

Citizens4Citizens

Mapping participatory practices on the Internet

Paper for Politics: Web 2.0: An International Conference

*New Political Communication Unit, Department of Politics and International Relations,
Royal Holloway, University of London, April 17-18, 2008.*

Albert Meijer & Nils Burger

Utrecht School of Governance

Bijlhouwerstraat 6

35 11 ZC Utrecht

a.j.meijer@uu.nl, N.R.R.Burgers1@students.uu.nl

Wolfgang Ebbers

Telematica Instituut

Postbus 589

7500 AN Enschede

Wolfgang.Ebbers@telin.nl

Version: 5 March 2008

Citizens4Citizens

Mapping participatory practices on the Internet

Albert Meijer, Nils Burger & Wolfgang Ebbers

Abstract

Public participation is often regarded as a matter of contact between government and citizens. However, many important forms of public participation take place in interactions between citizens. These forms of public participations can be labeled Citizens4Citizens interactions (C4C). Citizens use the Internet to facilitate policy participation (meant to support or undermine government policies), political participation (directed at influencing political decision-making) and social participation (to increase social capital). Attention for these forms of digital participation coincides with the rise of a new set of Web applications which are grouped under the label 'Web 2.0'. This paper is an attempt to explore the wide and varied domain of C4C. We do not claim that our exploration will lead to a final and complete description of C4C; we merely aim to present a first overview of the diversity of forms of C4C initiatives that are taking place in the digital world. The argument is that the new technologies offer new venues for participating and the basic idea is that these new practices will constitute both a replication of and an addition to existing offline practices of public participation. Our explorative research of C4C initiatives results in a map of political, policy and social participation. This map of C4C initiatives can provide insights in the variety of Internet practices and help subsequent researches in their selection of initiatives for in-depth studies.

Key words

Political participation, Policy Participation, Social participation, Citizens for citizens, Web 2.0.

1. Introduction

Government agencies find it difficult to attract citizens to their websites and participate in discussions on political issues whereas political content swarms well-known websites such as Youtube and Facebook. Citizens seem to be interested in the public sphere but discuss issues in digital places that they are familiar with rather than visit government websites. Many analyses of e-participation disregard these interactions since they do not directly result in signals to government.

Public participation is often regarded as a matter of contact between government and citizens. However, many important forms of public participation take place in interactions between citizens. These forms of public participations can be labeled Citizens4Citizens interactions (C4C). C4C on the Internet is used to facilitate various forms of participation. In this paper we distinguish between policy participation (meant to strengthen government policies), political participation (directed at influencing political decision-making) and social participation (to increase social capital).

Attention for C4C coincides with the rise of a new set of Web applications which are grouped under the label 'Web 2.0'. User generated content and social networking are key features of these new technologies and these features are extremely useful for supporting interactions between citizens. The 'new Internet' is no longer a collection of information websites but rather a network of platforms that support diverse interactions between users. C4C is just one type of interaction that taking place on Web 2.0 but for political scientists probably one of the most interesting ones.

Studying new forms of political participation is important for political scientists who want to understand politics in the information age. The characteristics of the medium influence the interactions between citizens and, consequently, may induce new relations between citizens and governments. To be more precise, in this paper we depart from the government-centered position that is characteristic for most investigations into e-participation and we focus on new patterns of interactions between citizens.

This paper is an attempt to explore the wide and varied domain of C4C. We do not claim that our exploration will lead to a final and complete description of C4C; we merely aim to present a first overview of the diversity of forms of C4C initiatives that are taking place in the digital world. The argument is that the new technologies offer new venues for participating and the basic idea is that these new practices will constitute both a replication of and an addition to existing offline practices of public participation. The research question leading our research is: how can we map and categorize the variety of citizen for citizen initiatives on the Internet?

The aim of this paper is not to make quantitative analyses of C4C initiatives neither will the causal relations between origins and effects of these websites be investigated. Our aim is rather modest. We present an international explorative research into the varied domain of C4C in the form of a web analysis. The explorative research should be regarded as a ‘mapping exercise’; the variation in forms of C4C is investigated to show how new technologies lead to a replication of but also an addition to existing offline practices. A map of C4C initiatives can provide insights in the variety of Internet practices and help subsequent researches in their selection of initiatives for in-depth studies. Our map is mainly biased towards websites in the Netherlands but we have also included English and American websites.

2. Theoretical framework

2.1. Web 2.0

Web 2.0 is a buzzword as can be witnessed by the title of this conference. Originally Tim O’Reilly coined the term in 2005: “Web 2.0 is the network as platform, spanning all connected devices; Web 2.0 applications are those that make the most of the intrinsic advantages of that platform: delivering software as a continually-updated service that gets better the more people use it, consuming and remixing data from multiple sources,

including individual users, while providing their own data and services in a form that allows remixing by others, creating network effects through an "architecture of participation," and going beyond the page metaphor of Web 1.0 to deliver rich user experiences." (O'Reilly, 2005a; see also O'Reilly 2005b).

We see Web 2.0 as referring to a new wave of Web applications with the central defining characteristic that users of the Web are given a greater participatory role. Web 1.0 refers to the 'traditional' Internet applications which are used to read texts and view audiovisual material whereby the transmission of information is unidirectional. Web 2.0 points at new technologies such as RSS and blogging (O'Reilly, 2005; Rapoza, 2006) that have made users of the Internet capable of participate in an interactive manner by themselves creating and adding content, also know as 'user generated content' (Baumann, 2006).

Behind Web 2.0 there are values promoting the participative role of users and appreciating the collective intelligence they possess (Birdsall, 2007). Web 1.0, we argue, is about the owners of a website presenting certain information to the users whereas Web 2.0 is about users using a platform provided to them to interchange information, files, music, etc. A clear sign of the shift from Web 1.0 to Web 2.0 was that Time Magazine chose 'you' (the user) as the person of the year in 2006.

Complementary to the user generated content we also regard social networking as a key characteristic of Web 2.0. Social networking holds that networks on the Internet do not take the forms of a star with the website owner at the center and a group of users gathered around it, as is typical for Web 1.0, but rather takes the form of a peer-to-peer network with connections between the users. Put differently, in Web 2.0 networks are not top-down, but dynamic, open en decentralized.

