


Supporting Participatory Citizenship Insights from *LXAmanhã* Platform

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Abstract. Participation in decisions surrounding city-related interests promotes transparency of governance, enables progress, democracy and enhances the empowerment of citizens as central elements in a political, economic and cultural context. The purpose of this paper is to highlight the relevance of online digital platforms to enhance participatory citizenship in the current social, economic and political fabric of cities, through the analysis of a case study. In this way, this paper focuses on the case study of the *LXAmanhã* platform, as part of an on-going research on online platforms to support participatory citizenship. The design and functionality of the platform were analysed, as well as the data related to the projects submitted between 2012 and 2016. The results translate into insights and thoughts regarding citizens' participation in the platform, platform mechanisms and features and technological resources for the future. However future work is still needed, it was possible to conclude that the main challenge for these platforms is sustaining the community participation and significant engagement.

Keywords: Participatory · Citizenship · Culture · Digital platforms · *LXAmanhã*

1 Introduction

Citizens' participation in decisions surrounding city-related interests enables progress and democracy and, in addition to fostering common discourse, also enhances the formation and development of people as central elements in a political, economic and cultural context. Nowadays, digital platforms and environments are increasingly used to support the manifestations of the participatory citizenship and for the debate and organization of social and societal transformations. In some cases, citizen participation happens passively, as a result of requests from government agencies, non-governmental organizations, associations, syndicates or private companies. Accessing online public services, viewing parliamentary proposals, seeking information on transport, services and cultural activities are simple and common tasks, available through various tools and platforms.

Participatory culture, especially in the current context of Web 2.0, asks citizens for active and voluntary social action, which should consider the collective commitment to fundamental decisions that affect life in society, and that goes beyond simply clicking to search the web or comment posts. In the context of cities, participatory citizenship

can be seen as a form of participation in possible improvements to the structures of urban environments and the functioning of public equipment and services, as well as in the subsistence of cultural and educational projects, among other possible examples.

Without neutralizing or demeaning other types of resources or ways of discussing or practicing citizenship, mediation of technologies emerges as a way to foster these discussions and practices, allowing the use of digital online support to disseminate and expand actions and projects and thus achieve better results, such as increased citizen compliance, greater diversity of resources, more attractive tools and lower cost.

The *LXAmanhã* platform is one of these online spaces for the exercise of participative citizenship, encouraging citizens to research, share and collaborate online to improve the urban spaces of the city of Lisbon, as well as the enjoyment of these spaces by citizens. This paper presents the study of the particular case of the *LXAmanhã* platform, a work that is part of a survey and analysis of a set of platforms to support participatory citizenship. First, this research contributes to the existing body of knowledge by providing an objective analysis of a local case study features and participation data. Second, it is expected that the study will allow to identify a set of good practices that can be enunciated as guidelines for platforms to be developed in the same scope, to encourage the active and meaningful participation of the citizens.

2 Background

In a network, individuals combine and share their knowledge, references and culture. In this process, what is shared can be corrected, opened, processed, enriched and evaluated, something that is fundamental to what Levy (2004) called “collective intelligence”. For the author, communities function as intelligent filters that help deal with the excess of information and unify the alternative views of a culture. By disregarding the specificities of situations and individual needs, networks are more efficient (Levy 2004). In this way, the existence of a collective is essential for mobilization, organization or any interaction in a cultural construction and development perspective. Jenkins (2009) emphasizes that this construction and development do not occur through devices, however sophisticated they may be, since they emanate from the subjects and their social interactions. It’s important to understand about a participatory culture.

Jenkins et al. (2016) consider that any element developed for the exercise and promotion of a participatory culture, such as, for example, a digital platform, cannot limit access to the cultural means of production and circulation, nor fragment and isolate the public rather than provide opportunities to create and share culture and build hierarchies, or even hinder significant influence over the fundamental decisions that affect life in society. Participatory culture requires subjects’ actions to be motivated and nurtured by an ethos of ‘doing it together’, in addition to ‘doing it alone’ (Jenkins et al. 2016). Moreover, another way of conceptualizing the term and conceiving its development is to understand it as something dynamic and unfinished, defined in the current context and in parallel with institutionalized structures and powers. This culture is produced by people who find voice, agency, and collective intelligence in spaces on Web 2.0 platforms (Jenkins et al. 2016).

Shirky (2011) points out that the simple fact of creating something online together with other people and then sharing it represents the repercussion of the old model of culture but technology enhanced. For the author, the concept of participatory culture refers to the experiences lived by the subjects, transposed to and shared mainly on the web, since users take the offline knowledge to the online lives. The context, environment, sensations and social relationships online and offline can be integrated, and technologies can enhance this integration, adding possibilities to users and offering tools for group organization and expression.

