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**Active Citizen Participation Online: A Typology For Evaluating Online
Civic Participation Projects**

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Dedication

To Jennifer, my love and dearest friend:

We've finally made it. What a long, strange journey it's been.

Abstract

Active Citizen Participation Online: A Typology for Evaluating Online Civic Participation Projects

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Communications scholars recognize two related trends in twenty-first century politics: the rise of information and communications technologies promising major changes in civic participation and a growing disconnection between citizens and their governments. The coexistence of these trends raises some interesting questions about the role of ICTs for enabling new forms of civic participation. How can new technologies better enable civic participation? This report proposes a typology for evaluating online civic participation projects that allows researchers to analyze the goals, designs, and outcomes of particular projects. The typology also incorporates Arnstein's (1969) ladder of citizen participation in order to enumerate the relationships between the project's goals and its outcomes and to provide a flexible model for understanding the democratic conceptualizations manifested in particular projects. The report analyzes three online civic participation projects, highlighting their innovations and discussion their levels of citizen participation. The analyses suggest that a project's goals, designs and outcomes

are related to, and inform, its desired and realized levels of citizen participation. The review also suggests clarifications to Arnstein's ladder for future use in understanding online civic participation. The report's evaluative typology can aid in the interpretation of past online civic participation projects and guide the conceptualization and implementation of future projects in order to facilitate the development of more direct connections between citizens and governments and more open and transparent democratic governance structures.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

Communications scholars suggest that the connection between citizens and their government lies at the heart of democratic practice (Bimber 2000, Coleman 2005, Coleman and Blumler 2009). Coleman defines representation as the ability for political representatives to express aggregate citizen opinion when citizens cannot physically participate in making political decisions. Because representation involves speaking on behalf of distant citizens, communication channels between representatives and citizens allow representatives to speak with, and to speak for, citizens in a way that bypasses restrictions of time and distance (“Lonely Citizen” 199). Many scholars argue that the communication lines between citizens and government have weakened due to changes in the mass mediated culture of the late 20th century (Davis 1998, Tsagarousianou 1999). Coleman and Blumler argue that, due to mediation, political campaigns and political parties resemble little more than PR-centric political messaging machines intent on conveying (and sometimes coercing adoption of) particular political messages to journalists and citizens (49-50). They suggest that mediation has led to a state of constant tension between journalists and politicians that occasionally escalates into full-on attacks on particular politicians, political reporters or political reporting (52-53). Coleman and Blumler suggest that the breakdown of mediated political discourse into a battle of partisan messages turns many voters off to civic participation (60).

Scholars argue that the weakening of ties between citizens and government is best expressed in terms of connection and disconnection (Coleman, Morrison and Yates 215). Coleman, Morrison and Yates contrast disconnection with “political efficacy” (215), the ability for citizens to translate their discussions and opinions into cohesive policy recommendations that influence government policy decisions. Coleman maps several

elements of political connection (“Lonely Citizen” 199). First, political connection entails closeness, or the ability for representatives to transcend temporal and spatial barriers to connect with distant citizens. Second, political connection also entails empathy, where representatives overcome citizen disinterest and apathy to connect with citizens’ wants and desires (200). Political connection also implies mutuality, meaning that citizens have free access to political information and are provided with pathways for transparent conversation with other citizens and with their representatives. Finally, political connection means a level of coherence, meaning that representatives consistently and thoroughly aggregate disparate community voices into a cohesive public voice with respect to policy decisions.

Coleman argues that very few citizens think about the meaning of political representation on a regular basis (“Lonely Citizen” 201) and that citizens tend to focus on the constituent-representative relationship, its characteristics and its relative health as indicators of their political connectedness (206). Coleman reports qualitative responses from a UK study consisting of interviews and a national survey on political connection. He argues that a significant minority of respondents felt that their representatives were unknown (203), distant or overly partisan and unaffiliated with their life experiences (204). Other respondents described their representatives as untrustworthy, arrogant, or sometimes just irrelevant to their everyday life (205). Coleman argues that the problem of civic disconnection is not that citizens do not know their rights, but that they do not feel connected to their representatives and cannot participate in public life (199).

This report draws on literature analyzing the relationship between the Internet and civic participation, particularly relying on the deliberative democracy tradition of European communications scholars. Communications scholars and activists over the past 30 years have claimed that information and communications technologies, or ICTs, in

various ways, could address feelings of citizen disconnection by providing opportunities for citizens to connect with one another, sharing information and discussing topics, and could also reconnect citizens with their government across spatial and temporal boundaries (Coleman and Blumler 2009, Dahlgren 2000, Toulouse and Luke 1998). Hacker and van Dijk summarize many claims made by scholars on the potential benefits of ICTs for civic participation (4). First, scholars argue that the reduced cost of information distribution will put more plentiful and less biased political information into the hands of citizens. They argue that access to political information will inevitably lead citizens to become more politically informed and more competent to discuss political issues. Second, scholars argue that ICTs can be used to encourage online citizen deliberation, facilitate the creation of better-organized, more independent social movements and allow citizens to connect through institutional communications channels with their representatives. These scholars argue that political interactions over the Internet will encourage more horizontal political systems that promote active civic participation, both in terms of citizens discussing political issues and in terms of citizens more directly influencing policy outcomes.

Despite optimism about the democratic possibilities enabled by ICTs, other scholars caution against a form of technological determinism that disregards the influences of social and institutional power structures on the Internet's democratic applications (Sassen 1999). Bryan, Tsagarousianou and Tambini warn that media organizations and politicians use obsolescence and replacement rhetoric to justify media consolidation, deregulation and privatization (11), while other scholars such as Sassen and Hand point out that social interactions on the Internet manifest their own distinctly unequal hierarchies of power. Further, many scholars argue that online policy initiatives and research projects often lack strong definitions of democracy, democratic

communication and civic participation and ignore the relationship between the projects' goals and designs and the projects' outcomes (Coleman 2005, Hand 2011, Tsagarousianou 1999).

Scholars recognize two contrasting trends in 21st-century politics: the rise of information and communications technologies promising major changes in civic participation and a growing disconnection between citizens and their governments (Coleman and Blumler 2009 14-15). The coexistence of these trends raises some interesting questions about the role of ICT use for enabling new forms of civic participation. How can new technologies better enable civic participation? This report will review the literature on the Internet and online civic participation projects in order to suggest a framework for mapping the definitions, designs and outcomes of particular projects in terms of active citizen participation, with the goal of improving the conceptual and methodological foundations of future research projects.

In order to understand the relationship between the Internet and civic participation, it is necessary to clarify definitions of democratic concepts related to civic participation. What is civic participation? What is the role of civic participation in democracies, and what are the barriers to civic participation? How does the Internet potentially influence the conceptualization of civic participation, and how can scholars measure levels of civic participation in online civic participation projects?

I will then propose some evaluative criteria for reviewing online civic participation projects, focused on identifying project goals, tracing the influences of those goals on project design, reviewing how citizens engage with the project and analyzing the project's outcomes. These evaluative criteria will allow me to examine the extent to which online civic participation projects encourage active citizen participation, defined by Sherry Arnstein as a transfer of political power from government officials to citizens

(216). Finally, I will review and evaluate several online civic participation projects. How does the project conceive of civic participation, and what are its goals? What are the challenges of using new technologies for civic participation? I will evaluate a small sample of digital democracy projects with diverse goals, practices and contexts in order to test my evaluative model. A thorough evaluation of the literature related to the Internet and civic participation will yield a series of evaluative criteria that will help researchers review the goals, designs and outcomes of current online civic participation projects and will highlight project innovations that result in active forms of citizen participation in order to encourage more robust project design for future online civic participation projects.

Chapter 2: Civic Participation – Opportunities and Challenges

Scholars argue that civic participation as a theoretical construct encompasses a number of citizen actions driven by a variety of motivations and goals on the part of citizens. Governments often understand civic participation in terms of formal democratic activities such as voting or aggregating citizen voices in opinion polls, surveys, government consultations and requests for comments on particular policies or issues. Coleman and Blumler argue that, in contrast to government perceptions, citizens understand civic participation primarily in terms of identity construction, often realized through social movements and other oppositional actions not directly connected to formal political action (157-158). Coleman and Blumler suggest that citizens participate in political discussions and activism in order to effect change in the government, to feel connected to a certain community or organization, and to identify themselves with particular causes or movements. Many scholars suggest that civic participation is composed of rational deliberation between citizens, taking place within a vibrant public sphere and supported by a diverse civic culture.

ELEMENTS OF CIVIC PARTICIPATION

Coleman and Blumler define deliberation as a public, competitive and thorough hearing of competing ideas, either in person or mediated by technologies, from which the public can understand and agree to a solution to policy questions through non-coercive means. They outline several requirements for projects that encourage deliberation among citizens and between citizens and their representatives. First, deliberative projects must provide free access to comprehensive information on the discussion topic and have an open plan for discussion, free of public or private influences on the direction of the

discussion. Deliberation requires an adequate amount of time for a comprehensive discussion between an “inclusive sample of citizens” (40). Further, deliberative projects should acknowledge differences between citizens while mitigating prejudices based on social or economic class (41). Finally, deliberation should include interaction with government officials and should provide an institutional channel for expressing public opinion to the government with the purpose of influencing policy outcomes.

