

# **Organizing Political Parties as Online Communities: Implications from a Mass-eParticipation Initiative**

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## Introduction

Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) are more and more used to manage and support the relationships between public organisations, like political parties or governments, and citizens. Usually such settings are identified with the term eParticipation (Veit & Huntgerburth, 2014), and are supposed to pose new challenges (Criado et al., 2013) and offer new opportunities (Medaglia, 2012) for organizing the relationships between political parties and citizens.

Literature on eParticipation currently focuses on political parties, citizens, and public administrations use of ICTs in conjunction with traditional communication channels (Criado et al., 2013; Kavanaugh et al., 2012). It reports that existing initiatives so far failed to introduce significant innovations in the way these stakeholders interact (Chadwick, 2008). Only few initiatives achieved their intended aims (Sæbø, Flak, & Sein, 2011), and many remain of local or small-scale (Medaglia, 2012).

Successful citizen-initiated eParticipation initiatives, though few, are fascinating subjects for further study currently untouched by the literature (Medaglia, 2012; Susha & Grönlund, 2012). Also little research addresses the organisational settings needed by political parties to attract a base of followers (Criado et al., 2013), and there have been no advances in the practical understanding of how to implement ICT and integrate it into existing institutional processes (Ferro et al., 2013).

We argue that when ICTs are used to embark citizens in eParticipation initiatives we have an Online Community (OC). The three components of OCs (people, technologies, and the surrounding organizational environment) are discussed separately by the literature. We instead posit that they should be addressed together as they influence each other. Again such entangled perspective of OCs is underdeveloped in the literature, while it embodies potential to generate new knowledge, and to challenge the current, sometimes unfit, understanding of the organization side of OCs (O'Mahony & Ferraro, 2007).

The Italian Five Star Movement's ('*Movimento Cinque Stelle*'; henceforth, M5S) is an exceptional example from which to glean information on organizing a political party as an OC for many reasons. First, the M5S is one of the few eParticipation initiatives which is influential at both the local and national levels, and has probably garnered more influence in less time than most (if not all) other eParticipation initiatives combined together. Second, unlike many eParticipation political initiatives—which are overwhelmingly founded on existing political systems and focused on the interests of traditional stakeholders—the M5S is an innovation in the Italian political landscape started by people who were not part of the established political elite, using the form of a large OC (around 800,000 current members) to get organized. Third, this organisation has, since its inception, carried on and coordinated all its activities using ICT tools online.

In short, this organisation has introduced several innovations in a strongly institutionalized landscape (that of Italian politics), challenging the status quo of established routines. Due to its novelty and pioneering efforts in promoting political engagement through mass-eParticipation, the M5S can be seen as a large-scale experiment based on an OC. In this paper we describe the activities of a research project studying this setting guided by the following research question: *What are the consequences, challenges and opportunities for organizing a political party as an Online Community to manage collective action?*

## Related Research: eParticipation and Online Communities

ICT might provide citizens the opportunity to initiate policy changes from the bottom up (Abdelsalam et al., 2013) and act as a transformative agent in generating citizen engagement (Chun & Luna Reyes, 2012). By utilizing ICT, a large number of citizens might be able to participate in shaping politics (Bekkers et al., 2013) achieving such an aim through the efficient facilitation of collective actions (Coleman & Blumler, 2009) in posing questions, receiving information, engaging in conversation, and otherwise setting the rules for open dialogue (Mossberger et al., 2013).

Individuals' extensive participation in online political discourse is hard to achieve (Coleman & Shane, 2012). While some scholars argue that online discourse is dominated by members of elitist groups that are already active in and dominate politics—'*most people have no will [to join] nor interest [in joining]*' (Margolis et al., 1996)—others argue that ICT could transform citizens engagement (Chun & Luna Reyes, 2012). More research is needed to fully investigate the deliberative qualities of online political activities and explore the scale of information sharing, the heterogeneity of messages posted, and the number of people participating in collective actions (Coleman & Shane, 2012).

