

The University in the Polis: An Emerging Role of Democratic Intermediary in e-Participation?

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Abstract e-participation enables citizens' voices to be heard more clearly and frequently, but does not self-implement. Strategies should be planned, models should be followed, the public actor should encourage administrative and political changes. In this paper the well established OECD levels of engagement (information, consultation, public participation) are described, with reference to enabling digital technologies: a need of trustworthy intermediaries emerges. This conceptual framework drives the presentation of some experiences that recently took place in the city of Genoa, highlighting the emerging role of the university as a democratic intermediary.

Keywords Democratic intermediary · Participation levels · e-participation

1 Introduction

The crisis of representative democracy is now quite evident and involves both political parties, as organizations representing citizens, and institutions, legitimized by vote to govern. The concentration of power in global players, far beyond the control of nation states, reduces the real power of democracy. The growth of inequalities beyond a certain limit erodes trust in the formal equality of citizens and

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the employment crisis pushes citizens towards non-conventional forms of production and consumption. Hence, a crisis of governance is added to that of democratic institutions: less entitled to govern, they cannot always have an impact on the real determinants of people's lives. Along with a growing sense of apathy and impotence, a demand for bottom-up participation is also growing: therefore, institutions seek for new forms of citizens' inclusion in decision-making processes to give voice to the needs of direct democracy and to restore confidence and legitimacy.

Participation trust offered by ICTs fits into this framework. This paper aims to show that, without solid theoretical assumptions, it is not possible to design appropriate modalities of participation of citizens in decision-making processes, that make use of the ICTs as a fundamental element. In the digital era, participatory processes that do not integrate online and offline modalities are not sustainable; by reflecting on how these opportunities are configured and how they can be adapted to the requirements of participation, it is possible to propose concrete and appropriate solutions.

While a frequent role assigned to the Internet is disintermediation, in the public sector a new role for intermediaries emerges in the literature. Edwards [12] suggests to consider moderators of public forums as *democratic intermediaries* between citizens and public institutions. Taking inspiration from experiences such as MySociety,¹ and its pioneering activities with projects such as FixMyStreet, TheyWorkForYou, etc., [6] call for "an entirely new kind of public agency, designed to forge fresh links between communication and politics and to connect the voice of the people more meaningfully to the daily activities of democratic institutions". Also [2] identify the need for new, third millennium bodies to lend stability to various cultural initiatives: although they do not refer to the digital world, the kind of body they outline, called Participatory Foundation, inspired the statute of the RCM² Participatory Foundation, promoted by the Civic Informatics Laboratory at the University of Milan to provide continuity to the RCM initiative, one of the first community network in Europe [10]. Reflecting on these experiences, [8] points out the need of identifying such third party bodies as guarantors of the public dialogue in the design of democratic deliberative digital environments.

This paper pursues these considerations by applying them at the case of the city of Genoa, where the municipality undertook some initiatives of e-government and e-participation. In some of them the University of Genoa already played a role that somehow corresponds to the pattern sketched above. From the discussion of these cases, we envisage the great potential that the university, in its role of third-party, can play in the public sphere. The balance of the paper is as follows. Section 2 presents different levels of participation, also discussing how new technologies can help to bridge the increasing gap between citizens and political institutions. Section 3 introduces some of the initiatives that took place in the city of Genoa, and Sect. 4 concludes this work discussing the role universities can play in this context.

¹<http://www.mysociety.org>.

²www.fondazionercm.it.

2 Levels of Participation

One key issue in relation to participation—that certainly involves participation processes supported by ICTs—is the transposition of these processes into decisions. The possibility for participation processes of directly influencing decisions, attaining the deliberative level [14], depends on the role they have with respect to the formal decision-making processes. This role is not defined once and for all, but is object of regulation processes and progressive institutionalization, that may lead to:

- The definition of behavioral codes in the context of a specific participation process, like for example the subscription of a “participatory contract” in the initiatives promoted by the RCM Foundation [8].
- The enactment of specific laws or rules binding at the territorial or thematic level.