Based on Habermas’ examination of eighteenth-century rational public discourse (see Calhoun 1992), scholars argue that the public sphere is a neutral common ground where citizens can deliberate, discuss government policies, distribute information and come to a consensus about their political concerns (Bentivegna 2006, Dahlgren 2005, Tsagarousianou, Tambini and Bryan 1998). Dahlgren argues that the public sphere provides three elements that facilitate citizen deliberation: “structures, representation and interaction” (“Dispersion and Deliberation” 148). Structures are the contexts that influence the types of deliberation that take place within the public sphere. Structures include formal channels for communication such as voting and the institutional channels that let citizens contact their representatives (149). Representation includes the aggregation and reconciliation of citizen deliberation into a coherent public voice and the means by which the voice is communicated to governments and political representatives. Finally, interactivity encompasses the foundational rules and elements that regulate deliberation in the public sphere, as well as the diversity and openness of channels of communication between citizens and their government. Many scholars attribute the rise in political disconnection among citizens to a breakdown of one or more of these elements of the public sphere (Bohman 2004, Hand 2011, Poster 2001).

If the public sphere encourages deliberation between citizens, then civic culture is the set of skills, practices and values that citizens share in order to participate in

deliberation. Dahlgren defines civic culture in terms of citizen self-identification and education enabling citizens to participate in the public sphere (“Reconfiguring Civic Culture” 153-154). Dahlgren outlines several facets of civic culture that are key to civic participation. First, civic culture depends on a set of shared values related to core concepts of democracy (such as equality) and to the mechanics of democratic interaction (such as discussion and tolerance) and a basic shared commitment to those principles (157). Civic cultures also impart knowledge or literacy, the ability to access to reliable information and the means to interpret it. That knowledge base is supplemented by a set of democratic rules, routines and practices that guide civic participation and provide the framework for negotiating exceptional circumstances and challenges to democracy (158). These practices include formal actions, such as voting or contributing to a political campaign, as well as informal actions, such as discussing political decisions or being involved in a grassroots social movement or citizen-led protest. Finally, civic culture is built on active discussion, or the practical and often informal ways in which citizens interact on a daily basis. The informality of discussion provides a “permeability of contexts” (160) that is essential for democratic deliberation. Dahlgren argues that discussion sets the tone for the other aspects of civic culture and that the ways that citizens participate in political discussion shape the viability of a given civic culture (159).

BARRIERS TO CIVIC PARTICIPATION

Despite the democratic potential for deliberation through diverse public spheres, active citizens and an active civic culture, scholars recognize several barriers to formal civic participation (Coleman and Blumler 19). First, barriers of distance, time and scale restrict the extent to which citizens can educate themselves on political decisions, discuss

political matters with one another, and communicate their opinions to government officials. Restrictions on time mean that citizens often choose between everyday activities and civic participation, a decision made harder by their distance from the political center that requires a significant effort on the citizen's part to communicate face-to-face with their representatives (20-21). In addition to restrictions of distance and time, Coleman and Blumler argue that it is difficult to aggregate and translate the voices of thousands of citizens into coherent suggested policy outcomes (21).

Second, the struggle to understand complicated political decisions alienates most citizens from civic participation (Coleman and Blumler 22). The complexity of political issues, coupled with the growing mediation of political life (23), leads citizens to rely on their representatives to strategically advocate for their interests and deliberate with other representatives on their behalf in order to reach political consensus (24). Third, even if citizens overcome spatial, temporal and competency barriers, the design of the electoral democratic system limits the abilities of citizens armed with that knowledge to make substantive policy suggestions (24). The lack of institutional channels for communicating citizen knowledge, experience and deliberation to government officials also limits the usefulness of active citizen participation in traditional governance structures. Finally, other scholars contend that deliberation is an inherently rationalist concept that excludes alternative realms of discourse and affective contributions to political life such as informal conversations and discussions in apolitical communities that have the potential to become politically active (25). These marginalized, fragmented expressions of citizen's experiences and values do not easily fit in the boundaries of the rational, politically driven public sphere of communications theory and are not explicitly contributing to civic culture.

REIMAGINING CIVIC PARTICIPATION

The critiques of rationalism inherent in definitions of civic participation have led scholars to reimagine deliberation and political discourse in terms of identity construction, fragmentation and networks. Many scholars argue that civic participation extends beyond citizens' involvement in a singular public sphere filled with rational deliberation to include citizen identity construction in a pluralistic, fragmented network of public spheres. This expanded conception of civic participation allows for formal deliberation as well as informal conversations, personal stories and other fragmented means of personal expression and political discussion (Bakardjieva 2009, Cammaerts and van Audenhove 2005, Coleman and Blumler 2009). Dahlgren suggests that the media blur previously strong barriers between public and private life, and that civic culture acts as a bridge to connect constructed citizen identities to deliberation and civic participation in the public sphere (Dahlgren 2000, 2003).

While a constructivist understanding of deliberation, public spheres and civic culture encourages more citizens to participate in deliberation, scholars still wrestle with the problem of connecting citizen that deliberation with the power to influence political decisions. Sherry Arnstein (1969) defines civic participation in the more radical terms of political power instead of the ability to discuss political matters. Civic participation is “the redistribution of power that enables the have-not citizens, presently excluded from the political and economic processes, to be deliberately included in the future.... [civic participation is] the means by which they can induce significant social reform which enables them to share in the benefits of the affluent society” (216). The disjuncture between the ways that citizens choose to participate in political discussions and the kinds of participation that governments recognize and encourage leads to the imbalance of power that discourages citizen participation altogether.

Arnstein analyzes urban renewal and city planning projects and maps eight levels in a “ladder of citizen participation” (217), ranging from citizen placation and tokenism to full citizen control over local projects. Arnstein’s levels demonstrate how implicit or explicit definitions of civic participation can influence the possibilities for facilitating active citizen participation through democratic projects. Arnstein’s first two levels of civic participation, which she groups together under the heading “nonparticipation” (217), involve one-way transfers of information from authorities to citizens. The first level, manipulation, represents one-way efforts by authorities to “educate” citizens on the propriety of the authority’s plans. The second level, therapy, uses similar approaches to frame citizens’ complaints in mental illness language and treat citizens as patients to be cured rather than victims of poor planning on the part of authorities (218).

Arnstein argues that the next three levels of citizen participation are a form of “tokenism” (217) that allow citizens to voice their opinions but safeguard the right for authorities to make decisions on citizens’ behalf. The third level of citizen participation, information, defines citizen participation in terms of quantitative information distribution (219). Similarly, the fourth level, consultation, focuses on the amount, rather than the significance, of citizen voices in order to justify particular policy decisions. With the fifth level of citizen participation, placation, authorities grant citizen positions of apparent authority but limit their abilities to contribute to political decisions (220). Arnstein recognizes that, at this level, authorities do not address citizen suspicions about the legitimacy of their contributions to political decisions and that authorities still view citizen participation as a means of appeasement rather than as a means of delegating political power to citizens.

The last three levels of citizen participation, which Arnstein describes as forms of “citizen power” (217), involve authorities entrusting some or all governance

responsibilities to accountable citizens and citizens' groups, the sharing or transfer of political power to citizens themselves (221). Arnstein argues that when social movements and protest organizations gain enough traction to challenge authorities, the authorities often respond with negotiation towards a partnership with citizens (222). This sixth level of citizen participation, partnership, represents the point at which citizens have enough leverage to negotiate with authorities for citizen control over local governance projects. At this stage, citizen participation often takes the form of representative citizen leaders, held accountable to the citizens themselves, who are actively involved in project planning and can negotiate with authorities on the citizens' behalf (221-222).

With the seventh level of citizen participation, delegation, authorities grant citizens direct control over particular parts of local issues or projects (222). Delegation often takes the form of majority-citizen panels and councils that can allocate funds to local governance projects and work alongside authorities (and sometimes independently from them) for the benefit of the community. The eighth level, citizen control, represents the ability for citizens to manage both the planning and implementation phases of projects in their communities and to regulate the extent that authorities outside of the community can interact with and make decisions on their behalf (223). Arnstein's ladder of citizen participation is important to communications scholars for the ways that she shifts the discussion about measuring citizen participation from citizen-to-citizen relationships, through deliberation or education, to citizen interactions with governments and the sharing or transference of power from government officials to citizens. Arnstein's model of active citizen participation has influenced scholarly work in fields ranging from social science (Connor 1988, Rowe and Frewer 2004) to international development (Choguill 2009). Arnstein's power-based understanding of citizen participation addresses the critique of deliberation as a redundant exercise by suggesting that citizen participation

becomes the means by which citizens more directly contribute to policy outcomes, rather than understanding civic participation as merely one of many considerations for formal policy decisions.

