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Regione Emilia-Romagna

Sabrina Franceschini graduated in Sociology of Communications at the University of Bologna in 1992. Since then she has always worked in the communications sector, initially in the private sphere, and is currently Executive Area Manager at the Regione Emilia-Romagna (Emilia-Romagna Regional Authority), where she has been particularly involved in the development and support of professional communicator and innovator networks. Sabina Franceschini has also supervised the e-democracy, Partecipa.net and Io partecipo projects as well as the ComunicAzione dell'eGov project in Emilia-Romagna.

The Regione Emilia-Romagna first began to look into e-democracy in 2004 with its nationwide tender for the financing of "projects for the development of digital citizenship".

The project that this led to, Partecipa.net, was part of the Emilia-Romagna Computerization Plan, and following this overall approach, it was developed together with a total of 21 other local associations.

The project was run over 24 months and its main goals, most of which were achieved within the established time limits, centred on developing a local network of participation processes with the aid of new technologies. This involved pooling tools and methods and focussing on experiences that had already proved successful within the various associations.

With regard to tools and methods, an "e-democracy kit" was developed, together with open source applications and method support documentation and a regional e-democracy portal was also set up: www.partecipa.net. This access site unified all the various processes as well as being a fixed base for promoting, not just the project, but also a general awareness of the importance of participation.

6 identical tests were carried out in 6 different administrations at various institutional levels. All of these allowed us to benchmark the project internally and assess the results of these experiences in different contexts (as while the context changed the other variables remained the same).

The project left us an important legacy in terms of tools, relationships between associations, experiences, and therefore improved operator skills, and a number of precious lessons for the future.

First and foremost, distinct political goodwill is required. This must go further than mere formal agreement as the level of commitment to this policy must be sufficient to accept results that may sometimes be unexpected. Secondly, the various administrations must be integrated internally. Our project was created in the computer area and it did not always find the collaboration it required from the other sectors involved (reference policy experts, communicators and sectors with the most experience of participation processes, etc.). In any case, the project can certainly take credit for focusing the attention of the administrations involved on a new way of relating to citizens and handling policies.

In January of this year the Regione Emilia-Romagna launched its new project, "Io partecipo", which is essentially a spin off from the previous one. If the role played by the Regional authorities in the first project was to support and coordinate the associations, in this project it addresses citizens directly, supplying them with a channel through which their views on regional services and policies can be heard and exchanged.

At www.iopartecipo.net citizens are presented with a menu of cross-sector information and services from which they can choose those that interest them the most via a self-profiling system. This is, therefore, a single access site offering a panoramic vision of the various activities conducted by the Regione Emilia-Romagna (starting with an initial selection that will grow as time passes), with a particular focus on issues, services, and policies featuring processes that citizens can use to air their views and become involved. Furthermore, compared to the previous project, on "Io partecipo" users can produce news and features aimed at the public administration and the digital community with the "Become an Editor" service. The aim of this tool, which is conceptually part of the civil journalism and web 2.0 area, is to improve access to the public sphere and encourage citizens to become truly active.

In the knowledge that we can only really talk about digital citizenship if a wide and expert access to the network exists, synergy was established with another project in the Computerization Plan. This project called "ECitizen" was introduced to teach and diffuse the use of internet and was also focused on citizens in the local region.

But all this may not be enough, as even if making the entire range of PA information available to citizens in a way that is transparent and accessible, and listening to and interacting with citizens is an indispensable prerequisite for complete democracy, it is also true that citizens often participate more frequently and more freely in other locations and not solely on the web.

What seems to be the challenge today is how should we listen to the appeals of civil society if these are not directed at the PA. In this context, the old proverb, "If Mohammed does not go to the mountain, then the mountain will have to go to Mohammed", is probably true. Fortunately, technology can come to our aid once again here, by providing us with tools that can collect and meaningfully "classify" the opinions and even protests that are increasingly expressed in the various social networks or blogs, while at the same time guaranteeing full respect for citizens' privacy.

The potential integration between institutional and spontaneous processes may prove to be an immense opportunity for a PA that wishes to really meet citizens' needs wherever they are manifested or expressed. However, for this to happen, as we have already anticipated in our comments regarding the conclusions of the "Partecipa.net" experience, technology alone is not enough. We must accompany this revolution with another of the same dimensions, a revolution that is directed at aspects such as organization, cultural attitudes and decision-making.