Unlike traditional communities, pre-existing social ties and material benefits for contributions are weak or non-existent in OCs (Butler et al., 2002), allowing broader dynamic organization-wide online sharing (Majchrzak et al., 2013) to become more flexible and fluid than in traditional communities (Faraj et al., 2011).

With regard to the OC built around an eParticipation initiative, discussions have already been formulated on the OCs' organisational structures (Faraj et al., 2011), yet research into the consequences of designing dynamic self-organising features for such communities is needed. Various groups of users and stakeholders have various needs, and the possible uses for technology change dynamically. Hence, governance structures must address the various possible roles and likely consequences of ICT implementation. Research into OC also raises awareness of platform ownership when collective action involves exchanging information (Murray & O'Mahony, 2007).

ICT supplants hierarchies into networks (Zammuto et al., 2007). Shirky (2008) provides a simplified, yet illustrative classification of various forms of group undertakings in online networks by proposing a three-step ladder of group compilation. *Sharing* represents the easiest form of organizing, in which everyone is invited to share online. *Cooperation* involves changing behaviour to synchronize with others (Ostrom, 2000), where the product is a result of collaborative production, and members need to negotiate to make collective decisions. *Collective action* represents the more advanced kind of OCs' efforts. Here, shared responsibility is of critical importance to link individual user identity with the identity of the group, which holds the power in making group decisions which are binding for individual members. Hence, collective action involves challenges of governance: individual members must accept the superiority of group decisions, and the community must be organized to allow this decision-making. As Shirky (2008) argues a strong vision is necessary to bind all participants together to undertake a collective action. For this reason, collective action is more difficult to arrange than information sharing or collaborative creation.

## Research design

What is presented here is a part of a larger research project started in July 2013 and lasted for 20 months. It began with an exploratory study ([anonymised]) that allowed us to get an initial understanding of the M5S, identifying the stakeholders, and getting general insight into how the M5S orchestrates its activities.

We subsequently designed a semi-structured interviews' and observations' plan that includes the following empirical-data sources: semi-structured interviews, archival data (from Web pages and other online documents), observations of available software features (both public and internal), and documents presented by interviewees. With regards to archival data, we analysed the documents available, including M5S's requirements for use of its ICT channels and presentation (if any) of the organisational staff, to observe the type of information provided, the level of transparency and the organisation's structures.

We conducted nineteen interviews with members of the movement's major stakeholder groups:

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

All of the semi-structured interviews, which lasted an average of one hour, were recorded, transcribed and analysed individually by the research team members, who iteratively discussed the results of their individual data analyses to compose a mutually agreed-upon interpretation. Archival data and observations were used as Eisenhardt suggests (1989) in a triangulated approach to strengthen the relevance of the knowledge gleaned from interviews, archival data, and used ICT tools.

Following this interpretative approach, the research team let concepts and relationships emerge from its data analysis without adhering to any *a priori* constructs. The resulting ideas were later analysed in light of current related literature to identify how the study added to existing research, allowing us to examine implications for researchers and practitioners. Six key topics emerged, and were used to classify findings: *Goals, Participation, Technology use, Internal governance, External Consequences, Challenges*. These topics are consistent with the direction Criado et al. (2013) insist eParticipation research should take.

## Main findings and implications

The M5S's main objective is to achieve direct citizen involvement in politics throughout the decision-making process, from agenda setting to policy evaluation. Although facilitating individuals' extensive participation in online political discourse is difficult to achieve (Coleman & Shane, 2012). The M5S case demonstrates that numerous people are willing to play an active role in politics if they are allowed to do so through purposefully designed services, as long as M5S representatives carefully consider their ideas. M5S' subscribers are several, and a great part of them (about 30,000-40,000) usually participate in important online discussions.

M5S subscribers do, however, report difficulties ascribed to their lack of technical expertise in the issues discussed. For example, M5S uses a system designed to collectively build law proposals (Lex). They use such tool to engage citizens in the co-production of law texts that M5S' representatives should propose in their

institution. The representatives we interviewed reported anyhow the difficulties to incorporate direct citizens' input into political processes, as average citizen often lacks contextual and procedural knowledge. This indicates a need for technical and organisational solutions that empower citizens with regard to these aspects.