The influence of these processes on the decisions arises however, in different ways, depending on whether the participation:

- Is promoted “from above” by the public actor which, for institutional role, holds the decision-making power (the so-called *top-down* participation). In this case, the participation should have already defined its status within the decision-making process and the rules pre-define the mode and the space given to it at the deliberative level. There is therefore a level of meta-participation within which the public actor decides who will participate, what matters, when and how, and, above all, with what degree of decision-making power.
- Is promoted “from below”, thanks to the initiative of citizens who hold a stake but do not have decision-making power on the issue under consideration (the so-called *bottom-up* participation). In this case, the participation attempts to create spaces within a decision-making process that had not solicited nor foresaw rules or space for participatory decision-making instances. This second mode is to be distinguished based on the fact that it has local character or not: citizens may be activated by a particularistic question about “their backyard”³ or, conversely, as a matter of general interest. Whatever the level concerned, we can say positively that “democracy is substantial (real) when people can participate in, and influence, the choices that are relevant to their life”.⁴

In top-down participation usually the public actor makes the rules and enforces them, while in the bottom-up case, the rules are normally the result of a negotiation process between the citizens who have decided to take action. In this second case, compliance with the rules is more easily subject to spontaneous sanctioning of deviant behaviors since the rules are not defined *ex ante*, but are the result of negotiation processes.

³To echo the Not In My Back Yard syndrome.

⁴Mary Kaldor, Opening Speech World Forum for Democracy, Council of Europe, Strasbourg, November 2013.

Bottom-up participation may be more susceptible to conflicts *among participants*, which could be called “regulatory” because somehow functional to define the “rules of game”; bottom-up participation is also the subject of a greater social control from the bottom and spread, which can contain in a spontaneous way such conflict. Moreover, conflicts may arise *between participants and decision-makers* too, depending on the way in which the participation result is incorporated or not in the decision. Also in this case, becomes therefore essential the support of a participatory contract that governs the interaction between the citizens and the decision-maker.

By contrast, top-down participation is generally regulated a priori, then apparently less prone to “regulatory conflict”, since there are rules and they are clear. But just because it is stimulated by the decision-maker, the more difficult it benefits from wide-ranging social control from below, while it remains in charge to those who have promoted to mediate and manage conflicts and emerging instances. When promoting a top-down participation process, the decision-maker must therefore adjust and operate it with much forethought and awareness or, easily, it will result in highly conflictual situations. A problem that arises in this case is that the decision-maker often organizes the participation using implicit assumptions on the behavior of the participants, inspired by instrumental rationality. However, usually among the participants instrumental and expressive instances are much more interrelated (see in this regard the contribution of [19] in response to the paradox of free riders highlighted by [15]).

In both cases, the participatory process will succeed if there is clarity on the following two key issues [8]:

- The “stakes”, with a balance between commitment and expected return. Participants (citizens, politicians, civil servants) should clearly know “what will I gain?” from their commitments. Along with the rules of the game, the participatory contract must explain this point. This applies, even if in a different way, also in bottom-up processes: “I participate if it can change things”.
- The “actor” who enforces the rules, namely the participatory contract negotiated between the social actors involved. As already observed in Sect. 1, in the literature on the topic the figure of the *democratic intermediary* [12] has emerged, generalizable to the role of a third-party, and we claim that, in several cases, universities (or their expressions, such as the RCM Foundation) can play this role of democratic intermediary, being meeting places for multidisciplinary languages and cultures, and guarantors of participation processes, thus preventing them degenerating into demagogic and manipulator processes.

Let us now look at *e-participation* and at the role that ICTs play in the two modes of activation of the process. Different levels of participation can be identified and this issue has been extensively treated in the literature, where different classifications have been proposed. In this paper we refer to the model introduced in [5] that suggests three main levels of involvement (information, consultation, and public participation), based on the direction of information flow (one-way,

two-ways) and on the intensity of the relationship between citizens and institutions. Other classifications exist, and the interested reader can check the literature for more details (see for example [1, 17, 22]).

2.1 Information Level

Today, governments feel with a greater urgency a duty of transparency, which is actually enshrined in the law for many years. On the technological level, ICTs facilitate access to information to those citizens who spontaneously activate, but only to the extent that the public administration (PA) is sufficiently transparent and provides access to such information. A government that wants to inform the citizens—also in view of a subsequent involvement at higher levels (consultation, public participation)—is potentially facilitated by ICTs but, in this respect, there is a problem of inequality among citizens' access to ICTs and then to the processes of e-participation. The existence of the digital divide, of course, does not absolve the government from using the full potential of ICTs for citizens' participation. Rather, the gap in terms of civic participation is one more reason to reduce the digital divide itself. We can frame this problem from different perspectives:

- If we consider the presence of the *supporting infrastructure*, different situations emerge, with not covered specific areas in which it is impossible or very hard for citizens to access the information⁵ conveyed by the government.
- If we consider the differences in *socio-economic status* and the availability of economic resources, the disadvantaged segments of the population are easily excluded from access to the network and participatory processes channeled through it.
- If we consider the *generational differences*, we realize that large segments of the population—particularly the elderly less educated people—could be excluded from these processes since they are not accustomed to the use of ICTs although, potentially, they are more active and involved than the younger. Conversely, the young and very young people (the so-called “digital natives”), are certainly facilitated with respect to the medium but often less interested in active engagement.