It should be noted that the distinction between the two forms of Internet applications is fuzzy. As O'Reilly (2005) points out that 'Web 2.0 doesn't have a hard boundary, but rather, a gravitational core' (O'Reilly, 2005: 2). The categorical omission of forums en newsgroups in every description we could find of the difference between Web 1.0 en

Web 2.0 illustrates this point. The problem is that Web 2.0 is treated as a historically revolutionary development where in fact the ‘old fashioned’ forums and newsgroups, and the Internet itself, were already based on the concepts of user generated content and social networking. Certainly, Web 2.0 applications have become more common, as can be witnessed in the immense popularity and use of sites like Facebook, Youtube and Flickr, but the underlying principles are perhaps not as revolutionary as one might think. Moreover, Web 2.0 has not (yet) replaced Web 1.0 and perhaps never will. Our present day internet is characterized by a combination of Web applications which provide information in a unidirectional way and applications through which users share and co-create different types of data and knowledge.

The ease with which one can use the Internet has dramatically increased over the past decade. This, amongst other things, has led to a global increase in the use of Internet and has changed this use from Web 1.0 centered to Web 2.0 centered. The sharing and exchanging of video images, pictures, opinions, informative texts, personal preferences, et cetera has become commonplace. Such behavior has implications for the public sphere. To be able to systematically characterize and analysis internet practices we identify different forms of public participation.

2.2. Three types of participation

Public participation is a key concept in political science and is generally defined as involvement in political, administrative and social processes. The general idea is that citizens transform themselves from bystanders to active involvement. A closer look at public participation shows that three types of participation can be distinguished: political participation, policy participation and social participation.

Within the three forms of public participation, political scientists traditionally focus on *political participation* and describe this in terms of power and influence on political decision-making (Arnstein, 1969). Political participation is defined as the actions of citizens that aim to influence the selection and behavior of political decision-makers.

Coleman & Morrison (2007) use the work efficacy to refer to ‘a citizen’s capacity to intervene in political affairs’. Following this conceptualization, political participation does not only refer to influencing decision-making processes but includes political agenda setting. Political participation often focuses on influencing formal political arenas also includes self control (e.g. squatting) and protest against other actors (e.g. protest against killing whales).

Citizens participate in political agenda setting and decision-making to influence these processes in a certain direction. Lobbying, writing letters to representatives, writing newspaper articles and organizing protests are some well-known forms of political participation. Barber (...) argues that a high degree of political participation strengthens democracy since citizens are more involved in political processes. Voting is seen as a ‘weak’ form of democracy which does not require an effort whereas political participation is a characteristic of strong democracies. A growing political trust and the construction of a political identity are important byproducts of political participation.

Traditional perspectives focus on the first phases of policy processes (agenda setting and decision-making) whereas modern perspectives also focus on the later phase (implementation). Participation in the implementation phase of policy processes is called *policy participation*. Different forms of policy participation have been mentioned in the scientific literature. Edwards (2003: 41) highlights the active role that citizens play in public service delivery and shows that the actual implementation of tax and income policies is the result of interactions between government and citizens. Civic competence is a core element of these forms of policy participation and filling in tax forms is a clear example of the role of citizens in policy implementation.

Newer forms of policy participation focus on the role of citizens in regulation. Meijer et al. (2007) mention the opportunities that have been created to signal bad smells, unsafe labor conditions or poor hygiene in restaurants. Citizens can form the ‘eyes’ of regulators and this enhance the effectiveness of policies. Policy participation may not always serve the interest of government: citizens can also help each other to avoid certain forms of

regulation. Well known in the Netherlands are the notices of police speed controls on the radio. Citizens mention these speed controls to the radio stations and thus help each other to avoid tickets for speeding.

Public participation does not only refer to relations between citizens and government but includes interactions between citizens. These forms of participation can be grouped under the heading of '*social participation*'. Important for our thinking about social participation has been Putnam's 'Bowling Alone' (2000). Putnam describes how social capital is created through interaction between groups in society and these interactions can take the form of 'bonding' when persons from the same group contact each other and 'bridging' when the contacts cross the boundaries between different groups in society.

Governments in Europe and North America pay a great deal of attention to social capital since this is seen as an important way to prevent disintegration of societies (and, additionally, social capital also contributes to material wealth). Traditional connections in societies are wearing out and Putnam paints a grim picture of people who do not spend time with friends and family but rather go 'bowling alone'. Others have argued that societal groups such as church groups, sport clubs and neighborhood groups still play a crucial role and Putnam's book is misleading.

Public participation is often regarded as something 'good' which is important for 'strong democracies'. However, public participation can also hamper government policies and lead to all kinds of anti-social behavior on the Internet. Public participation certainly has a 'dark side' to it. Political participation by extremist groups can result in undermining democratic regimes, policy participation by violators can result in a decrease in compliance with government rules and social participation in the form of exclusive bonding can strengthen stereotyping of groups in society. Public participation has to be studied and understood within a specific context and evaluated from a normative frame for a sophisticated view on its effects on political and social systems.

Three types of participation have been described but the distinction between these types cannot always be made easily. Well known are Habermas' (1991) coffee houses in London and Vienna where citizens would discuss personal but also public issues. These coffee houses combined political and social participation. Policy participation can, then and now, not always be distinguished from political participation since influencing policy processes can also has an influence on political decisions. Even though we acknowledge that distinguishing the types of participation in practice is not always easy, we pose that this distinction can be used as an analytical tool to map the diversity of forms of participation on the Internet which are generally referred to as e-participation.

2.3. Structuration framework

How can we understand the relation between Web 2.0 en public participation? We pose that technology is neither an instrument nor a determinant of social practices: the confrontation of technology and social practices can be understood with a structuration framework (Giddens, 1984; Orlikowski, 1992; DeSanctis & Poole, 1994). The basic idea of this framework is that technology is shaped by social practices but, at the same time, technology also transforms these practices. This argument is summarized in the following figure (adapted from Orlikowski, 1992).

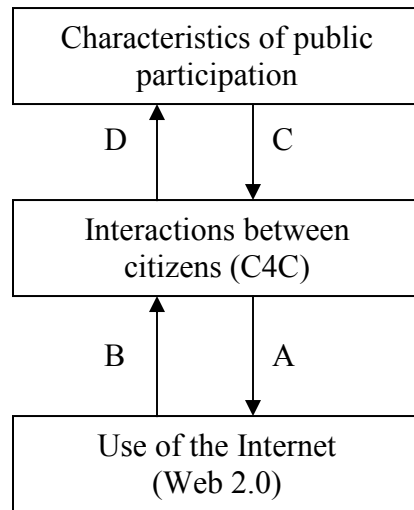


Figure 1. Interrelation between use of the Internet and public participation (loosely based on Orlikowski, 1992)

We will explain the various relations in the model:

- *Relation A.* Citizens have certain patterns in interacting with other citizens and various media are used for these interactions. The Internet will be used as an additional medium for their interactions.
- *Relation B.* The Internet offers citizens new opportunities for interacting with each other. They can, for example, easily interact with citizens that share their interest. In that sense, the Internet influences how citizens interact.
- *Relation C.* Formal and informal rules regarding public participation influence how citizens interact. Legal rules regarding political participation, for example, and informal rules for social participation, as another example, structure how citizens interact.
- *Relation D.* Formal and informal rules only exist when they are being reproduced through citizen interactions. Rules that are not being followed in any citizen interactions lose their meaning.