Communications scholars theorize that civic participation can be understood as citizen participation in the public sphere, the development of a robust civic culture, and citizen deliberation on political matters. Barriers to civic participation through deliberation and the public sphere include temporal and spatial restrictions to participation, restrictions on citizen education on political issues, limitations on institutional channels that connect citizen deliberation with policy outcomes, and the limitations inherent in conceptualizing civic participation as a rational, formal, primarily political exercise. Arnstein's ladder of citizen participation addresses the limitations on institutional channels of citizen participation by reframing the discussion in terms of power delegation from government officials to citizens, while other scholars suggest alternative formulations of the public sphere that address the rationalist critique. However, Arnstein's model does not suggest institutional channels for connecting citizen deliberation with government decisions, and scholars who reformulate deliberation into an informal, constructivist exercise have few suggestions for how government officials and researchers can actively encourage those forms of interaction. Spatial and temporal barriers, alongside restrictions to citizen participation are exacerbated by the one-way, broadcast model of mediated political culture that permeates political discourse (Coleman and Blumler 53). Given the challenges of civic participation and the alternative models for constructing citizen identity and connecting through networked public spheres, scholars suggest that the Internet can lower the barriers of information access and informal discussion and can provide channels for connecting citizen deliberation with government officials and policy outcomes. How can researchers use the Internet to lower

barriers and encourage more diverse civic participation? What new opportunities and challenges do online interactions pose for researchers looking to encourage deliberation and active civic participation?

Chapter 3: The Internet and Civic Participation

Whether for good or for ill, scholars agree that online interactions will play a crucial role in shaping democracies in the 21st century. Scholars argue that the Internet allows citizens to access, discuss and distribute information at a greatly reduced cost without mass media filters and government oversight, but that these characteristics do not guarantee increased civic participation or more open democratic governance (see Sassen 1999 and Resnick 1998). They argue that the capacity for horizontal communication and open information distribution over the Internet does not inherently make governments more transparent or accountable, that information proliferation does not guarantee information accuracy, and that online political involvement does not promise better citizen action or citizen deliberation (Hindman 2010, Poster 2001, Tsagarousianou 1999). Sassen argues that the commercialization of access and the rise of information-aggregation intermediaries along with the international deregulation of telecommunications industries and the rise of private networks could negate the supposedly inherently democratic characteristics of the Internet (Sassen 1999 57-58).

These scholars take a constructionist view of the Internet. They argue that technology does not inevitably shape political and social structures due to its supposedly inherent characteristics, nor does technology offer a panacea that solves the pedagogical and logistical issues that often discourage active citizen participation. Technologies have particular characteristics that can be manipulated for good or ill and have features that can be used in the service of both bottom-up and top-down democratic (or authoritarian) regimes (Hagen 2000, van Dijk and Hacker 2000). Many scholars argue that ICTs do not fundamentally disrupt societal norms, but instead amplify existing social, cultural and institutional tendencies. They argue that activists and social scientists must contest the

reshaping of both online networks and offline infrastructure in order to protect the ethos, distributed power structures and horizontal communications channels once thought to be inherent and naturalized in the design and function of the Internet (Sassen 1999 62).

Many scholars argue that the challenge of civic participation in the age of the Internet is to restore a healthy relationship between citizens and their representatives. They suggest that politicians and researchers can use the Internet to facilitate civic participation by personalizing the interaction among citizens, as well as between representatives and citizens, and by linking civic action with influences on policy outcomes (Bimber 2000, Coleman and Blumler 2009, Dahlgren 2005, Hand 2011). Most scholars argue that the Internet can be harnessed to lower the barriers to civic participation and equip citizens to contribute a more clear and nuanced representation of their opinions and desires to government officials. The Internet allows for asynchronous communication across national boundaries and enables political discussion regardless of physical location or time (Coleman and Blumler 28). Further, systems for aggregating and rating data online, combined with personal moderation and reporting, can overcome the problems of scale for turning deliberation into clear, understandable policy recommendations from citizens.

In addition to addressing the limitations of information access and temporal and spatial barriers, scholars argue that the Internet allows citizens to engage in discussion and deliberation through interactive discussion forums and other channels of citizen interaction online (Coleman and Blumler 29). Scholars suggest that the online discussion forums, blogs and other online innovations allow citizens to voice their opinions, disagreements and discontent with the political system (Bohman 2004, Coleman and Blumler 2009). Bentivegna argues that these channels address the increasingly fragmented construction of private and public life and so can be adapted to establish

political identities, manage political movements and meet citizens' various political, social and cultural needs (341). Scholars have proposed many different ways to understand the alternative public spheres online.

Bohman describes a distributed public sphere (139), a “public of publics” (140) that connects fragmented, identity driven micro-public spheres. He argues that the Internet allows for citizen participation across multiple spheres and provides the means for micro-public spheres to collectively deliberate with one another. Papacharissi describes the network of public spheres as a “virtual sphere” (20) that allows fluid movement between public and private communication as well as individual and communal expression. She argues that alternative public spheres bridge cultural divides and worldviews in a safe, semi-anonymous, synchronous network. These alternative spheres also allow citizens that are excluded from formal rational deliberation to communicate with citizens across spatial and temporal boundaries and participating in online deliberation (22-23).

Coleman and Blumler suggest that properly moderated online interactions can expose people to broader perspectives about the world and encourage individuals to interact in a civil manner with other citizens (32-33). They suggest that deliberation on the Internet can overcome many of the institutional barriers separating citizen deliberation from policy outcomes because it captures a wider range of citizen voices and thus enriches civic participation through formal channels. However, other scholars suggest that online interactions between citizens can call attention to disparities built into the social and cultural systems of political communication (Coleman and Blumler 2009, Hand 2011, Sassen 1999). Papacharissi argues that while the Internet provides access to sources of information and interactive discussion, most online interactions merely replicate offline inequalities, and that deliberation may not translate into policy changes

(13). Further, Johnson recognizes that, even when politicians interact with citizens online, those interactions usually serve as a means to target (and manipulate) individual voters, rather than translate their discussions into policy initiatives (422). Coleman, Morrison and Yates echo Arnstein by suggesting that online civic participation initiatives should focus on building formal channels to connect citizen discussion with substantial changes in public policy (221), either through involving government officials in online discussions with citizens (Coleman and Blumler 135-136) or through the establishment of a government agency to facilitate citizen deliberation and report its results to government officials (171).

Coleman and Blumler argue that “a more deliberative democracy” (27) requires that civic participation must become embedded in, and fundamental to, the workings of democratic governance, linking citizen deliberation to substantial policy outcomes from the ground up, free from public or private coercion and manipulation (38-39). Online interactions have the potential to mitigate barriers to political information, temporal and spatial barriers, and cultural barriers that exclude citizen voices because they do not resemble formal, rational deliberation. However, scholars suggest that political systems must change in order to connect increasingly robust and diverse citizen deliberation with a more responsive and increasingly direct system of formal governance (39). The literature discussing online civic participation suggests that online civic participation projects must actively focus on connecting citizens and representatives through interactive exchanges on the Internet. The goals and designs of these projects can lead to outcomes that embody high levels of citizen participation and citizen power-sharing as envisioned by Arnstein and can realize the democratic potential of the Internet as envisioned by communications scholars by facilitating online interactions that influence

current political structures and encourage a more direct connection between representatives and the citizens they represent.

Chapter 4: Criteria for Evaluating Online civic participation projects

Researchers designing or analyzing online civic participation projects must intentionally examine their goals, designs and implementation strategies in order to understand the extent to which their projects use the Internet to encourage civic participation, and to analyze the kinds of participation that the projects encourage (Bentivegna 2006, Bimber 2001, Bohman 2004, Poster 2001). These elements are interconnected: a project's aims reflect how project sponsors frame the obstacles to civic participation, which are informed in part by the project's implicit or explicit formulation of citizenship and civic participation. Further, a project's goals often influence how its creators understand the ways that ICTs can be used to encourage civic participation and also influence the design functionalities that projects support or curtail. The project's design further influences how citizens participate in the project and affects the outcomes of citizen engagement with the project. Finally, the interrelationships of these elements inform researchers about what types of citizen participation a project encouraged in its design, and what levels of citizen participation occurred when citizens participated in the project.

An early study by Bimber illustrates the ways that assumptions made in early studies of online civic participation influenced the study's results ("Information and Political Engagement" 53). Bimber questions the assumption made by many scholars that merely reducing the cost of information distribution and access through the Internet will increase civic participation (54). In a study conducted between 1996 and 1999, Bimber found that Internet access had no direct correlation with citizen engagement (61), that people pursuing campaign information online were not more likely to engage in civic activities than citizens pursuing information offline (62) and that, except for a slight

correlation in fundraising, the study shows no link between political information and increased civic participation (63-64). He concludes that the lack of correlation between information access and civic participation should lead researchers away from exploring information access to addressing the ways that online civic participation can encourage structural changes to political institutions and conceptualizations of civic participation (64).

A TYPOLOGY FOR EVALUATING ONLINE CIVIC PARTICIPATION PROJECTS

Bimber's study highlights the ways that early new media research's foundational assumptions, that citizens are consumers and that the core of the problem of civic participation was information access, distracted them from more fruitful goals and outcomes (see van Dijk 2000). His research suggests that the investigation of online civic participation projects must necessarily begin with questioning its foundational assumptions about citizens' problems, assumptions that in turn that influence the project's methodologies for addressing those problems and can influence interpretations of a project's outcomes. Drawing on many case studies and theoretical explorations related to the Internet and civic participation, I propose a typology for evaluating the goals, designs, and outcomes of online civic participation projects (Table 1). Explicitly identifying these elements allows researchers to analyze online civic participation projects in terms of citizen deliberation and Arnstein's ladder of active citizen participation and in terms of the relationships between the project's participatory elements and the project's implicit and explicit goals and designs.