In this regard, the increasing tendency of the political class to use rhetorically ICTs and especially social media to promote and expand the participation of (younger) citizens in political life, seems designed to easily obtain legitimacy and presumed consent (the “I like”) rather than democratization of decision-making

⁵This is not dissimilar from a participatory process in presence, taking place in areas which are difficult to reach by citizens; in this case it would be possible to introduce the idea of a *physical divide* for in presence participatory processes.

processes. The use of social media such as Facebook and Twitter for the management of public dialogue with citizens is more and more widespread [3, 18] but another possible choice is that of implementing dedicated platforms that use the social media as a vehicle for advertising participatory initiatives to make them as inclusive as possible [20]. Environments such as Facebook and Twitter, born for social interaction, can be used by public agencies as an additional channel for the dissemination of information one-way (broadcasting) with occasional and ephemeral two-ways interaction/dialogue. In Sect. 3, the Facebook pages which are presented show that this channel is appropriate to broadcast information easily accessible and shareable by the public, much less to encourage their active participation, except in the case of emergency management.

3 Consultation Level

If we consider consultation, ICTs can facilitate both top-down and bottom-up participation but have a potentially more ambiguous role, at least for three reasons:

- The first reason is due to a problem of *user identity*, namely the fact that in online communication we cannot be certain of the identity of the person we interact with.
- The second reason is related to the fact that, by involving substantial numbers of citizens, communication processes at the base of the participatory process will most often be *asynchronous* and subject to the typical characteristics of online communication. The meaning of the sentences written by another person is less immediate since it is not supported by non-verbal communication⁶ but it has the advantage of forcing those who want to be included to explain clearly and unambiguously their message, also allowing them to combine/attach written references and links to the sources used, making messages potentially less ideological.
- The third reason is related to the *interpretation* of the messages conveyed in these participatory processes. Here come into play, as intermediaries of communication processes, actors who play a key role and may moderate, reformulate or aggregate what expressed by citizens, facilitate discussion and bring a number of instances, suggestions or opinions to the next (deliberative) level. The moderator-facilitator of the process, in analogy to what should be done in presence, must ensure that those who have expressed a position recognize themselves in the interpretation and synthesis made and returned as part of the result of the process. This process of interpretation and synthesis of the positions

⁶The conventional symbols (e.g. emoticons) used to substitute for this deficiency have limited efficacy compared to non-verbal communication in presence.

expressed by the citizens is transparent only to the extent that it is *public* and *accessible to stakeholders*. This allows the control of the facilitators from the participants. Under these accessibility conditions, online participation may present less risk of manipulation than offline participation, where the processes of interpretation are more elusive and less easily controlled. For both online and offline participation mediation transparent rules are necessary as well as a code of ethics of the facilitator [21].

3.1 Public Participation Level

At this level, the involved citizens share decision-making power with the actor who, institutionally, should take decisions on the considered issue. It is worth noting that to some extent top-down and bottom-up participation patterns must converge at this level, otherwise the decision might have a political weight (depending on the size of the movement that expresses it) but without cogency legislation.

Many of the limitations and advantages mentioned for the previous levels also apply to this one, with different shades. Certainly ICTs can facilitate and reinforce participation, but this possibility depends on the way in which this level is linked with information and consultation. While in offline participation the actor may have strong difficulties in accessing information and debates when called to contribute in decision-making, in online participation this can be much easier. Imagine a citizen who should express his position on one issue, going to an offline consultation and selecting one alternative on a white paper: even if he has some doubts, he does not have the possibility of coming back to the debates he heard or the articles he read. In an online consultation the same citizen could connect to an online platform and select one alternative among several possibilities: it is easy to provide him with links to all related information, and these materials are rapidly sortable and accessible with few clicks on the same platform. While in offline participation informing citizens is costly, time consuming and usually time bounded, in online participation these limits can be easily overcome.