In addition to this model we argue that the Internet, Web 2.0, has certain characteristics. DeSanctis & Poole (1994: 126) refer to the structural features such as the algorithm and hardware characteristics and spirit of technologies which can be regarded as the ‘script’ underlying the technology. The characteristics of communication media are a central tenet of the so-called ‘new medium studies’ (Deibert, 1997; Hutchby, 2001, 2003). These studies highlight the way media structure communication by facilitating certain forms of interactions while hindering other forms. The concept of ‘affordance’ plays a key role in these studies. Sellen & Harper (2003): ‘An affordance refers to the fact that the physical properties of an object make possible different functions for the person perceiving or using that object.’

The following affordances of Web 2.0 and the Internet at large have been highlighted in various researches: transparency, many-to-many communication, virtuality, calculability, etc. (Bekkers, 1994; Frissen, 1999). New medium studies, however, highlight that these affordances do not determine outcomes. The outcome should be conceptualized as the results of affordance, the context of use and individual choices. This makes this theoretical approach compatible with structuration theory, although new medium studies do not emphasize that the context also changes in the use of technology.

The model shows that the outcome of the interaction of Web 2.0 and public participation emerges from the various relations and loops in the model and cannot predicted. In this paper we study the forms of e-participation that emerge from these interactions. For analytic purposes, we will characterize these outcomes as either replications of current practices (when social structures are not challenged by the new medium) or transformations of these practices (when the structure of political participation is transformed through the new medium). The new forms of public participation on the Internet have been studied before and we will present some of the previous findings before going into our own empirical research.

2.4. E-participation

E-participation is generally seen as the use of ICT-tools to involve citizens in finding solutions for social problems (www.burger.overheid.nl). This description focuses primarily on what we call policy participation because the political/normative desirability of change is not questioned and the problems focused on are not directly related to social participation. We see e-participation as referring to all the ways in which citizens interact with one another or with other parties on the Internet. This participation takes place in the virtual world, but can have concrete effects on the lived or 'real' world (Gotved, 2002).

The question can be asked how the different forms of public participation, as identified above, will develop in the information age. In other words, what effect or influence does the Internet have on public participation? For a long time the digital divide dominated the discussion about the meaning of Internet for participation (references). However, the importance of the digital divide in the sense of the social divide between information rich and poor in a nation (Norris, 2000) has been diminishing. Among Dutch youth for example one can no longer speak of a digital divide, for 97% has access to a computer and Internet (SCP, 2005). Youngsters are 'digital natives' and for them the Internet has become the most important medium of communication, more important for example than television (Frissen, 2007). This means that we can further specify the question regarding the meaning of Internet for participation. Which forms of participation take place on the Internet and what meaning should we attribute to this participation?

Based on a secondary analysis of research into ICT and political participation Bovens (2003) concludes that the importance of ICT on this form of participation is minimal. There is no 'digital Athens' in the making. He perceives the rising of an 'enclave democracy' in which there is engagement with political issues, but this engagement is between people who already think alike and focuses on specific issues. However, developments in the senatorial campaign of Howard Dean in 2004 do indicate that Internet can lead to a greater engagement (Hindman, 2005). In the current presidential campaign of Barack Obama Internet also plays a significant role. What is interesting

about political participation on the Internet is that it does not only relate to existing political institutions, but that it can create new institutions such as the European Social Consulta (which, by the way, only existed for a short period of time). What is more, online participation can be used to organise offline participation (Bennett, 2007). For example, in 2004 a total of twenty million people were mobilised within six months for demonstrations against the war in Iraq.

When looking at policy participation, what could the impact of ICT be? Little research into this field has been conducted. Research by Meijer, Homburg & Bekkers (2007) does indicate that policy participation regarding surveillance (toezicht en handhaving) still is very limited. They show that hardly any possibilities for policy participation have been created (by government) and as far as these do exist the public interest is marginal.

What could be the impact of the Internet on social participation? Bekkers (2004: 68) indicates that three ‘camps’ can be identified regarding the perceived impact of ICT on social participation (see also Norris, 2000; Linders & Goossen, 2004). In one camp people are saying the Internet improves social participation because new connections between people can be made and already existing relations can be maintained. Another camp believes that people are spending an increasing amount of time on the Internet and thereby less time with family, friends and neighbours. The third camp points out – mainly inspired by Wellman (1999) – that social participation obtains another form on the Internet because a digital community is developing on the Net. Here we would also like to identify a fourth camp which does not believe new connections are made, but that the Internet mainly leads to bonding in the sense of ‘digital balkanization’ (Putnam, 2000), meaning that primarily likeminded people meet each other on the Net and strengthen the boundaries between them and other groups (see also Papacharissi, 2002; Anduiza et al., 2007).

In regards to all these forms of participation the question is relevant how representative the users of the Internet application are for the whole population. The general remark can be made that people who use sites which can be categorised as involving a certain form

of participation will do this when it is part of their 'normal' use of Internet (Frissen, 2007). So people who do not normally take part in forums will probably not start doing this in a forum which is for example about the maintenance of public safety. In the words of Norris (2000) there is a 'democratic divide', meaning that there is a difference between those who do, and do not, use the panoply of digital resources to engage, mobilize and participate in public life. People who participate are thus not representative. Moreover, the people within a nation who have access to Internet are also not representative for the whole population. However, it should be noted that people who normally take part in for example political activities are not necessarily representative of the whole population either.

A remark that is often made about participation on the Internet is that its quality is low due to the ease with which one can participate. Two reactions are in order. First of all, being physically present at a discussion does not grantee that the participation is of high quality in the sense that discussions are held in a rational-critical manner so as to reach a consensus of opinion (Habermas, 1991). Internet could contribute to the quality of a discussion because it gives people time to consider their responses and possibly look up relevant information. Secondly, discussions on the Internet can also be evaluated in another way? Perhaps it is not only the contents that is important, but also the fact that Internet enables people to stand in constant communication with one another. When we for example look at MSN, the contents of what is being discussed can from an external perspective be seen as having little quality. However, the fact that people are constantly online and talking to their contacts is in itself and interesting phenomenon. Social ties are continually being confirmed and new (loose) ties are being created.