Table 1: A Typology for Evaluating Online Civic Participation Projects

Goals / Aims	Project Designs	Use	Evaluation	Participatory Analysis
Participation Challenges	Design Characteristics	Project Implementation	Project Results	Arnstein's Ladder of Participation
Project Goals	Technical Functions	Participants	Innovations	Deliberation
Ideal Outcomes	Interactivity	Responses to the Project	Limitations	

Project Goals and Aims

Researchers can gain insight into online civic participation projects by evaluating their stated goals, identified barriers to participation and ideal project outcomes. What do the project sponsors argue that their project is trying to accomplish? What deficiency in civic participation do they believe that their project addresses? What is the ideal outcome of a citizen's participation in the project? Project goals and outcomes can include informal actions such as encouraging citizen discussion or fostering local community connections; formal actions such as voting, receiving government information or contacting representatives; or deliberative actions such as fostering dialogues between citizens and representatives or developing systems for aggregating public opinion and communicating it to government officials.

Designs

Van Dijk argues that foundational assumptions about citizens and civic participation also influence the ways that project sponsors use the Internet in online civic participation projects (40). For instance, democratic projects that focus on improving representational practices often interpret citizen apathy as a function of a lack of information for navigating the complexities of political decisions; in turn, they harness the Internet to gather citizen opinions more quickly and efficiently and to deliver well-

organized and accurate information through cost-effective and efficient information distribution channels (40-41). In contrast, online civic participation projects that focus on deliberation at either the individual or grassroots organization level tend to leverage the Internet to both provide information to citizens and facilitate citizen online deliberation in networked, fragmented public spheres. Van Dijk provides researchers with several questions to elucidate how online civic participation projects design their interaction systems. What designs or online services do project sponsors employ to encourage civic participation? What functionalities do project designs incorporate?

Many scholars argue that electronic civic participation projects should ideally move citizen-to-citizen interactions from one-way information sharing to interactive deliberation, and move citizen-government interactions from one-way information exchange to two-way interactive dialogue (Bimber 2000, Coleman 2005, Hacker and van Dijk 2000). Welch and Fulla offer four avenues for assessing the level of interactivity in online civic participation projects: information provision, the possibility for citizen contributions to political discussions, the consistency of government interactivity and the level of complexity apparent in their response (223-225). The way that electronic civic participation projects handle interactivity can shed light on their definition of democracy, their understanding of civic participation, and their ideal communicative relationship among citizens and between citizens and governments. What facets of interactivity are reflected in the project's design? What kinds of interactivity do projects encourage? Elucidating a project's design and analyzing the ways that the project facilitates online interaction can reflect the kinds of citizen participation the project seeks to encourage and thus the project's desired outcomes in terms of influencing governance structures and power.

Use

Coleman and Blumler's exploratory case study concerning online deliberation provides several questions for assessing the implementation of online civic participation projects (184). First, who participated in the project? How do the participants compare to the project's ideal participant? Second, in what ways did citizens participate in the project? How do the ways that citizens use information and communication channels compare with the ideal uses suggested by the project sponsors? What sorts of activities did citizens engage in online?

Evaluations

Also drawing on Coleman and Blumler, researchers should examine the results reported by project sponsors and the innovations and limitations of the online civic participation project (184). What sorts of outcomes does the project produce, in terms of artifacts (such as reports or policy drafts) or in terms of qualitative changes in citizen perceptions or behaviors (such as increased participation or increased feelings of political connection)? How do project sponsors assess the results of their projects? How do the project sponsors evaluate the level of citizen participation in their project? When considering online civic participation projects in aggregate, mapping goals, definitions and outcomes can also highlight prevailing frames for civic participation, deliberation and democracy present in the literature along with prevailing techniques for encouraging online civic participation. What sorts of limitations or innovative practices can we observe about the project based on its outcomes? To what extent can project innovations or omissions inform the conceptualization and design of future online civic participation projects?

Participation Analysis

Participation analysis focuses on examining online civic participation projects in terms of Arnstein's levels of citizen participation. The complaints of communications scholars about the ineffectiveness of particular online civic participation projects are categorized by those scholars as a failure of conceptualization, but Arnstein suggests that those failures are often connected to whether the project encourages a citizen participation that invest citizens with power and to what extent the project translates citizen deliberation into citizen political power. Arnstein's ladder of citizen participation is an invaluable analytical tool for the purpose of evaluating the extent to which projects suggest active citizen participation. What levels of participation do project sponsors implicitly or explicitly encourage in their project goals and design? What levels of participation are achieved through the implementation of the project? Following Arnstein's definition of civic participation, researchers should interrogate the relationships between project goals, designs and outcomes in order to inform future research projects on how to encourage power sharing and active citizen involvement in public life.

TYPES OF ONLINE CIVIC PARTICIPATION PROJECTS

Based on empirical case studies, many scholars have identified several types of online civic participation projects. Tsagarousianou distinguishes between three broad categories of online civic participation projects: national governments using the Internet for internal and external communication, local and regional governments that use the Internet to engage their citizens, and citizen-driven collective action projects (196). Coleman and Blumler argue that citizens have come to expect more direct and timely representation from governments, and that government officials have been pursuing systems to establish that connectivity, to varying effects (90-91). They define this

category of projects that owe their existence to, and are maintained by, government entities as “e-democracy from above” (90).

Dahlgren argues that e-government is built on (mostly) one-way top-down contact between representatives and citizens (“Dispersion and Deliberation” 153), a method of interaction that ignores the possibilities of citizen-to-citizen communication in favor of more presentational one-way communication. This model too often reflects a limited view of democracy driven by the citizen-as-consumer (and therefore government-as-service) claim (Tsagarousianou 1999 196-197). Coleman and Blumler argue that skepticism and mistrust about the political efficacy of such efforts undermines the democratic potential of top-down e-democracy projects (115). In contrast, Tsagarousianou and others suggest that local initiatives tend to be more interactive, fostering discussion and giving citizens more direct channels for commenting on and influencing local political decisions (Cammaerts and van Audenhove 2005, Davis 1998, Tsagarousianou 1999). Arnstein’s study of civic participation tempers overly optimistic hopes about local governance by suggesting that proximity to citizens does not guarantee that a project will be more accountable to their needs and desires, and that project sponsors should design their local projects in such a way as to facilitate active citizen participation in public life.

Many scholars also recognize the potential for civic participation in social movements that organize online, in informal community interactions, which have the potential to generate political discussion and action as well as formal deliberation (Bakardjieva 2009, Dahlgren 2005, Papacharissi 2002). Scholars argue that these grassroots communities represent “e-democracy from below” (Coleman and Blumler 2009 118). Coleman and Blumler argue that representatives should encourage citizens to engage in e-democracy from below and should also interact with citizens involved in

grassroots movements. Additionally, they articulate several challenges to a model of representation driven by grassroots citizen participation. First, e-democracy from below is almost by definition disconnected from institutional power structures, and as such has no clear channel for translating citizen deliberation into policy changes or even formal mechanisms for collation and consensus-building (135-136). Second, online networks rarely have the staying power necessary for long-term political engagement and influence, and their short-lived nature dissuades representatives from consistently engaging in deliberation with those groups (136-137). Finally, online activism is often perceived as socially unacceptable or illegal and threatens to delegitimize online political action and deliberation (137).

Finally, Coleman and Blumler argue that policy initiatives are responsible for offline commons; therefore, formal institutions for citizen deliberation online require a policy initiative akin to major educational efforts of the past (164-165). They argue for the creation of a government-managed “a civic commons in cyberspace” (169). This “trusted public space” (170) would be managed by an independent government agency that monitors and aggregates encourages active citizen discussion and communicates aggregate decisions to government officials. The agency would actively recruit citizens to participate in online deliberation, train citizens in deliberative techniques and moderate discussions in order to communicate the aggregate outcomes of public deliberation to government officials through a transparent system that would be open to investigation from citizens and other organizations (171, 174-175).

CONCLUSION

Coleman and Blumler argue that encouraging public voices to interact with each other and with the government is the key to overcoming cynicism and disconnection in

modern democratic systems (41). Communications scholars can examine online civic participation projects to identify aims and designs that encourage active civic participation and power sharing by paying careful attention to the ways that online civic participation projects enumerate their goals and aims, by evaluating the ways that projects use the Internet to encourage interactive deliberation among citizens and between citizens and governments, and by analyzing project outcomes. In order to understand the variety of influences that project designs, definitions and goals can have on the outcomes of online civic participation projects, the remainder of this report will focus on analyzing select online civic participation projects, drawing from top-down projects, grassroots projects and hybridized local governance projects. The three cases examined in the report are notable for the ways that they encourage active citizen participation, whether indirectly through project aims and participation outcomes or directly through project designs. The cases result in different levels of citizen participation as well, with citizens interacting with government officials in a consulting role, citizens influencing mainstream policy outcomes through social movements or citizens creating their own citizen-driven participation projects. Further, the projects are designed around different technological functionalities that encourage different levels of formal and informal interaction online. Finally, the mainstream recognition that the projects have received also allows scholars to explore the relationship between projects encouraging active citizen participation and government responses to those projects. They represent active citizen participation in terms of deliberation and Arnstein's ladder while also clarifying the ways that Arnstein's ladder of citizen participation can address active citizen participation in online civic participation projects.