Finally, we emphasize the following two aspects. Firstly, there is a specific phase of the participatory process, the definition of the possible decision alternatives, which is placed in between the consultation and public participation levels, which can take advantage of software and tools for idea gathering, which offer a powerful technological answer to be combined with the most adequate management of the participatory processes. These tools, thanks to their tagging and ranking features, prompt the emergence of decision alternatives among different proposals on the same subject. Secondly, at this stage and at all considered levels, it is convenient to adopt in a balanced way online and offline modes of participation and qualitative and quantitative research techniques [16].

4 Online Participation Examples in Genoa

This section introduces some e-participation initiatives that took place in the municipality of Genoa, with a special attention to those in which the university played an active role. The first four experiences show different examples of top-down processes, the last two are bottom-up processes, promoted directly by citizens.

1. Urban Center. One of the first experience of top-down participation is the Urban Center,⁷ whose development started in 2006 thanks to project funded by the Italian Government in a call for e-democracy. The aim of the project was the design and the development of a virtual Urban Center (i.e., a web portal) for Genoa, since the town was witnessing a significant urban transformation phase. Hence the idea of proposing an online space that could (1) help the administration sharing with citizens information on urban planning and territorial policies; (2) promote new urban projects; (3) gather suggestions from stakeholders and citizens; (4) promote people's participation in the municipality decision-making process.

Discussions involving citizens and experts were carried out during the project, the most significant being probably the one taking place in 2009 on the project of a motorway by-pass of the city [4]. In that case, most of the activities were organized in presence (offline), in form of public meetings with experts, an independent board of faculty members of the University of Turin, and local communities. The online Urban Center has been mostly used to distribute material (institutional acts, different projects proposals, FAQs,...), to broadcast news and collect questions from the citizens in thematic forums, in a *mixture* of offline and online phases. The University of Genoa has been involved in the project as a technology partner while the University of Turin played the role of the democratic intermediary.

2. Facebook pages. In 2009, following the experience of many others, the municipality of Genoa launched its Facebook pages⁸ to broadcast news (bus strike, weather information,...) and events (concerts, workshops and conferences,...), and to promote the interaction between the administration and the citizens. These pages enriched the institutional websites, offering citizens the opportunity to share their opinions via (moderated) comments and express their preferences through the "I like" button. However, there was not much space for active engagement: in this case Facebook pages offered another information/advertising channel with minor room for citizens' feedback.

3. Authority for Public Local Services. A third top-down e-participation initiative is the one promoted by the Authority for Public Local Services,⁹ an independent body responsible for the monitoring of the services provided by the municipality. Among the participatory activities of the Authority we recall the online space allowing citizens to report the inefficiencies encountered when using

⁷<http://www.urbancenter.comune.genova.it/>.

⁸<https://it-it.facebook.com/citta.genova>.

⁹<http://www.asplgenova.it/>.

the services offered by the municipality through a web form, whose content is forwarded to the competent office; best practices can be reported too, the most interesting ones being filtered and published on the website. The Authority also encourages the notification of citizens' alerts about problems to be fixed, in the style of the popular FixMyStreet service already replicated in several cities in Italy.¹⁰

4. Comunaligenova2012. The examples discussed so far see the PA as *the subject* promoting citizens' engagement, in a pure top-down approach, placing at the first level, the information level, in some cases with (moderate) interaction with citizens.

A different experience is the one carried out during the municipal election of 2012 with the goal of stimulating a stronger involvement of citizens. This time, a democratic intermediary¹¹ has opened a website, called Comunaligenova2012¹² (CG2012), based on the open source platform openDCN, where DCN stands for Deliberative Community Networks. CG2012 is a participative platform, set up by the University of Genoa as an independent body not engaged in the campaign, where the different social actors play on a neutral ground, in the style of the analogous initiatives undertaken during the Milan municipal elections in 2006 [9] and 2011 [11].

In that period, users could enroll to the platform and introduce themselves as candidates in a dedicated area where they could post information on their curriculum vitae and their electoral program. 291 users enrolled to CG2012, 73 of them as candidates, who considered it as yet another form of advertising for their political candidature. Problems have been reported by citizens in the Problem&Proposal space, many on them accompanied by possible solutions. Among the suggested topics we recall the water purifier, the difficult access to the sea, the role of ICTs in a smart city, the lack of libraries and green areas, and mobility issues.

As discussed in [11], the municipal elections are an effective opportunity for promoting online dialogue among citizens and between citizens and local institutions at the urban level. The electoral period is especially suitable for triggering participation of the political actors, especially of the candidates who, if elected, will become citizens' representatives.