This short exploration of the meaning of ICT – and in particular the Internet – for political, policy and social participation shows us that the perceptions are very diverse. These differences can be ascribed to different conceptualisations of participation and also to choices for the practices that are being studied. What is more is that Internet and its use are constantly changing and every analysis is therefore of a temporary value.

Nevertheless, the previous research has informed our present study in that it has helped us to map and categorise the various citizens for citizens sites on the Internet.

3. Research methods

The three different forms of participation were used as sensitizing concepts (Blumer, 1954) for the mapping and categorizing of websites. Based on the definitions of political, policy and social participation we identified sites to be researched. These operational definitions of these forms of participation are:

- *Political participation.* The website is devoted to the influencing of decision-making by political institutions or is about citizens' opinions about their role in the political process.
- *Policy participation.* The website is devoted to activities influencing the realization of governmental policy goals by supporting government, direct action towards third parties
- *Social participation.* The website helps in the construction of social capital. Connections within and between social networks are supported by interactions on the website.

We are well aware that these definitions do not give an unconditional footing for the identification of websites. One of the goals of this explorative research was therefore to give empirical substance to these categories.

Sites were identified in the following ways:

- Searches on the Internet for relevant sites.¹

¹ A few key search words were: forum government, forum overheid (forum government), political discussion, politieke discussie (political discussion), uitleg belastingen (explanation taxes). On the following dates Google was used to search for sites: 18 October 2007, 20 October 2007, 30 October 2007, 2 November 2007 and 23 November 2007.

- The identification of relevant sites in newspapers.²
- Asking experts in the field of ICT en politics for relevant sites.³
- Participating in lectures and congresses on this subject.⁴
- A workshop on this subject was organizer.⁵

The aim of the exploration was not to describe all the e-participation sites but rather to identify the best know initiatives and to show the variation in initiatives. The variation was primarily achieved by looking at different forms of participation and different geographical levels of participation. Additionally, we strived for inclusion of the best known national and international websites in our sample.

The description and analysis of the sites took place based on the following criteria:

- Type of public participation (policy, political or social)
- Geographical level (local, national or international)
- Founder of the website (citizens, government, media, political parties, NGOs, companies)
- Offerings of the website (forum, information, voting, evaluating, virtual world, social networking, exchanging multimedia files, download files)
- Goal of the website (inform, debate, organize protest, entertainment, support, improve service delivery, create social coherence, trade)

² In the period October – December 2007 the Dutch newspapers the *Volkskrant* and the *NRC Handelsblad* were screened for relevant sites.

³ The international network of contacts of the researchers formed the starting point for approaching experts. The following experts have presented us with relevant websites: Arre Zuurmond (Zenc en TU Delft, Lilia Efimova (Telematica Instituut), Robert Slagter (Telematica Instituut), Marcel Thaens (Ordina en EUR), Gert den Toom (UU), Dennis de Kool (EUR), Rebecca Moody (EUR), Charlie Schweik (University of Massachusetts, Amherst), Michael Ash (University of Massachusetts, Amherst).

⁴ Wolfgang Ebbers and Nils Burger participated in the e-participation summit in Amsterdam (15 november 2007) and Nils Burger attended a lecture by professor V. Frissen (*Digitale Diaspora* (Digital Diasporas), in The Hage on the 16th of November 2007).

⁵ On the 27th of November 2007 a workshop was on this subject was organized at the Telematica Insitute in Enschede (the Netherlands). Participants from the Telematica Institute were: Wolfgang Ebbers, Mark Melenhorst, Wil Janssen, Marcel Bijlsma, Mettina Veenstra. Participants form the USBO were: Albert Meijer, Nils Burger, Stephan GrimmeliKhuijsen en Gijs-Jan Brandsma. Participants from the University of Twente were: Jörgen Svensson, Lex van Velsen. In the workshop they were all explicitly asked to name examples of relevant sites.

- Moderation (no, little, great deal)
- Approximation of number of visitors (if available) (few, moderate, many)
- Depth of argumentation (little, moderate, much)
- Publicness (fully public, free subscription required, not public)
- Anonymity (fully anonymous, partly anonymous, not anonymous)

These criteria were, apart for the different forms of participation, not pre-establish, but were developed during the research. We found the criteria useful for comparing sites and explaining differences between them.

4. Empirical analysis of types of participation

4.1. Types of policy participation

We found a broad set of 22 initiatives that we qualified as policy participation. These initiatives take place at the local and the national level: no forms of policy participation were identified at the international level which is not surprising since little policy implementation is carried out by international actors.

The following categories of policy participation were constructed on the basis of an analysis of the objective and use of the websites:

- *Citizens pressure government to implement policies accurately.* The well-known British example ‘Fix My Street’ fits within this category. Citizens can use this website to send a signal to local governments that they should come and fix something in their street. An interesting finding was that both this website and a similar Dutch initiative were both set up with government funding.
- *Citizens support each other in issues related to government policies.* The Dutch website Forum Werk (Labor Forum) is an interesting community of people discussing issues related to finding a job or getting different kinds of government

- support. Similar initiatives relate to tax, immigration and safety policies. These initiatives provide a way to strengthen their civic competence.
- *Citizens expose offenders of government regulation.* The website ‘Voorkom die bon’ (Avoid that ticket) lists citizen notices of people who were calling on their mobile phone while driving and not using a hands-free set for their phone. This kind of behavior is forbidden under Dutch traffic regulation and annoys other drivers since it can lead to irresponsible driving. One should note that this website has been set up by a company that sells these hands-free sets.
 - *Citizens report offenders to government.* Meldpunt Kinderporno (Child Porn Report) is an initiative of citizens that want to stop the spread of child porn on the Internet. Citizens can report information about child porn on the Internet anonymously to this website. The owners of the website evaluate the information and, if the information is about illegal activities, the mention is forwarded to Dutch or international law authorities.
 - *Citizens undermine the implementation of government policies.* Flitsers (Speed Cameras) is a website that provides citizens with information about speed cameras on the Dutch motorways. Citizens can use this information to make sure they only speed in areas where there are no cameras and, hence, they can avoid tickets for speeding. This website undermines the police system for motorway speeding oversight by exposing it.