Chapter 5: Mapping Goals, Designs, Uses and Outcomes: Three Cases

Tsagarousianou suggests that many online civic participation projects do not meet these criteria because they are driven by the one-way information provision models of civic participation and because they frame deliberation as a matter of rational persuasion instead of conversation or protest. These one-way messages have often defined the scope of the problem at hand and thus provide information strongly favoring one solution over another (202). Scholars and activists suggest several types of projects that have emerged that attempt to encourage civic participation, in the form of top-down contact between representatives and citizens, bottom-up social movements, and hybridized local governance projects (see Pinkett 2003, de Cindio 2004). The three cases below, a study of blogs written by European leaders, an online discussion forum focused on parenting, and an online community network, represent high-profile projects that attempt to encourage active citizen participation in public life through online interactions and have received attention from both communications scholars and government officials.

Coleman and Moss' study reviews three well-known blogs through which government officials appear to encourage interactive dialogue with citizens, while Mumsnet users have contributed to UK policy outcomes through consultation and social movements. Additionally, the Milan Community Network contains elements of interactivity and moderated citizen participation that many communications scholars idealize (see Bohman and Coleman and Blumler) at a local scale that connects online political participation with offline community involvement. Further, these case studies challenge portions of Arnstein's ladder by suggesting that online citizen participation often repurposes approaches or styles of discourse that Arnstein dismisses. Thus, the case studies provide can be better understood in terms of Arnstein's ladder of citizen

participation while also suggesting ways to adapt Arnstein's theory to citizen participation on the Internet.

TOP-DOWN PARTICIPATION: UK GOVERNMENT OFFICIALS' BLOGS

Political blogs published by European officials provide a useful top-down project to examine in terms of civic participation. This analysis draws on Coleman and Moss' evaluation of the blogs of "Margot Wallström, the European Union Commissioner for Institutional Relations and Communication; David Miliband, ... British Secretary of State for the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs; and David Cameron, the Leader of the Conservative Party" (8) from late 2006 and early 2007. Coleman and Moss focused on these politicians because of their national or international positions of authority (8). Negotiating national or regional disconnection is a major concern for politicians, and Coleman and Moss suggest that politicians see blogs as a way to mitigate political disconnection by directly addressing citizens through blogs (9).

Participation Challenges

Coleman and Moss identify implicit goals, challenges, designs and uses based on interactions through political blogs. Coleman and Moss describe the implicit goal of the three political blogs: "to make representation appear more direct and to raise public expectations about the potential for more inclusive, interactive governance" (9). They assert that the political blogs functioned largely to change the perception of interactivity between citizens and politicians, though the change in perception may go a long way towards encouraging active civic participation (19). Coleman and Moss suggest that Wallström, Miliband and Cameron portrayed themselves through their blogs as personal, responsive politicians seeking direct connections with citizens.

Participants and Design Characteristics

The three politicians Coleman and Moss studied blogs with open comments systems. Wallström and Miliband produced text blogs, while Cameron's blog consisted primarily of recorded videos (7-8). Cameron's site included functionality for citizens to compose new posts in discussion threads alongside the ability to comment on Cameron's blog posts. Further, Cameron's blog features an "Ask David" section where "David will respond to the top 3 blog posts from the Open Blog as rated by you, the users" (Coleman and Moss 18). The participants on the blogs appear to be citizens who read the blogs and those who posted comments.

Project Goals and Ideal Project Outcomes

Coleman and Moss argue that the texts of the politicians' blog posts suggest three implicit interrelated claims. First, the bloggers identify and personalize themselves with the public, claiming that their online portrayal reflect more ordinary, "real" constructions of their identity. Second, because blog expressions reflect a more "real" version of the government official, by extension their interactions on blogs are more unfiltered and unmediated than political messages intended for mass audiences and often provide insight into the influences behind their decisions. Third, politicians assert that blogging about their personal opinions allows room for dialogue: citizens can question and critique their approaches and the politicians can respond in a timely and unfiltered manner (Coleman and Moss 9).

Use

Coleman and Moss report that all three bloggers sought to distance their blogs from "other mediated forms of publicity" (9). Wallström describes her blog in terms of direct interaction between citizens and politicians, Miliband frames his blog in terms of

transparency, and Cameron describes his blog as a glimpse into the Conservative party (9). Politicians shared stories from their lives, commented on popular culture events and shared their limitations and weaknesses in order to personalize their political life (10-12). Coleman and Moss argue that the politicians often combined political and personal statements, such as a post from Cameron about television shows and job training (11), a post that combined political and personal statements in order to appear more informal and less “on-message”. Politicians also called attention to their flaws in their blogs in order to appear aware of their own limitations. Coleman and Moss describe posts about Wallström’s limited French language skills and Miliband’s lack of familiarity with local governance projects. Coleman and Moss argue that such statements may make citizens feel more connected to the government officials while also providing opportunities for citizens to accuse politicians of “being insincere or inconsistent” (Coleman and Moss 13).

Coleman and Moss also suggest that the three bloggers attempted to create an air of spontaneity and transparency in their blogs. Wallström and Miliband sometimes posted about particular events and their reactions as they happened (15), while Cameron’s video posts showed Cameron addressing the camera and speaking in the present tense to convey simultaneity (15). Coleman and Moss argue that the politicians used these tactics to ground their reactions “in the moment” in order for their responses to appear more honest and unrehearsed. When the politicians did not address issues as they happened, they focused instead on detailing the logic behind their decisions on particular policy issues (15).

All three politicians describe their blogging efforts as acts of interaction with the public. Cameron frames his blog in terms of direct communication with interested citizens, Miliband describes his efforts using bridging and reconnection metaphors, and Wallström argues that her blog is built on engaging with citizens’ everyday experiences

at the local level (Coleman and Moss 16). Coleman and Moss argue that various levels of interaction occurred between citizens and the politicians on the blogs (17). Coleman and Moss describe Miliband's call for citizens' opinions on issues and his "personalized responses" (17) to comments as well as the informal nature of comments offered in response. He tends to include responsive phrasing in new blog posts on particular topics, though some readers expressed disbelief in his commitment to conversation (complaining that he rarely responds in citizen discussions) (17). Further, in response to Cameron's "Ask David" segments, some readers like the interactivity, though others bemoan the fact that Cameron emphatically stated that he will only respond to posts, and not just comments as well (18). A few readers understand his lack of response to direct comments as a means of propagating political messaging and not engaging citizens in dialogues.

Coleman and Moss acknowledge their lack of a methodological tool to comprehensively evaluate citizen reception through blog comments (19), but they attempt to discern impressions about sincerity from commenters' responses. Coleman and Moss report several comments as potentially indicative of the outcomes of political blogs. When Miliband weighed in on a particular week's Big Brother, though commenters expressed their skepticism about his familiarity with the subject (12). Some reader comments also suggest that Wallström succeeds at communicating without filters in a more personal style (10). Other commenters criticize Wallström taking time away from her ostensibly demanding public duties to tell personal stories or moralize (13). Similarly, a young commenter criticizes Cameron for personalizing his political videos solely to establish an air of approachability, and for appearing to equate personality with electability (13). Coleman and Moss suggest that readers evaluate claims made by politicians in light of their own private behavior and look for consistency between public policy stances and private consumption and behavioral decisions (13).

Evaluation

Coleman and Moss suggest that politicians capitalize on the appearance of interactivity as a means of political connection (16) They argue that the blogs provide a limited form of interactivity - while the blogs “give an impression of senior politicians as more accessible human beings”, “they offer few interactive opportunities to citizens that have not been available” (18) through offline means. Coleman and Moss conclude that the perception of interactivity may encourage civic participation and a feeling of citizen connection, regardless of the present institutional channels for civic participation. They suggest that, in the pursuit of the appearance of interactivity, government officials may encourage active participation by encouraging citizens to feel more connected and thus encouraging them to act more connected.

Participation Analysis

According to Arnstein’s ladder of citizen participation, the government officials argue that they consult citizens through the blogs, while in reality, they often merely inform citizens about European political decisions. The personal, simultaneous aspects of their blogs deflect accusations of manipulation, because the appearance of humility and interactivity between officials and citizens offers at least a token channel for citizens to respond to the politicians’ ideas. However, the amount of interaction is limited more to a perception of interactivity and closeness rather than consistently interactive dialogue, because the motivations of the bloggers appear grounded in the service-driven, consumer-focused model of political governance that sees the problem of civic participation as one of mistranslation or bad information rather than one of encouraging citizen participation. However, Coleman and Moss point out that, inasmuch as a feeling of efficacy encourages citizens to more actively participate in civic matters, then the blogs, by attempting to communicate the idea of closeness may indirectly foster practices of political closeness

and political actions in citizens. Accordingly, the blogs may create an environment where citizens feel more directly connected to their representatives, and therefore more likely to engage in a variety of forms of online and offline political action. Table 2 maps the project's goals, designs and outcomes according to the typology proposed in chapter 4 and highlights the types of deliberation and citizen participation that the project encourages.