Although the website was intended to survive after the elections this was not the case. Indeed, despite the initial enthusiasm, and even though some requests to the institutional actors, the municipality has not embraced the initiative and the website has slowly lost its visitors. Candidates who have been elected, once reached their goal, disappeared; some of them have also asked to the administrator of the

¹⁰Let us recall for example the early initiative on road safety held in Milan in 2008 (<http://www.sicurezzastradale.partecipami.it>), the Internet Reporting System launched in Venice in May 2008 (<http://iris.comune.venezia.it>) which collected since then 20392 reports, and the experience of Udine (<http://www.epart.it/udine>) based on the custom technology ePart for urban maintenance, well integrated in the website of the municipality.

¹¹The University of Genoa, with the help of the Civic Informatics Laboratory of the University of Milan and of the RCM Foundation.

¹²<http://www.comunaligenova2012.it>, now archived at <http://comunaligenova2012.opendcn.org/>.

platform to remove their online presence, probably willing to delete the “digital traces” of their political experience.

The lack of interest of the municipality for this experience is quite surprising if we consider the role of Genoa as a smart city. Indeed, Genoa is probably still closer to the technological view of a smart city rather than to the more recent idea of a “human” smart city populated by smart communities [13], although some experiences exist, documented as results of European projects [7].

Summarizing, the case of the Urban Center was a good example of how difficult is moving from information to consultation of citizens, especially in cases where the decision that should be taken closely affects their lives and their properties. The greater success achieved by the platform *ComunaliGenova 2012* in listening and dialogue with citizens was limited to the election period, while the period after revealed the utilitarian use by candidates who have opted not to continue the confrontation. The initiative promoted by the Authority for Local Public Services—although apparently little known—is interesting both for the presence of an independent body that plays the role of mediator with the municipal administration, and because the focus on the inefficiencies of municipal services suggests more a function of signaling that of listening with a potential direct impact on concrete decisions that affect the lives of citizens.

5. OpenGenova. Moving to the third level of Sect. 2, public participation, it is worth mentioning the *bottom-up* experience which started in 2013 thanks to a group of citizens who have launched the group *OpenGenova*. This is a community of citizens, who meet mostly online on the group’s website,¹³ discuss about the problems of the town, propose possible solutions. Members of the community can also publish online calls for *offline laboratories* on a given subject and try to involve in the activities other members or new participants. One of the first laboratory, for example, promoted co-working trying to aggregate young people in a shared place where they can exchange ideas and collaboratively develop innovative projects. Another one suggested to transform a street in Genoa into a new “promenade” with the elimination of some parking spaces, the widening of the existing pavement, and the installation of kiosks for public exercises.

Interestingly, this group has recently involved the *Centro Est* municipality¹⁴ and organized a context called *Partecip@*. A call for projects has been advertised asking groups of citizens to suggest improvements for buildings and other public spaces to be renewed. On its side, the municipality has allocated a monetary budget for the winners of the context. Citizens were not only asked for contribution with ideas and projects, but residents in the area were also involved in the selection of the best proposals: voting has been organized through a polling, opened on the *Urban Center* website, in a short circuit between bottom-up and top-down

¹³<http://www.opengenoa.org/>.

¹⁴From the administrative point of view, the city of Genoa is divided into nine municipalities, each one corresponding to a different area in the town.

participation, whose convergence has been suggested in Sect. 2 for the public participation to become effective.

OpenGenova, is a case of bottom-up public participation that illustrates, on the one hand, the need for the right mix of online and offline participation moments, which have different functions in the activation process of the citizens, on the other hand, the need for these initiatives to be recognized by those who have formal decision-making power so that the direct initiatives of the citizens can take effect.

6. Angeli del fango. Finally, another bottom-up participation process which is worth mentioning is the one known as “Angeli del fango” which has seen the mobilization of citizens in the case of the two floods that have hurt the city in 2011 and 2014. In both cases, groups of citizens, mainly students, auto-organized to help removing mud and debris in the areas affected by the flood. In these cases, the mobilization took place thanks to the use of Facebook and Twitter which show their power and immediacy in emergency management.

4.1 Online Survey

Do the recent experiences discussed so far mean that time is now mature for online participation? Probably yes, but with some care as we will discuss in the remaining part of this section.