The huge volume of online postings, which have no hierarchical structure, makes it difficult for participants to follow discussions and identify those contributions that provide valuable insights. Whereas social media might facilitate a paradigm shift that will make organising collective action more efficient (Bekkers et al., 2013) the example of the M5S illustrates the need for a citizen-engagement strategy aimed at deriving more value from net-savvy citizens through social media (Chatfield et al., 2013).

The M5S seeks to provide information directly through the organisation's blog, since it considers traditional media, biased. The findings indicate that a lack of trust in the political and mass-media status quo is an important motivation for M5S followers, and ICT-based channels are seen as a solution to establish transparent, unmediated flows of information.

This case study also provides empirical insights into the organization of citizen-initiated eParticipation initiatives achieved through the efficient facilitation of collective action. The M5S represents a networking strategy (Mergel, 2013) that relies on extensive citizens' discussions in which party members participate as one set of actors, who introduce topics for discussion and set rules for open dialogue (Mossberger et al., 2013).

Current research rarely focuses on the consequence of self-organizing OCs. Our empirical data shows that the M5S adopts a flat structure, with a limited set of rules and regulations, allowing members to freely organise in teams, but also hardening the coordination of actions and the sense making necessary to form a coherent opinion. The present findings identify a double-loop design in 5SM, consisting of a more structured core and a more flexible periphery, as a solution to face this issue in an OC.

ICT use of the M5S mimics such double-loop structure. At the local level, the M5S allows participants a great deal of latitude in their use of ICT tools. A larger variety of different, self-managed, and loosely supervised by the centre, tools are used. In contrast, at the central level a limited, more focused, collection of official tools is used to encourage participation. Access to these core ICTs is regulated and certified by M5S staff. Then, also technology plurality in different contexts may be seen as an answer to possible tensions in a large OC.

Through citizens' engagement in political processes via ICTs, the M5S seeks to transform the role of elected representatives. First and foremost, each representative is a *primus inter pares*, a spokesperson on behalf of equally important participants. Second, the representatives are seen as ombudsmen, responsible for representing participants' needs and for raising concerns that reflect everyone's needs. Third, the influence of representatives is reduced, due to the fact that they are committed to following the opinion of the majority of subscribers when a decision must be made. Finally, representatives now play the role of boundary spanners between the OC and the institutional process.

A set of practical and research implications emerged from the discussion of findings. They are respectively summarized in Table 1 and 2.

**Table 1.** Practical implications

Goals	Market the services as an innovative alternative to existing practices through coherent use of ICT, to allow for openness and transparency.
Participation	Plan and design for a huge number of participants; ensure scalability. Develop processes and features for identifying meaningful content amongst a vast number of online postings.
Use of technology	Ensure technological plurality to allow participants to achieve various aims. Carefully manage and balance the need for openness with the strictures that technology necessarily imposes on processes.
Internal governance	Balance centralised control with self-managed groups. Manage, rather than cause, dynamic changes by assigning roles and responsibilities.
External governance	Manage relationships with existing movements and political parties.
Challenges	Manage trolling and opportunistic behaviour.

**Table 2.** Research implications

Goals	What are the effects of mass-eParticipation initiatives on the roles and relationships between political institutions and parties?
Participation	How to design flexible and scalable eParticipation solutions?

	How to use crowd-sourcing techniques to identify meaningful content?
Use of technology	How to design technology that involves a double-loop system with a stable core and a dynamic periphery? How to leverage technology's sense-making potential in mass-eParticipation initiatives?
Internal governance	How to integrate on- and offline activities in a discussion protocols? What are the effects of allowing self-organising groups to engage in conflict management?
External governance	How to manage the boundary spanner role between representative and spokesperson? How to manage ownership of enabling platforms?
Challenges	How to balance a lean organisational structure against managing a large number of participants? How to allow for freedom of participation yet prevent trolling?

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