In the culture of participation, citizens develop skills, if necessary, and systematize communicational processes and actions in favour of resolutions for causes, socio-environmental support, political manifestations, economic gains, entrepreneurial initiatives, among others. They empower themselves through interaction, initially triggered by an exchange of information to produce knowledge, needs and desires, and they do so not only through the appropriation of media artefacts, but also in digital platforms organized for several purposes.

Jenkins et al. (2016) compare the effort of citizens in the context of participatory citizenship to the performance of fans, an audience that plays a key role in the production of media content. Like the fans, active citizens take a deep commitment, but with civic responsibility, often disinterested for profit and driven only by the will and social relevance of collaboration. Understanding the contributions of participatory culture involves an evaluation of practices, which, according to Jenkins et al. (2016) has also allowed the realization that the greatest social transformations happen through a shared vision of how a better society could be.

Individuals post on blogs, social networking groups, complaint and opinion pages, video sharing sites and other online services and platforms, multimedia content about their experiences in the city, in their convivial environments, in work contexts, between others. In the community, other members who have experienced similar or adverse experiences collaborate by publishing other content, new or complementary. Besides these, other possibilities open up to collaborate and produce in a network, so that the rights and duties of the citizens are transformed through a participatory culture lived in the cities.

In Portugal, some platforms approach this purpose with different strategies. The platform *Ideias à moda do Porto*, for example, is an initiative of a group of Porto city's citizens, which receives proposals to improve urban spaces, puts suggestions to vote and tries to promote some of them among the population. The *LXAmanhã* was created with the exactly same goal, but receives proposals for the city of Lisbon, inserted by the citizens directly into the platform, and then organized and showed using geolocation. Moreover, it is possible for users to support a proposal. Similarly, but supported by private entities, the platform *Por Um Bairro Melhor* allows the registration of citizen-owned projects to be carried out in the space of the neighbourhoods, and has a network of business partners to finance the selected projects. These examples have in common the fact that they operate based on the active participation of the citizen to promote the reflection and/or the execution of alternative forms of experiencing the urban spaces. They also promote the exercise of citizenship anchored in citizens' social commitments and, as a result, encourage a culture of participatory citizenship.

In the scientific context, the concept of participatory culture has become an interest of many areas and has been studied, mainly, in the political, administrative, cultural, communicational and media contexts. Over the past five years, some approaches have gained more prominence. The production of content with citizen participation and the media as a tool for social empowerment in manifestations, activism and democratic exercise (Linders 2012; Keller 2012) are much discussed topics. Another question of interest has been to understand how media and digital cultures allow citizens to get organized, to get involved and to act on collective issues and engage in the co-creation of the social fabric and the construction of the city shape (Lange and Waal 2013).

Research has also focused on the use of platforms in education, literacy and the exercise of citizenship in community, in order to encourage competences that allow more active participation in society (Kassam 2013; Taylor et al. 2012). Studies have also been carried out to generate reflections on government practices and reforms, especially regarding models for governance and administration practices (Nam 2012; Bonsón et al. 2012; Ellison and Hardey 2014).

3 Methods

The research this paper presents has a qualitative nature and is based on the case study (Gray 2014) of the *LXAmanhã* platform. This platform emerged in 2012 from the partnership of three colleagues from different areas and was inspired by the German project NextHamburg. It is an independent platform for collecting and consulting citizens' ideas to improve the city of Lisbon and reflect on its future, which allows the insertion of urban intervention proposals, which are mapped according to the locations to which they refer. The insertion of proposals, as well as access to other functionalities - such as, receiving notifications when comments are made on the proposals, post comments and collaborating on the development of suggestions, supporting ideas, etc. - depend on a registration as a platform user, by inserting personal data, a user name and a password. The support for an initiative is made through a voting system, by clicking a like-type button. After the submission, the idea becomes visible on the map, opening the possibilities for collaboration. The user may browse through the proposals by region of the city and by categories (represented with different colours), such as environment, architecture, social affairs, commerce, culture, public space, mobility, and others. The platform, by retaining and classifying solutions sought and co-opted by citizens, gives the community and policy makers a comprehensive vision of future needs and needs, and may therefore help elect initiatives for implementation.

The analysis focused on virtual documents available in the platform or through it, like texts, the platform chronology, the *LXAmanhã* blog, podcasts from radio programs, and all the project's proposals made available from 2012 to 2016. Proposals were analysed considering the insertion date, the amount of support achieved and the categories in which they were indexed by the citizens, when the project was inserted in the platform. Some features of the platform were also analysed, given its importance for the interaction process, such as the functionalities related with the insertion and visualization of the project's proposals, feedback and information updating. The platform's interface

was not considered in the analysis. Although the study was based solely on data collected on the platform, *LXAmanhã* is also present through a blog and profiles on Facebook, Instagram and YouTube.