These categories show that there are several ways in which policy participation supports the implementation of government policies. Citizens can give information to government agencies or expose offenders; they can also help each other and hence reduce the pressure on agency information services; they can send signals to agencies to improve the quality of their work. The categories also show that policy participation can be annoying for agencies since they are constantly pushed into improving their performance and some initiatives even undermine their policies. A common feature in these initiatives that they are all concrete: they relate directly to citizens’ life worlds.

Most of these initiatives form an addition rather than a replication of offline practices of policy participation. A first key difference between these initiatives and offline practices is that all actions can easily be made transparent to a general public. Citizens could send a letter to their local government before with complaints about their street but through the Internet the general public can also read these complaints and follow whether governments take timely and appropriate action. Naming and shaming of offenders could take place through traditional media but this has become much easier now reports about offenses, such as calling without a hands-free set in the car, can be published on the Internet without any cost or effort. A second key difference is that the Internet makes it possible to interact around forms of policy participation and hence form digital communities. Citizens could have formed communities before around issues such as finding work or filling in tax forms but the costs and effort of forming such a community in the offline world are high. The Internet enables citizens to form easy accessible and open communities around policy participation.

The reporting of offenders to government can be regarded as a replication of offline forms of policy participation. The Internet makes reporting easy and the Internet is the right medium for this type of offense, child porn on the Internet, but apart from that there are no fundamental differences from traditional means to report offenders through the telephone or mail.

Some of these forms of policy participation raise important normative questions. The 'Voorkom die bon' (Avoid that ticket) website is a form of exposing of citizens by other citizens. Is that acceptable? Or should the privacy of the offenders be respected? Another set of questions concerns the uneven effects of certain initiatives. If certain initiatives are only used by Internet savvy users, the result could be that government will be more responsive only to certain groups in society. People that don't have Internet access can't use the Fix My Street website and hence may have less means to attract the attention of government agencies to the problems in their street.

4.2. Types of political participation

We qualified a broad set of 26 initiatives as forms of political participation. These initiatives take place at all levels: local, national and international. The variety of websites is enormous and our selection can never be considered to provide a comprehensive overview of all forms of political participation. Nevertheless, we did manage to construct a set of categories on the basis of our sample which provides a first idea of the variation in types of political participation.

- *Citizens protest against a specific proposal or policy.* A large group of websites is devoted to organizing protests against certain proposal or policies. A (typically) Dutch example of these websites is Red de Paddo (Safe the Magic Mushroom) which is devoted to organizing protests against a proposal to make the selling of magic mushrooms illegal. An international example is Bilaterals.org which aims to support protests against bilateral agreements between countries which could have a negative impact on less-powerful groups and the environment. These websites mainly have a single-issue character: they focus on one issue and this issue may be short-lived.
- *Citizens use a website to organize political action.* These websites also focus on specific issues but the primary goal of the website is not to debate issues or provide information but rather to organize collective effort. The ‘Petitions’ website in the UK is an example. Citizens can propose a petition and aim to attract enough votes to make the petition successful. ‘Make Poverty History’ is another example: this website has made selling the well-known white bands one of its main goals. These initiatives use the potential of the Internet to organize masses of people around the world (see also Bennett, 2007).
- *Citizens hold a plea for broad political changes.* The difference between this type of website and the previous type is that these initiatives are not connected to specific decisions or policies. They organize citizens in their pleas and actions for a world with peace, no poverty, a clean environment, and so forth. A well-known international example is Stand Against Poverty which aims to make people stand

- up and speak out to demand a more urgent political response to the growing crisis of global poverty and inequality.
- *Citizens discuss political issues within their own social networks.* Not all websites aim to achieve some kind of change through protests or actions. Many websites merely provide platforms for discussing political issues within certain social networks. An example is the leftist website Red Pepper, ‘a magazine of political rebellion and dissent’, which provides information about access to discussions about feminism, environmental issues, etc. Another example is the extreme right website Stormfront which enables members to discuss issues such as, primarily, immigration and integration. An interesting feature of these websites is that especially websites on the political extremes lead to lively debates and discussions.
 - *Citizens discuss political issues in the public sphere.* Although most political C4C initiatives connect like-minded spirits, some important initiatives are about bringing different people together to discuss political issues. These initiatives are sometimes connected to news programs on television. ‘Een Vandaag’ is a Dutch news program which triggers heated debates on its website. Other debates have a local character (e.g. Groups Google Stad Utrecht about the Dutch city of Utrecht) or focus on specific political questions (e.g. Talk Politics European Union). Successful websites, however, are connected to mass media or are well-known information websites. Less known websites seem to result in debates of kindred minds.
 - *Citizens provide assessment tools their voting decisions.* Several websites on the Internet help citizens to choose between political parties and candidates. ‘Wie Kies Jij’ (Who do you choose?) is a website that presents users with a list of ten questions that can help them suggest the candidate of their party that suits their preferences best. There is a wide variety of these websites and they have already been investigated by several researchers (Boogers & Voerman, 2003).

These categories provide an interesting overview of forms of political involvement. They show that political participation can range from discussing issues with members of the

same political party to voting electronic petitions and finding out what the right candidate for you might be. The list also shows that extremists have found the Internet to be a useful platform but political participation is not only about discussing issues with people that have the same opinion. The trend of 'Balkanization' of political discussions and interactions (Putnam, 2000; Bovens, 2003) is not confirmed by our research since it shows that some important initiatives create platforms for debates between the various groups.

Some of these online forms of political participation can largely be regarded as replications of offline practices. Websites are used to protest against specific proposals and policies and hold a plea for broad political changes. These initiatives do not seem to be much different from similar initiatives through traditional media. An interesting difference, though, is that websites operate on an international scale whereas there are no traditional media that have global coverage. The organization of collective effort through websites is also a replication of the use of traditional media to organize protest and the major difference seems to be that the cost of the use of the Internet is much lower than the cost of using traditional media.

The forms of political interaction identified, within a certain group and within the public sphere at large, also seem to be replications of offline interactions. An interesting difference, though, is that the Internet enables small and dispersed groups to form political communities on the Internet. One could claim that this is the political version of the 'long tail' account of the Internet: small specific interests can be accumulated because the medium offers the opportunity to have worldwide interactions at a low cost.

The last form of online political participation we identified, citizens provide assessment tools their voting decisions, has no equivalent in the offline world. This initiative builds upon similar initiatives in the commercial world that provide consumers tools to choose between various alternatives. The Internet provides an interesting addition to consumer democracies by providing cheap and accessible tools for comparison of political candidates and parties.