Table 2: Typology of European Politician’s Blogs

Goals / Aims:	
<i>Participation Challenges</i>	Citizen disconnection from public life; feelings of distance from government officials
<i>Project Goals</i>	Reestablish feelings of closeness between citizens and officials
<i>Ideal Outcomes</i>	Citizens feel more in touch with (and presumably support) government officials; increased citizen participation in (formal) means of (national) government
Project Designs:	
<i>Design Characteristics</i>	Government official’s blogs with open comments; an Open Blog for citizens to write posts
<i>Technical Functions</i>	Information delivery; comments on posts; ability to post longer discussions as separate posts (for Cameron)
<i>Interactivity</i>	One-way information provision; inconsistent, asynchronous communication with citizens
Use:	
<i>Participants</i>	European citizens
<i>Project Implementation</i>	Blog posts encouraged the perception of ordinariness, a lack of political filters, and interactivity between citizens and representatives; Blogs encourage participation through the appearance of interactivity
<i>Response to the Project</i>	Blogs succeeded in conveying politicians’ humility; commenters questioned bloggers involvement in “superfluous” online activities; commenters questioned officials’ references to popular culture; commenters expected personal behaviors to match policy standards
Evaluation:	
<i>How sponsors interpret results</i>	Limited interactivity wrapped in the language of dialogue with citizens
<i>Innovations</i>	Encouraging the perception of interactivity may lead to increased feelings of citizen connection and therefore to active participation
<i>Limitations</i>	Asynchronous communication still primarily resembles one-way information distribution rather than two-way dialogue
Participatory Analysis:	
<i>Arnstein’s Ladder of Participation</i>	Officials promise consultation, blogs suggest information
<i>Deliberation</i>	Comments allow for open-ended citizen responses; few channels for involved conversations with officials

BOTTOM-UP PARTICIPATION: MUMSNET DISCUSSION FORUMS

Mumsnet is an example of bottom-up civic participation, where citizen interaction and political action arose from a community not explicitly focused on political discussion. The data about this project was gathered from Gambles' review on Mumsnet as a personal political public (29). Gambles describes Mumsnet as both a cultural icon and an interactive discussion forum for citizen dialogue about parenthood (31-32). In terms of design, Mumsnet is known for information provision and interactive online discussion. The site's discussion boards facilitate discussion on a variety of issues from grief counseling to baby name choice to child psychology (32). Mumsnet is a series of websites on the Internet with an easy community registration system and a large number of members (60,000 in 2007) (33). Gambles reports that most of the participants on Mumsnet are women with university degrees and a middle-class socioeconomic background (38).

Participation Challenges and Project Goals

Mumsnet is an example of a grassroots project focused on facilitating community and information sharing among parents and equipping parents to make sense of parenthood and various parenting issues (Gambles 33). Gambles does not attribute explicit democratic goals to the project, but rather emphasizes that the network creates an environment for participants to interact and express their stories in ways that have both public and private repercussions. Gambles focuses on personal expression on Mumsnet, and the possibilities for that expression to have political consequences (29). Gambles suggests that "the processes of online interactive communication have the capacity to make public the wealth and diversity of what might otherwise be regarded as personal or private experiences" (33) because contributors can control both the style and the content of the expression of their experiences.

Use

Gambles argues that the Mumsnet forums allowed participants to communicate informally and to “learn from, negotiate and make sense of their parenting experiences in interaction with each other” (33). The website emphasizes the “lay expertise” (Gambles 33) and experiential knowledge contributions by parents to conversations on a number of parenting-related topics (33). She cites a number of instances where the community collectively addressed the problems of particular members and actively discussed parenting techniques and hardships (34).

Gambles also explores Mumsnet’s political connections in terms of both formal political action and in terms of social movement organization (34). First, Mumsnet has attracted significant UK political attention. Gambles relates that “politicians [often visit] who seek to communicate directly with parents about their contemporary parenting experiences” (34). Gambles argues that politicians frame their involvement as connecting with the ‘real’ issues parents face as a form of political consultation into policy decisions related to parenting. Second, Mumsnet users often organize to collectively address concerns that link parenting to policy (35). She describes a 2008 campaign to set standards for more sensitive treatment from doctors of women who had miscarriages (35). In that case, Mumsnet users produced “10 recommendations [that] were subsequently developed and compiled in a Code of Practice that was then featured in The Times newspaper” (Gambles 36). Gambles suggests political movements on Mumsnet often started with personal stories, which in turn catalyzed users to engage in community discussion, formulate policy positions and share them with government officials.

Gambles argues that the community consistently addresses public and private issues that pertain to community members or its parenting focus. Drawing on her own experiences with Mumsnet, Gambles argues that the comfort threads encourages people

“to ‘go public’ with their personal feelings and emotions, albeit in an anonymous and privatized way, which works with and encourages the development of personal strength to keep going in terms of trying to become a parent” (37). The emphasis in these occasions is often on personal support and encouragement. Gambles recognizes a duality in Mumsnet, where it simultaneously encourages people to publicly share intimate life experiences while also tending to depoliticize personal experiences and discuss them primarily in personal terms.

Gambles describes this tendency as a trend towards individualistic and therapeutic language in Mumsnet discussions. She argues that the therapeutic reconstruction of social interactions “can be seen through the type of voice encouraged on Mumsnet: one of a sharing and supportive nature that often works with and emphasizes a therapeutic, empowerment, self-help-through-support-and-discussion approach” (38). This trend is evident in the “behavior and development” section of Mumsnet where discussion often centers on personal responsibility and “somewhat eclipses discussion of the socio-economic opportunities and constraints that characterize the lives of different parents and their children” (37). Within that problematic emphasis, Gambles recognizes more flexible connections than other scholars. She suggests that the community chooses to personalize social problems, and that their choices potentially can be interpreted as forms of citizen participation in the framing of their problems (38).

Evaluation: Innovations and Limitations

Gambles suggests that political interactions on Mumsnet can be seen as characteristic of a more dialogic new media that promises more political accountability, especially on interactive websites “where participants have much more direct control due to a lack of editorial intervention” (35). However, Gambles expresses concern that

Mumsnet might overemphasize the personalization of parenting problems rather than political action shown by its language and discussion patterns (36-37). Gambles is also concerned about the representativeness of Mumsnet, and who it implicitly excludes from participation in the stated democratic, open online discussion (38). Gambles points out that Mumsnet is primarily inhabited by current or future mothers rather than parents (39). She argues that who speaks on Mumsnet, along with its content, “has implications for what - and whose - personal issues are taken up politically in the context of parenting, and may link to the somewhat eclipsing and privatizing of socio-economic and gendered constraints and other sets of issues that face some parents more than others” (39).

Participation Analysis

Gambles appears to suggest that, when arising from a bottom-up approach to personal sharing and political action, these kinds of personalized problem solving skills are not entirely reflective of Arnstein’s therapy level of citizen nonparticipation. When coming from the ground up, that level of citizen participation can be a step up towards more active engagement and power delegation rather than a step towards appeasement and public non-participation. The political attention that Mumsnet attracts and the campaigns started by its members are encouraging signs that apolitical grassroots communities can potentially engage in political action. However, the attitudes of British politicians towards Mumsnet’s political contributions, along with its privatizing and personalizing language trends, may limit the long-term possibilities of consistent, active citizen participation in political affairs born out of Mumsnet and comparable grassroots communities. Table 3 summarizes the project’s goals, design characteristics and uses, as well as its forms of citizen participation and deliberation.

Table 3: Typology of Mumsnet

Goals / Aims:	
<i>Participation Challenges</i>	Parents need information about parenting and community interactions with other parents
<i>Project Goals</i>	Provide information on parenting; encourage parents to interact and share their stories with one another
<i>Ideal Outcomes</i>	Online community-building; collection of user-generated parenting information; parent education and involvement
Project Designs:	
<i>Design Characteristics</i>	Website with regular information pieces and discussion forums
<i>Technical Functions</i>	Information delivery; Creation of discussion topics; respond to discussion topics; comment on other citizens' responses
<i>Interactivity</i>	High levels of citizen-to-citizen interactivity; per Coleman and Blumler's expectation, few institutional channels to communicate experiences to government officials
Use:	
<i>Participants</i>	UK parents, typically female, moderately well-educated, middle socioeconomic class
<i>Project Implementation</i>	Online collective behavior; information exchange; interactions with politicians over Mumsnet; collective political action on parenting issues
<i>Response to the Project</i>	Participants shared personal experiences in Mumsnet's public places; the tone of the sharing is split between calls to political action and therapeutic / privatizing language; Primarily personal expressions encouraged collective identity formation and drew attention of government officials looking for citizens' opinions on particular policies

Table 3: Typology of Mumsnet (continued)

Evaluation:	
<i>How sponsors interpret results</i>	Participants engaged one another and politicians on occasion; reviewer expressed worry about individualized responses to social concerns
<i>Innovations</i>	Personalized public expression online
<i>Limitations</i>	Personalizing language discourages political action; issues of access and literacy prevent Mumsnet from being a representative voice when speaking to government officials
Participatory Analysis:	
<i>Arnstein's Ladder of Participation</i>	Problematic; active engagement in political and personal expressions mitigates the nonparticipatory elements of therapeutic language
<i>Deliberation</i>	Encourages citizen deliberation and political action, though filtered through non-interactive means of engaging with citizens

HYBRIDIZED MODEL: THE MILAN COMMUNITY NETWORK

The hybridized, local model of accountable civic participation is a fruitful place to explore the influences that an online civic participation project's definitions, designs and outcomes have on the project's usefulness for connecting citizens with each other and to their representatives. Researchers at the Civic Informatics Laboratory at the University of Milano set up the Milan Community Network in 1994 (de Cindio et al. 396). The project recruited citizens of Milan, local government organizations and private businesses to participate in the network (de Cindio et al. 396). As of 2003, the Milan Community Network hosted 187 public discussion forums, 348 informational forums for organizations, and 179 "direct lines" (de Cindio 207) between citizens and government officials with close to "15,000 registered members among the approximately 1.3 million citizens resident in Milan" (de Cindio 206).