4 Results and Discussion

The results translate into insights and thoughts organized in two main topics: the frequency of participation in the platform during the period under analysis and the structure and functionalities of the platform. Considering the results of participation in *LXAmanhã* as a vulnerability of this type of online participation model, and based on the reflections and insights that resulted from the study, some improvement actions are suggested for the *LXAmanhã* platform and for other platforms or initiatives that come to be developed within the framework of participatory citizenship. It is also relevant to clarify that the interests of those responsible for the platform, whether economic or otherwise, were not considered or researched.

4.1 Participation in the Platform

The available map on the *LXAmanhã* platform allows citizens to view the proposals submitted by users since the platform's launch date, according to the area of the city of those proposals. The survey took into account the period of the last five years and all the categories that the platform integrates, in a total of 129 posts from 64 unique users, and 1010 supports. This computes to an average of 2 proposals per user and a support of 7,8 per proposal, which according to the online participation models (Preece and Shneiderman 2009) is an interesting participation average. Active participant users can be organized into 3 categories: one time participants, returning participants and regular participants. The first is a user that posts one entry and usually does not interact. The second is a user that posts from 2 to 4 entries, on the same month, around one or two related topics, and that interacts sporadically through support or comments. The last is a regular user that posts throughout the different years and interacts regularly with other users on different topics, promoting the platform and the causes. There are two clear examples of the latter: Jozhe (submitting proposals in all 8 categories between 2013 and 2016) and Luis (in 5 between 2012 and 2013). Although April seems to be the most active month for proposals, and Public Space and Mobility the most active topics, there were no specific trends detected. However, a decrease in these participations was observed (Fig. 1), especially from 2014, when four of the categories did not receive any project. Thus, this decrease in participation seems to constitute a vulnerability of this platform, and it is necessary to understand the possible reasons for having stopped attracting participants.

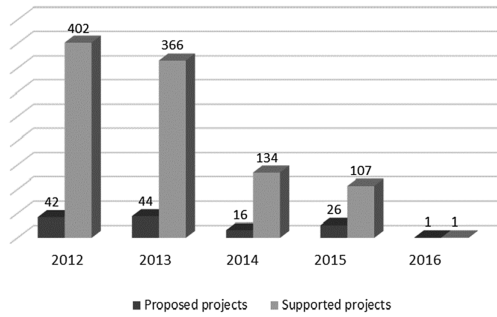


Fig. 1. Number of supporters and platform posts.

Recalling the political and economic context during the period under review, and specifically in the year in which participation began to decline, the country was beginning to recover from a deep economic crisis. In these contexts, and although the sense of collectively and the interest of citizens in the common good may be even more necessary to overcome adversity, it is common for people to focus their efforts on individual and, at most, household survival.

Regarding the distribution of the proposals by the categories listed in the platform, it can be observed that, in the period under study, the categories with the most submissions are “public space”, “mobility” and “environment”, with 45, 34 and 23 posts, respectively (Fig. 2). Although the identification of the categories with the greatest interest for the users may be important to guide proposal’s raising and disseminating efforts, an analysis of each of the projects submitted in the different categories allowed to conclude that the categorization, made by the users at the time of submission, does not always describe or correspond to the type of proposal. It was possible to find ideas of a more cultural or educational nature, categorized, for example, in “public spaces”.

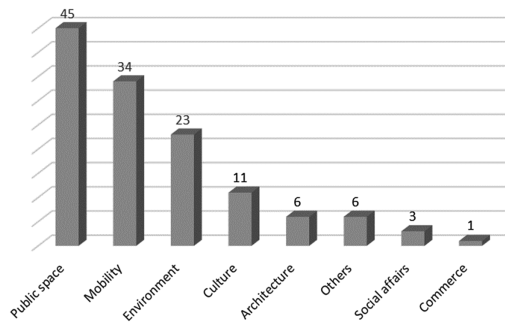


Fig. 2. Number of platform’s posts per category.

It is also worth emphasizing that the data available on the platform, such as those previously reported, could be essential to feed an annual report available to citizens and stakeholders, including public agencies, research institutions, private companies, associations, NGOs, among others.

4.2 Platform Mechanisms and Features

It can be argued that citizen participation through the submission of projects contributing to the collective sphere has great significance, since it is an individual initiative that will impact a larger number of citizens. But, in the case of *LXAmanhã*, the platform becomes obsolete by not having tools that integrate the users.

