Université Toulouse 3, France) ; Dominique Cardon (Orange Labs, France) ; Stephen Coleman (Leeds University, UK); Carlos Cunha (Lisbon University Institute, Portugal); Patrice Flichy (Université Paris Est Marne-la-Vallée, France); Eric George (Université du Québec à Montréal, Canada); Rachel Gibson (Manchester University, UK); Todd Graham (University of Groningen, The Netherlands); Fabien Granjon (Université Paris 8, France); Dimitris Gouscos (University of Athens, Greece); Fabienne Greffet (Université de Lorraine, France); Josiane Jouët (Université Paris 2, France); Rabia Karakaya Polat (Isik University, Turkey); Norbert Kersting (Muenster University, Germany); Raphaël Kies (Université du Luxembourg); Robert Krimmer (OSCE, Poland); Gérard Loiseau (Certop/CNRS, France); Laurence Monnoyer-Smith (Université de Technologie de Compiègne, France); Karen Mossberger (University of Illinois at Chicago, USA); Beth Noveck (New York Law School, USA); Zizi Papacharissi (University of Illinois at Chicago, USA); Serge Proulx (Université du Québec à Montréal, Canada) ; Jarmo Rinne (University of Helsinki, Finland); Cristian Vaccari (Università di Bologna, Italy); Thierry Vedel (CEVIPOF, France); Yanina Welp (University of Zurich, Switzerland); Stéphanie Wojcik (Université Paris Est Créteil, France); Han Woo Park (YeungNam University, South Korea), Scott Wright (Leicester University, UK).