At the beginning of 2014, an online survey on the quality of the municipality ICT services has been administered to citizens in an attempt to monitor the quality of the PA online support, and the results have been summarized in a report delivered to the managers responsible of these services. The survey, prepared by university experts, has been advertised through a link in the homepage of the website of the municipality, without any other action from the PA. Therefore it has been filled by citizens who—for any reason—landed on this web page and voluntarily decided to follow the link and answer. In addition to the questions on the online services, three multiple choice questions on e-participation have been added to understand the needs of the sample of respondents. During a period of 6 months (Jan–Jun 2014) 2023 questionnaires have been filled, but only 347 have been completed until the end and thus contain also the answers to the last questions on e-participation.

Due to a lack of space we cannot discuss here all the results of the survey, but we just stress that, when asked “Which tools do you consider more appropriate to facilitate citizens’ participation in the municipality decision-making process?” respondents selected as their first option the answer “Consultation within an online platform for e-democracy” (with 168 answers out of 347 participants, about 48 % of the sample), immediately followed by “Public meeting” (96 answers, 28 %) and “Survey filled at the municipal office” (80 answers, 23 %).

Even though the first option has been selected by half of the respondents, the second and third options propose indeed offline activities and thus their popularity suggests a need for both forms of participation, online *and* offline, to guarantee

everyone a chance for active engagement, somehow contrasting both digital *and* physical divide. This is particularly interesting if we consider the fact that most likely the respondents who completed the survey are those who are already familiar with the use of ICTs but, despite this, they suggest an associated use of online and in presence activities.

When asked “Which issues do you consider more interesting for citizens’ participation in the municipality decision-making process?” respondents selected as their first two options “Mobility” (230 answers, 62 %) and “Ecology and environment” (173 answers, 50 %). The other options which received high scores are “Urban redevelopment” (149 answers, 43 %), “Security” (145 answers, 42 %), and “Education and culture” (136 answers, 39 %). This result shows citizens’ interest in those aspects of daily life they would like to be able to discuss with the administration. Other choices, like for example the participatory budget or the city development planning did not get the same score, perhaps because the respondents did not feel competent enough in these fields. Top rated options seem to confirm that initiatives like the one supported by the Authority for Public Local Services might work well is sufficiently advertised and, above all, if followed by practical implementation.

Going back to the initial question, time seems mature for citizens’ participation that should be implemented in different forms (with and without ICTs) and citizens are willing to get involved, specially for those decisions affecting their daily life.

5 Conclusions

The availability and dissemination of appropriate technologies and the desire of participation, top-down and bottom-up, converge in generating a large number of experiences of e-participation and e-democracy, which, however, have several limitations.

A first problem is the lack of clarity, except in some cases, on how the results of participation will be included in the decision-making process. This lack of clarity is both legal-administrative and methodological since it is not always completely clear how the official decision-making processes will take into account the results of participation: In what way? With which amplitude? Moreover, too little attention is given to the techniques used to collect citizens’ views, summarize them, and put in relation with decision-making processes. If they are collected with qualitative methods, they leave room for interpretation of the decision-makers but, if they are standardized in a distorting way, they fail in respecting the spirit of participation.

The second limit is the way in which the processes of information and feedback are managed. What is the appropriate level of information to be disseminated to the public? Too much information is likely to create confusion and to involve only people sufficiently educated on the issue or with sufficient level of literacy; too little information is likely to simplify the problems and artificially produce biased opinions. Similarly, what feedback should be provided to those who participate?

Models of total transparency may be practiced only by those who have enough time and cultural resources. It is clear, however, that both in top-down and bottom-up participation processes, the presence of a democratic intermediary ensuring all participants in relation to the adopted method and the derived results should be guaranteed.

Among the cases described in Sect. 3, the Urban Center and Comunaligenova2012 have seen the involvement of the University of Genoa, with different processes and outcomes in relation to the issues addressed by the participatory processes. These examples do not certainly provide a conclusive proof of a vocation of the university for this role, but lead us to reflect on the strengths and weaknesses of the academic institution in assuming the responsibilities of democratic intermediary. Indeed, the presence of such democratic intermediary opens, in our opinion, an ample room for active engagement of the university, which embodies the values and incorporates the competencies of merit, method and technology to play a facilitation-mediation role of participatory processes, ensuring in a transparent way its real independence.

Some well established examples of such democratic intermediaries already exist, for example the RCM Foundation which brings together—in different roles—local institutions, university, schools, private enterprises, and representatives of civil society. This is indeed a big challenge that should be urgently addressed, specially to foster a stronger integration between the universities and their urban territories, thus stimulating the third mission of the university to qualify the *Third Millennium University*.

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