Participation Challenges, Project Goals, Ideal Outcomes

The project sponsors framed the problem of citizen participation in terms of a series of barriers. These barriers limited formal expression by limiting access to online avenues for civic engagement and limited informal community building online indirectly through a lack of regulation of both improper and irrelevant speech. Barriers to civic participation also meant limited direct communication with representatives due to restrictions in the level of interactivity between citizens and representatives, and limited creation of citizen-driven civic participation projects through the restriction of citizen access to resources, communication channels and public recognition. The Milan Community Network had three goals: to provide Milanese citizens with access to the Internet, to support online and offline experiences of local community, and to assert "the right of citizenship in the global networked society" (de Cindio 201).

The project sponsors designed the Milan Community Network to provide citizens with participatory tools by making network access free to all citizens and keeping maintenance within the purview of the project sponsors. Further, they facilitated community interactions through discussion forums that allowed for deliberation, information sharing and active participation on the network. Finally, the project sponsors encouraged government officials to interact with citizens directly by designing transparent and public online communications channels. The project sponsors grounded their educational and participatory goals in the local community: their founding document reports that the network would “integrate the principles and goals of a citizen’s network... with local services... to encompass in an online environment all the components of the town - the whole local community” (de Cindio et al. 396). Ideally, the Milan Community Network would facilitate citizen-led projects, connect citizens in the local community both online and offline, and strengthen the bonds between citizens, local governments and private organizations.

Design Characteristics

The project sponsors designed the Milan Community Network as an environment where differences between citizens could be recognized and regulated through staff moderation in order to lower the barriers of entry to civic participation online. Project sponsors designed the network to support this understanding of participation by focusing on three goals: identified users, regulated behavior, and proactive discussion moderation (de Cindio et al. 398). Project sponsors restricted anonymity for two purposes. They argued that a lack of anonymity would encourage citizens to carefully develop civic participation projects and regulate their online behavior knowing that other citizens could hold them accountable for their activity. Project sponsors also suggested that a lack of

anonymity would allow citizens to translate their online acquaintances into offline interactions. Second, project sponsors argued that heavy forum moderation would keep discussion on track and encourage civic deliberation by facilitating on-topic, relevant discussions in online exchanges and creating new discussion threads if participants expressed interest in discussing other topics (de Cindio et al. 399). Third, project sponsors created an online code of conduct, the “Galateo” (398) to regulate citizen interaction on the Milan Community Network. The Galateo restricted the distribution of online software, the sharing of illegal information, the posting of unsolicited and unrelated product advertising in discussion threads, and the use of distasteful, offensive or obscene language by participants. De Cindio and Ripamonti suggest that, while offline communities have “tacit assumptions, rituals, protocols, rules and laws, online communities need to make them somehow explicit” (269). The Milan Community Network made its norms explicit in the Galateo.

Use

Early planning and community management work was coordinated by the Milan Community Network’s staff and involved interacting with individual citizens (de Cindio et al. 399). Staff and community volunteers handled conversation moderation and non-anonymous registration created a system of mutual accountability between participants. After private citizens, local government and private entities soon joined the Milan Community Network in order to train their employees in new online communications media and to establish more interactive communications lines with Milanese citizens (399). The involvement of local organizations led to the development of a system of “direct line[s]” (399) that allowed citizens to publicly question government officials and receive public responses. The project sponsors argue that direct lines opened routes for

interactive dialogue both between agencies and citizens and later facilitated exchanges between citizens and candidates (400).

The growing complexity of social relationships on the Milan Community Network led to a number of regulatory evolutions, including the production of a Moderator's Galateo (de Cindio et al. 400) and, later, the "Member-Staff Intermediate Structure" (or ASSI) (401), a separate body of three directly-elected moderators who were tasked with managing interpersonal conflicts and enforcing punishments against rule-breaking community members. The ASSI became the de facto evaluator and regulator of the Galateo and an unofficial community voice in design and negotiation structures with the project sponsors until the formation of the Milan Community Network Participatory Foundation in 1998 (de Cindio 208). The foundation created a legal entity through which the project sponsors could interact with governments and corporations, and also allowed citizens and organizations to support the Milan Community Network financially by becoming contributing members of the foundation (de Cindio and Ripamonti 275).

Both citizens and local government officials took advantage of the network. De Cindio discusses citizens' projects in terms of their strengths, the limitations imposed on them by the network, and the features of the network that citizens found most important to their projects' success. First, De Cindio reported on Maurizio, a citizen activist who constructed a substance abuse forum for SOS Droga Milano, created a volunteer group called Solidarietà, and established a Historical and Social Research forum (210). Maurizio framed his experiences with the Milan Community Network in terms of overcoming mass media filters to content production and distribution (210). He argues that, despite the small numbers of citizens participating in his projects, the network has

allowed his initiatives to attract interested community members and address specific community issues (211).

De Cindio also discussed several educational projects that used the Milan Community Network as an educational tool for developing citizen literacy (212). These citizens argued that the Milan Community Network provided a protected environment for students and families to interact online (213) and acted as an “experimental and laboratory framework” (213) for rapid and iterative project development. Another citizen described the benefits of working on the network in terms of isolation and community (214). Participants recognized that the Milan Community Network’s project design and regulatory structure allowed school children, government officials, community activists and technically proficient citizens to engage in online discussion and political activity without intimidation.

Moving from citizen action to government officials’ activities on the Milan Community Network, the most successful outcome of the relationship between the network and public officials was the “direct line” system that connected citizen questions with representatives’ answers in a public and transparent way. De Cindio described the ways that the Province of Milan used the Milan Community Network to not only educate citizens about its existence, but also to connect them with a direct line to the president of the Province (217). The province’s experience with direct lines led to contribute new regulatory structures to the community for standardizing direct line management policies (de Cindio et al. 400).

The project sponsors also recognized that the direct line system, coupled with the Galateo, produced some interesting personalization side effects for local government officials. Government officials transitioned from utilizing the Milan Community Network as a tool for distributing political messages to using its resources to design and implement

interactive political projects. The project sponsors recognize that this personalized approach as the additional unintended effect of recruiting government officials to participate on a personal, rather than official, level in the discussions and activities of the Milan Community Network. De Cindio argues that the extent that the network has seen success in its relationships with local officials stems from the ways that those public officials used the network to implement their own projects and goals (215).

Evaluating Project Results

The project sponsors argue that these design decisions separated the Milan Community Network from other networks characterized by top-down regulation on the part of the project sponsors while allowing the staff to resist negative trends associated with online discourse by preventing libelous posts or posts encouraging illegal behavior from entering the network's ecosystem. The Milan Community Network staff argued that restricting anonymity imbued the online community network with the accountability and recognition characteristics of offline social relations (de Cindio et al. 398). Further, the community guidelines for interaction and communication on the Milan Community Network codified in the Galateo facilitated an interactive, consistent dialogue between project sponsors and citizens. This constant communication between the two parties, in the context of a bottom-up approach to network regulation, led to the rise of a network of volunteer moderators who were initially trained by the program sponsors but subsequently took on active roles in regulating the Milan Community Network. The participatory design of regulatory systems further influenced the direction of the network's more complex regulatory structures.

Based on the project's success in encouraging citizen projects and dialogue between citizens and government officials, the Milan Community Network's project

sponsors argue that the network's evolution and continued growth was strongly connected to the development of regulatory tools for encouraging civility and citizen deliberation (de Cindio et al. 402). First, they contend that strict moderation rules provided a nurturing environment for citizens developing the skills associated with digital literacy as well as citizens seeking to express views that would otherwise be marginalized or excluded from formal civic participation. Finally, the project sponsors argue that the Galateo allows the Milan Community Network to adhere to a deliberative, dialogic model of citizen interaction that subverts the consumer-focused, service-driven models of interaction typically associated with e-government (de Cindio et al. 403).

The project sponsors also recognize several problems with the bottom-up, moderated, foundation-based approach to managing the Milan Community Network. De Cindio argues that the direct line connections between government officials and citizens contributes to the network's value, but it also raises questions about the limits of constant, active engagement between politicians and citizens on the network (215). Politicians looking to connect directly with their constituents struggle to remain engaged in open and transparent communication with citizens over the lifespan of the project. The idealism of citizen deliberation collides against the political realities of scale and message distribution, especially when politicians compared the quantitative measures of citizens' participation in deliberative exchanges to the number of citizens visiting and reading more non-interactive, informational political sites. This disparity also affected citizen-sponsored projects: citizens report that their projects sometimes failed to attract mainstream attention outside of the Milan Community Network and could not overcome the very media filters that the designs of the network aimed to circumvent. De Cindio argues that social conditioning towards a non-interactive consumer model of civic engagement restricts projects to experimental sizes and scales (222) and keep citizens

from becoming involved in the Milan Community Network and other deliberative projects, even when local government officials are willing to engage them in dialogue (219).