In *LXAmanhã*, the contact between the users is made, exclusively, through comments that can be inserted in the proposals. In this sense, the focus on “doing it together” (Jenkins et al. 2016) is lost and therefore the opportunity to integrate such users to put the actions into practice is also wasted. It is not a matter of believing that the resources will determine the results, because this will only happen through the actions of the subjects. Cross-category opinions such as “necessity to transform the Garrett Street into walkable paths and eliminate parking...” (mobility comment in a 2012 Public Space category proposal¹), or “Location, for me, is very important, as the scenery is very beautiful...”², constitute such examples, expressed by users. Although the most active users interact and make efforts to mobilize and gain critical mass around topics and issues, what is proposed is to use the possible tools as strategies to extend the interaction between the users, to generate an easier, and richer involvement and commitment.

On the other hand, and by collecting information of interest to the public authorities, the platform could make the participation process even more expressive by extending it to other audiences, whether governmental, community or private, constituting itself as a participatory citizenship ecosystem, capable of mobilizing and being mobilized to transform ideas into actions.

A participatory ecosystem in the context of citizenship can be interesting to keep a financing relationship with public, private or alternative initiatives. Also, following the logic of crowdfunding platforms as a solution to broaden the power to fund proposals can stimulate contributions’ submission and make them more effective. The projects that were to be implemented and the partners willing to carry them out or finance them would be recognized by a certification or seal *LXAmanhã*, a kind of recognition for collaboration and an evaluation in the field of participatory citizenship.

As for the page design in which the proposals are viewed, although it is simple and clean, it presents a static environment, attractive only by the images and map. Moreover, the lengthy texts and lack of feedback on the completion or progress of the proposal limit the users’ knowledge to the point of generating disinterest.

It is also possible to verify that *LXAmanhã*’s blog and social networks could be better used in strategic communication actions with the public, deserving periodic updates, which currently do not happen. Through social networks, it would be possible to create interaction dynamics with users, such as the debate of ideas, voting, etc. It would also be possible to generate gamified challenges and to disseminate diverse multimedia information, such as videos or podcasts, to promote the platform, its goals and new projects.

¹ Available online at: <http://www.lxamanha.pt/userpost/pedonalizacao-da-rua-garrett/>.

² Available online at: <http://www.lxamanha.pt/userpost/andar-de-bicicleta-livrentemente-junto-ao-rio/>.

4.3 Technological Resources for the Future

It is also possible to verify that, presently, technological resources are available that, if properly employed in the case of the *LXAmanhã* platform, could boost the use of the platform and breathe new life into the project. Projects that can contribute to create and maintain a system in a predictable balance and help resolve conflicts (Stimmel 2015) are crucial in today's "smart" oriented environments. Taking advantage of the "mobile era" possibilities to renew and improve the user experience with *LXAmanhã* is one of the suggestions. Expansion to a Mobile App would enable on-site georeferenced publications. It would also be easier to collect and upload information such as photography, video and audio, for example, with testimonials from individuals who visit the places for which the proposals were launched. Augmented Reality could also be an interesting feature in this App. By adding a layer of virtual information to reality, the user could be notified regarding proposals submitted or in progress in a geo-localized way, being able to obtain more information by reading QR codes with the smartphone.

5 Conclusion

The results of the study confirm that the association between the interest in finding solutions, exploiting collaborative participation and using the mediation of information and communication technologies can be fundamental to the process of civic culture.

Although the results of this analysis are limited and cannot be extrapolated, the *LXAmanhã* case study can be articulated in the sense of projecting civility, establishing cultural influences of collaboration, sharing knowledge about the city and its improvements and facilitating communication between citizens and in society for decisions to be made.

The analysis of the participation data gathered throughout the time span of this project, led us to conclude that to contribute to a better performance of the platforms that follow these purposes and understandings, it is more efficient to privilege collective participation and invest in interaction between the subjects. The collaborative construction of improvement actions and the possibility of reaching other stakeholders of interest for the formation of a participatory ecosystem are ideal. As a result, we propose that, in order to legitimize the efforts sought by the platform and to achieve more concrete results regarding the implementation of the proposals, it is advisable to use partnership strategies with public, private and independent entities. By trying to implement these recommendations into an actionable plan or framework for specific projects, opportunities for execution and financing of proposals are enhanced, as well as citizen engagement.

The use of mobile technologies and mechanisms that facilitate the use of the platform can favour the dynamics, practicality and agility of using *LXAmanhã*, as well as promoting in users the feeling that the goals and contributions that feed these platforms are part of their day-to-day, to the point of being a reference for their performance as citizens.

Finally, it is proposed to use the data registered in these platforms to analyse or predict scenarios of need for citizens and the city and to direct efforts to strengthen the participatory culture in this area. In future studies, it will be appropriate to extend the

analysis to other platforms by comparing them, as well as interviewing users in order to understand their interpretation of the use and relevance of participatory citizenship through these platforms.

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