Do these forms of political participation contribute to a ‘strong democracy’? Many of these C4C initiatives seem to strengthen the capacity for citizens to organize political action and channel debate. In that sense, these initiatives indeed contribute to democratic processes by involving more citizens are creating more venues for political participation. Some of the initiatives also show the risks that political participation poses to democracy. Terrorist websites were not included in our sample but some of the extremist websites also present a risk to core elements of democracies (e.g. protection of minorities). A further in-depth investigation and analysis of these initiatives is needed to understand and evaluate the impact on democracy.

4.3. Types of social participation

We qualified a set of 20 initiatives as forms of social participation. Social participation takes place at the local, national and international level and varies from discussing neighbor issues to building networks of friends around the world. Again we want to emphasize that our overview can never claim to be exhaustive and we do not aim to achieve more than provide a first mapping of the diversity of forms of social participation on the Internet. We constructed seven categories of social participation.

- *Citizens maintain contacts with other citizens in the same area.* These initiatives form a digital extension to social networks in neighborhoods but may also help people to build new networks. ‘Bergpolderweg’ is a Dutch website which tries to bring together citizens in an area of the city of Rotterdam. The amount of people who participate in these local initiatives is very limited. This can probably be contributed to the fact that they are not well-known to the larger public.
- *Citizens maintain network contacts within their social networks (bonding).* Various forms of bonding take place on the Internet. Bonding may be organized around student clubs (such as the Dutch student club Biton) but also, more interestingly, around ethnic backgrounds. Maroc.nl and Hindi.punt.nl are interesting and well-visited websites of respectively Moroccan and Hindustan

- communities in the Netherlands. Various issues are discussed on these websites ranging from private questions about dating girls to question about the Koran and political issues.
- *Citizens build networks of friends.* Social networking websites are at the core of Web 2.0. Citizens use websites such as Facebook to contact their friends but also to extend their social networks. Extensions are especially interesting when it comes to more functional social networking sites such as Linked In. These extensions can be expected to take the form of bonding but further research will need to be done to see whether forms of bridging with people from other social networks also take place on these websites.
 - *Citizens help each other through support or concrete advice.* The variety of support websites on the Internet is enormous. There is a wide variety of patient groups and groups of people who support each other with all kinds of psychological problems. Some interesting examples are parents supporting each other with advice (Ouders Online (Parents Online)), anorexia patients supporting each other (Anangel), visitors to prostitutes exchanging information about the price and quality of prostitutes (Hookers.nl). Some of these websites have a limited number of participants but the meaning of these sites to them seems to be substantial (judging by the number and length of the posts).
 - *Citizens exchange (digital) goods and service.* The Internet is a giant market place and often citizens provide each other with goods at a low price or even for free. Internationally e-Bay is the market leader and ‘Marktplaats’ dominates commercial exchanges in the Netherlands. The photo website Flickr is also an interesting example of citizens exchanging products. These websites provide social capital since they enable citizens to help each other. Additionally, some of these interactions may result in the extension of social networks.
 - *Citizens develop public goods together.* This is probably one of the most interesting new forms of social participation since there are not many equivalents in the offline world. The LINUX and Wikipedia examples are very well known and show how citizens around the world can cooperate to develop products and information services. The literature on these forms of cooperation is extensive but

- rarely focuses on the contribution of these initiatives to social capital as a byproduct of cooperation.
- *Citizens form social networks in virtual world.* Second Life is the best known example of a virtual world where people meet and interact. The interesting thing is that people do not meet ‘as themselves’ but rather as ‘avatars’. These avatars create new connections and result in what could be called ‘virtual social capital’. This virtual social capital creates cohesion in the virtual world and helps the avatars to achieve things. The question whether virtual social capital is isolated from or connected with offline social capital provides the starting point for interesting research

This list of forms of social participation on the Internet illustrates that they vary from extension of encounters in a neighborhood to new interactions in a virtual world. This shows that social participation on the Internet may be a simple replication of offline interactions in digital form but some forms also constitute a totally new form of interacting with others (in whatever form). Whereas the use of the Internet for neighborhood interactions eventually aims to contribute to more social capital in the offline world, interactions in Second Life create forms of virtual social capital. It would be interesting to analyze the meaning of virtual social capital of frequent visitors to virtual worlds such as Second Life.

The distinction between replication of offline practices and additional digital practices becomes especially relevant when it comes to the social networking sites. These sites are a replication of offline practices when sites such as Facebook are used to connect to people met offline. However, these websites are also used to form new social networks and therefore they also form an addition to offline practices. This is an interesting difference with other media such as the telephone and letters which are (almost) exclusively used to contact people met face to face. When Facebook would be used to form social networks across traditional boundaries between groups, it could be an important medium for ‘bridging’.

Interesting forms of mutual support are identified on the Internet which partly form a replication (e.g. patient groups) but also form a relevant addition. 'Hookers' is an interesting initiative since one could not imagine a similar initiative in the offline world. The anonymous character of the Internet facilitates interactions on themes that are not commonly accepted in society.

The production of public goods is also an interesting feature of the Internet. Offline production of common goods does take place on a small scale, e.g. when neighbors collectively take care of a garden in a public place, but offline examples on a global scale do not exist (as far as we know). Wikipedia and LINUX form fascinating examples of citizens not only providing each other with information and support but actually developing products which make life easier for everybody.

When we take this analysis back to Putnam's 'bonding' and 'bridging' some interesting question can be raised. It is clear that the Internet supports 'bonding' but we still do not know to what extent 'bridging' takes place. To assess the contribution of these C4C initiatives to 'bridging' we need to find out to what extent social networks across different groups are being created and, also, we need to find out to what extent various digital interactions (selling products at e-Bay, working on Linux, meeting people in Second Life) actually contributes to offline social capital.