The participatory approach to design iteration also leads to contention and frustration, which plagued the funding of the Milan Community Network Foundation as a result of its participatory, grassroots-driven structures. Unlike other community networks that were funded by local governments or private organizations, the Milan Community Network relied on local government, corporate and individual sponsorship in the foundation, an expectation thwarted by economic and social realities. Tellingly, the same problems of scale that challenged politicians, set up strong barriers to the growth of citizen-led projects, and restricted the participatory financial funding of the Milan Community Network Foundation, also threatened to water down the participatory, bottom-up approach to network regulation envisioned by the project sponsors. De Cindio suggests that the key for future expansion for the Milan Community Network and similar projects lies in creating mechanisms for connecting public and private organizations to citizens' projects in terms of both organizational and financial support (222-223).

Participation Analysis

The active negotiation between the project sponsors and project participants over the regulatory structure of the Milan Community Network demonstrates an active definition of civic participation, focusing on training citizens to construct and manage their own local projects and encouraging citizen education and deliberation with minimal supervision from Milan Community Network staff. Project sponsors encouraged citizens to engage in dialogue, both with government representatives and with one another, for the purpose of deliberation, discussion and community building, in order to connect citizens,

governments and local communities online. Additionally, the project's focus on local community allowed citizens to engage with local government officials in transparent dialogues; as a result, the project attracted both government officials and local citizens to participate in the community network. Network participants also benefited from the educational focus of the Milan Community Network, and citizens learned how to use the Internet while also being trained to create their own projects that addressed the needs and desires of the community.

The Milan Community Network's design resembles the higher levels of citizen participation described by Arnstein. The design of the network allows project sponsors to delegate the bulk of the network's regulatory and participatory power to its citizens and local government officials. The Milan Community Network exemplifies the value of discussion in civic culture: the explicit tools provided by the project sponsors for network interaction influenced the network's communications ecosystem and produced a variety of beneficial regulatory innovations through iterative community power-sharing. Table 4 summarizes the participatory analysis of the Milan Community network, as well as its goals, designs and outcomes.

Table 4: The Milan Community Network

Goals / Aims:	
<i>Participation Challenges</i>	Barriers to citizen access, expression, and connection to government officials online
<i>Project Goals</i>	Connecting Milan citizens to the Internet; bolstering local community; educating and equipping citizens for active political participation
<i>Ideal Outcomes</i>	Citizen-driven participation projects; offline relationships and movements; connections between citizens and local government
Project Designs:	
<i>Design Characteristics</i>	Enforced non-anonymity; proactive post moderation; Galateo regulating online behaviors and communications
<i>Technical Functions</i>	Information delivery; Creation of discussion topics; direct line channels for communication with government officials and organizational leaders
<i>Interactivity</i>	Highly interactive, between citizens and with governments through systemic constructs such as “direct lines”
Use:	
<i>Participants</i>	Milan citizens, businesses, nonprofit organizations and local government agencies
<i>Project Implementation</i>	Organizational information pages; online discussion; direct lines with government officials; growing ecosystem of iterative moderation and community regulation
<i>Response to the Project</i>	Citizens initiated projects for community connectivity and education; governments used networks to train employees, engage citizens, create government projects and participate personally in the community
Evaluation:	
<i>How sponsors interpret results</i>	Citizens and government officials made highly interactive, highly creative uses of network capabilities; regulation encouraged deliberation and active citizen participation
<i>Innovations</i>	Regulatory environment that influenced bottom-up citizen and government activities towards active participation and dialogue
<i>Limitations</i>	Fatigue for politicians; dismissal of, or hostility towards, citizen-led projects by relevant authorities; lack of institutional channels to fund citizen projects beyond experimental stage
Participatory Analysis:	
<i>Deliberation</i>	Environment encouraged deliberation and connection
<i>Arnstein’s Ladder of Participation</i>	Hybrid model saw power delegation to citizens by network, though not directly from local governments; citizen-led local projects perhaps representing highest level of participation

CONCLUSION

The three case studies analyzed above demonstrate the ways that Arnstein's conceptualization of active citizen participation can provide insight into online civic participation projects, and that civic participation online can influence and refine Arnstein's model as it applies to civic participation online. Coleman and Moss' study of European blogs highlights the ways that government initiatives designed to inform citizens and placate them can encourage more active citizen participation when citizens feel that their representatives are personable and responsive to their questions and comments. Further, Gambles' experiences with Mumsnet suggest that therapeutic and personalizing language, when initiated by citizens, can represent a form of self-determination that politicizes personal experiences and can directly inspire civic action. These cases suggest that the Internet can potentially enable a range of political activities that may contribute to citizenship, but may not all involve active decisionmaking power. Arnstein's levels of citizen participation provides insight into both the benefits that project sponsors reported in citizen-led projects on the Milan Community Network and the troubles those efforts faced when trying to expand beyond small-scale experimentation. The evaluative typology suggested by this report encourages researchers to analyze online civic participation projects through the lens of a power-focused conceptualization of citizen participation and provides a framework for both making sense of when projects fail to meet expectations related to civic participation and for identifying innovations and encouraging developments outside the typical framework of the public sphere, civic culture or deliberation.

Chapter 6: Conclusion: Citizens Embodying Political Connection

Activists and researchers promoting civic participation in the twenty-first century face a paradox in political life. Citizens' discontent with government structures and their disconnection from their government grows even as ICTs offer the potential for more direct connections between citizens and their government and connections with one another (Dahlgren 2005, Toulouse and Luke 1998). Researchers and activists continue to develop online civic participation projects with the goal of more directly involving individual citizens in public life. The conceptual and methodological diversity of these civic participation projects suggests that scholars could benefit from a typology that embraces active citizen participation in terms of deliberation and power sharing and identifies the goals, designs and outcomes that influence the success or failure of particular online civic participation projects.

The model proposed in this report allows researchers to explore the relationships between online civic participation projects and active citizen participation in order to understand the innovations and limitations of past projects and to guide the conceptualization and design of future projects. The interplay of these elements provides researchers the means to analyze citizen participation in terms of citizen power rather than in terms of the desired response of any particular project. By utilizing Arnstein's framework in the context of online deliberation and interactivity, researchers can sidestep the methodological uncertainty involved in identifying implicit or explicit definitions of democracy, citizenship or civic participation (as proposed by Tsagarousianou 1999 and van Dijk 2000). Instead, scholars can spend their time more systematically identifying the produced level or levels of citizen participation in a way that defines citizen power in terms of self-governance.

Further, rather than focusing on identifying or setting up institutional channels to connect citizen deliberation to policy outcomes, Arnstein's ladder frames citizens' collective action and direct engagement with representatives as a form of equitable interaction. Rather than focus on particular policy outcomes or attempting to identify qualitative shifts in citizen participation, Arnstein's model allows researchers to understand civic participation in terms of identity construction and self-determination while also specifying empirical measurements for evaluating citizen participation. My typology combines deliberative theory and active citizen participation with a project's goals, designs and outcomes in a way that yields fresh insights both for understanding current studies and for planning future projects.

The three cases addressed in this literature review also demonstrate that online civic participation opens new routes for active citizen participation in ways that challenge Arnstein's focus on the transference or delegation of power and suggest new wrinkles to Arnstein's model to accommodate the use of the Internet for encouraging online and offline civic participation. The projects provide the necessary, though not sufficient, tools for citizen participation according to Arnstein's model, though they do not yet facilitate a measurable degree of citizen influence in formal policy formulation. Coleman and Moss' analysis of top-down political blogs suggest that top-down projects, even when they seek merely to imply political closeness rather than provide the infrastructure for true interactivity, can encourage more active citizen participation when they inform citizens or (even in a token way) consult citizens for their opinions on political matters. Gambles' exploration of the Mumsnet community suggests that designs that facilitate interactive exchanges between citizens allow citizens to transform their discussion into political action, even when the language permeating those discussions is rife with the therapeutic responsibility-shifting that Arnstein warns against as a form of non-participation. Finally,

the outcomes of the Milan Community Network suggest that scholars should focus their energies on developing a communicative environment that encourages particular kinds of citizen interactions rather than focusing project energies and resources on developing formal educational tools for pedagogy related to deliberation and civic participation. The hybrid and local nature of the network allows citizens, organizations and project sponsors to model power delegation and direct citizen control in an environment protected from the bureaucratic influences of private business or local government funding and with the layers of transparency, accountability and consequence facilitated by locally situated online networks.

Coleman and Blumler argue that digital democracy should be tailored to create an “accounting democracy” (41) that allows public voices to contribute to the policymaking in the 21st century (197). The problems of citizen disconnection and citizens’ discontent with political representation do not disappear with the advent of new technologies, even when those technologies promise online deliberation and a more horizontal political system. As Sassen warns, these networks are often shaped by entities that maintain power through indirect representation and one-way, non-interactive communication (61). If left unchecked, the end result of these is a network that merely replicates current mediated relationships between representatives and citizens and reinforces inequitable structures of social and political power.

The online civic participation projects analyzed in this review suggest that subverting those power structures in favor of a more deliberative and accountable government starts with project goals that exemplify active citizen participation, open and transparent designs that encourage active citizen political involvement. The typology developed in this report suggests ways that researchers can identify interrelated elements in project goals, designs and outcomes that encourage particular kinds of citizen

deliberation and particular forms of citizen participation. The ability to map those relationships can aid in the interpretation of past online civic participation projects and guide the conceptualization and implementation of future projects. Networks, when designed to encourage citizen accountability and foster community, can encourage citizens to actively participate in their own governance and in so doing can both create new systems of deliberation and self-governance and also shape current institutional structures of democratic governance into more transparent, accountable and accessible systems.

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