4.4. Result of this mapping exercise

This mapping exercise has resulted in the following overview of categories of public participation:

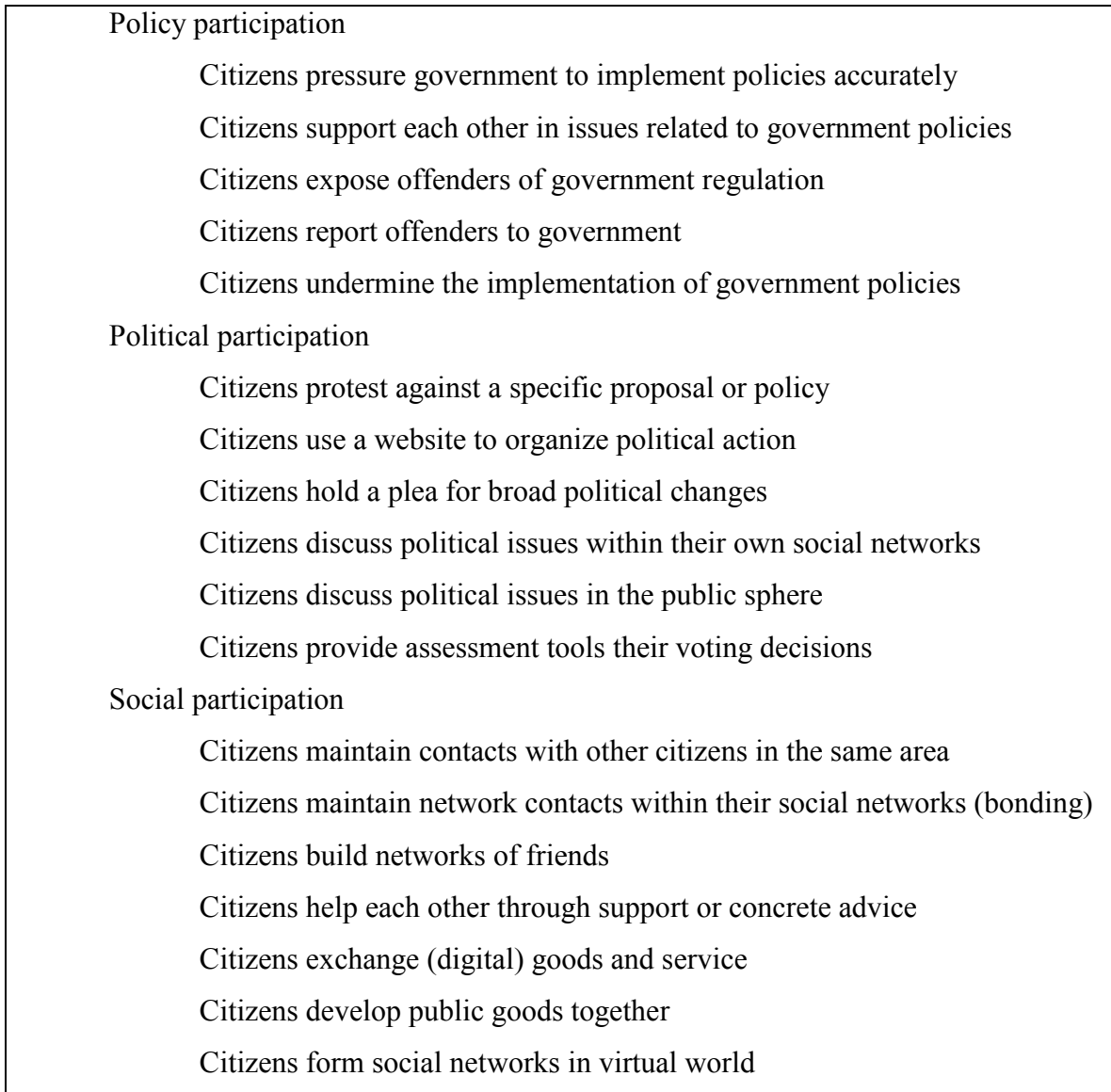


Figure 2. Overview of categories of public participation

This map – or maybe we should call it a tree – can facilitate discussions about public participation on the Internet by enabling researchers and practitioners to stipulate explicitly which types of public participation they are investigating or supporting. This map can also help researchers to make decisions about research design and the selection of cases for in-depth studies of public participation.

The mapping exercise also resulted in a discussion of the extent to which Internet replicates offline practices or forms a new addition to practices of public participation. Although many replications of offline practices were found, the findings also showed that certain characteristics of the Internet may lead to new practices of public participation. We identified ‘transparency’ and ‘interaction’ as important features facilitating new forms of policy participation; the ‘long tail’ and ‘calculability’ were identified as interesting features of the Internet facilitating new forms of political participation; the ‘long tail’, anonymity and ‘virtuality’ were identified as important characteristics of the Internet facilitating new forms of social participation.

On the basis of this mapping exercise we were able to raise relevant normative and empirical questions concerning policy, political and social participation on the Internet. We posed normative questions about privacy and representation regarding policy participation, we wondered to what extent new forms of political participation contribute to a strong democracy and we asked empirical question regarding the extent to which digital forms of social participation contribute to ‘bridging’. In that sense, this mapping exercise forms the first step in a broader investigation of public participation on the Internet and sets out directions for subsequent research.

5. Reflections on public participation

New forms of public participation are being created on the Internet. These forms, as we have shown, are both replications of and additions to traditional forms of public participation. In terms of the structuration framework we presented: social structures both form new practices and are formed by these new practices. On the basis of our explorative research, we presented a map of forms of public participation on the Internet and this map forms the answer to our research question. In this concluding paragraph, we will reflect upon the meaning of these new forms of public participation for the administration, politics and society. In these reflections we focus upon the possible beneficial effects of participation for government and society in terms of increasing

‘strong democracy’, improving the implementation of government policies and supporting social capital in society.

How can these new forms of political participation on the Internet strengthen democracy? Representation is an important shortcoming of all identified initiatives and the quality of debates generally does not reach as high a level as debates in newspapers. There is no direct and urgent reason for governments to react to these forms of political participation. That does not mean that these websites have no democratic value. An interesting opportunity these websites offer is that they enable governments to gauge sentiments in society. A common shortcoming of modern governments is that they often seem to have lost touch with citizens. A digital ‘thermometer’ can be used by politicians to get a better feeling of how citizens care and think about what goes on in the public sector. Governments do not necessarily have to react instantaneously to these sentiments but use them as additional input for decision-making processes. Politicians and administrators can assess debates critically, interpret the value of the various positions and evaluate the possible meaning for policies. Especially when it comes to groups of citizens that are difficult to reach such as drug users or visitors to prostitutes, a digital thermometer may enhance the sensibility of governments to society and thus enhance its legitimacy.

Can these new forms of participation on the Internet support policy implementation? The overview shows that, as we already know from theory, the implementation of policies does not only depend on government efforts but should be conceptualized as the outcome of interactions between various actors. Some citizen initiatives clearly support the attainment of government objectives but others undermine government policies or apply means that are questionable. The Internet offers new opportunities to create alliances in favor of government policies but also against them. Governments will have to get involved in strategic games on the Internet to mold strong alliances and, at the same time, they need to develop responses to alliances which undermine the attainment of policy objectives.

Do these new forms of public participation help to build social capital in society? The importance of general websites such as Hyves, YouTube and Wikipedia should not be neglected since these initiatives create frameworks for everyone. These common frameworks can facilitate other social interactions and make it easier for different groups in society to interact. At the same time, the level of interaction on these websites is limited and hence the contribution to building social capital may be limited. Initiatives with more interactions generally have a more stratified group of users and contribute more to ‘bonding’ than to ‘bridging’.

These three forms of public participation have been discussed separately but they overlap. Different forms of participation took place in Habermas’ coffee houses where citizens would discuss their social lives but also public and political affairs. Websites can be seen as the coffee houses of the information age and also integrate various forms of participation. YouTube, to name an example, contains private and political movie clips and combines social and political interests of citizens. Citizens visit YouTube to see the latest music clips and see the films that were posted by their friends but, while visiting the website, they may also start watching political movie clips and even films about policy implementation. A quick search led to the example of a film about all the garbage in New Bedford (Massachusetts) (<http://nl.youtube.com/watch?v=w7qn05koQhQ>). A new domain of public participation is being constructed by citizens to fit the new routines of the information society.

References

Arnstein, S. (1969). A ladder of citizen participation, *Journal of the American Institute of Planners*, Vol. 34, Nr. 4, pp. 216 -224.

Anduiza, E., Cantijoch, M., Gallego, A. (2007), *Political Participation and the Internet: Descriptive Hypotheses and Causal Mechanisms*, this paper was presented at the symposium “Changing politics through digital networks: The role of ICT’s in the formation of new social en political actors and actions” at Florence, 5-6 October 2007.

Baumann, M. (2006), ‘Caught in the Web 2.0’, *Information Today*, Vol. 23 (8), pp38.

Barber, Benjamin (1984). *Strong Democracy: participatory democracy for a new age*, Berkeley: University of California Press.

Beckers, D. (2004), ‘Effecten van ICT op sociale cohesie in Cyburg, Amsterdam’, *Jaarboek ICT en samenleving 2004. Beleid in praktijk*, J. de Haan en O. Klumper (red.), Boom, Amsterdam, pp. 65 – 87.

Bekkers, V.J.J.M. 1994. *Nieuwe vormen van sturing en informatisering*. Delft, Eburon.

Bennett, L. (2007), ‘The Digital Structure of Collective Action: Individuals, Organizations, and Networks in Protests Against the Iraq War’, Paper presented at the ICS-symposium ‘*Changing politics through digital networks: The role of ICTs in the formation of new social and political actors and actions*’, at Florence, 5-6 October 2007.

Birdsall, W. F.(2007), ‘Web 2.0 as a Social Movement’, *Webology*, Vol. 4 (2), pp1-14, found at: www.webology.ir/2007/v4n2/a40 (20 February 3008).

Blumer, H. (1954), ‘What is wrong with social theory?’, *American Sociological Review*, Vol. 18, pp 3-10.

Boogers, M., Voerman, G. (2003), 'Surfing Citizens and Floating Voters: Results of an Online Survey of Visitors to Political Web Sites during the Dutch 2002 General Elections Campaign', *Information Polity*, Vol. 8 (1/2), pp 17-27.

Bovens, M. (2003), *De digitale republiek. Democratie en rechtsstaat in de informatiemaatschappij*, Amsterdam University Press, Amsterdam.

Coleman, D., Morrison, S.E. and Svennenig, M. (2007), *New Media & Political Efficacy*, Paper presented at the ICS-symposium 'Changing politics through digital networks: The role of ICTs in the formation of new social and political actors and actions', at Florence, 5-6 October 2007.

DeSanctis, G. & M.S. Poole (1994). 'Capturing the Complexity in Advanced technology Use: Adaptive Structuration Theory'. *Organization Science*, Vol. 5, Nr. 2, pp. 121 – 147.

Edwards, A. (2003), *De gefaciliteerde democratie. Internet, de burger en zijn intermediairen*, Lemma, Utrecht.

P.H.A. Frissen (1999) *Politics, Governance, Technology, A Postmodern Narrative on the Virtual State*, Cheltenham: Edward Elgar.

Frissen, V. (2007), *Digitale Diaspora*, lecture held at The Hague on the 16th of November 2007.

Giddens, A. (1984). *The constitution of society: outline of the theory of structure*. Berkeley CA: University of California Press.

Gotved, S. (2002), 'Spatial Dimensions in Online Communities', *Space and Culture*, Vol. 5 (4), pp. 405–14.

Habermas, J. (1991). *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a category of Bourgeois Society*. MIT Press, Cambridge, MA.

Hindman, M. (2005), The Real Lessons of Howard Dean: Reflections on the First Digital Campaign, *Perspectives on Politics*, Vol. 3 (1), pp. 121-128.

Linders, L. and Goossens, N. (2004), 'Bruggen bouwen met virtuele middelen', *Jaarboek ICT en samenleving 2004. Beleid in praktijk*, J. de Haan en O. Klumper (red.), Boom, Amsterdam, pp. 121 – 139.

Meijer, A., Homburg, V. and Bekkers, V. (2007), *Toezicht 2.0. Onderzoek naar toezicht, transparantie, burgers en compliance in het informatietijdperk*, Unpublished Report for the Alliance ICT & Good Governance.

Norris, P. (2000), *Digital Divide: Civic Engagement, Information Poverty and the Internet Worldwide*, Cambridge University Press, New York.

O'Reilly, T. (2005a), *Web 2.0: Compact Definition?* Found at: <http://radar.oreilly.com/archives/2005/10/web-20-compact-definition.html> (5 March 2008).

O'Reilly, T. (2005b), *What Is Web 2.0: Design Patterns and Business Models for the Next Generation of Software*, Found at: www.oreillynet.com/lpt/a/6228 (20 February 2008).

Orlikowski W.J., (1992), 'The Duality of Technology: Rethinking the Concept of Technology in Organizations', *Organization Science*, Vol. 3, N°3, August, 398-427

Papacharissi, Z. (2002), 'The Virtual Sphere: The internet as a public sphere', *New Media and Society*, Vol. 4 (1), pp 9-27.

Putnam, R.D. (2000), *Bowling alone. The collapse and revival of American community*, Simon & Schuster, New York.

Rapoza, J. (2006), 'What Web 2.0 means to you', *eWeek*, Vol. 23 (1), pp38.

SCP (2005). *Jaarrapport Integratie 2005*. Den Haag: SCP, WODS en CBS.

Wellman, B. (ed.)(1999), *Networks in the Global Village: Life in Contemporary Communities*, Westview Press, Boulder.