

Hybrid Community.
An Empirical Case Study of Participatory Citizenship

The transformation of the public utilities

In the last twenty years the Italian sector of local public services has experienced remarkable changes. Besides the major national operators, who long ago launched a multi-business strategy and an aggressive penetration in international markets, new realities have appeared on the market, based on the merging of local companies.

The Iren Group is one of them and is now the main interregional multi-utility operator in the Northwest of Italy. Its field of activity spans Piedmont, Liguria and Emilia, and its services range from electricity supply to district teleheating, hydrology and even environmental issues linked to waste management. In almost every territory the Iren Group has acted as a catalyst for small and medium local service companies, offering itself as a bridging agent between different local systems. It is now deeply rooted, and therefore its relationship with local communities is of primary importance for its own continued development.

These strategies of the Iren Group and its decision to launch a vast project of participatory citizenship, called IRENcollabora, fully correspond to the large-scale changes that have taken place in the services sector provided by public utilities. Such changes consist mainly of the blending – both symbolic and normative – of a public dimension (public services) with a private dimension (transition from public-utilities under public control to multi-utilities under private control).

These recent changes in the way of managing and delivering public services have been also influenced by the diffusion and penetration of digital culture.

As the researchers Helen Margetts and Patrick Dunleavy put it

(2013), there are two confronted models at the root of these new trends: Public Management has shifted from a prevailing, almost exclusive model, the so-called NPM (New Public Management), to a new model, the DEG (Digital Era Governance), which strongly favours the adoption of digital communication technologies in the management and delivery of services for citizens.

Basically, the challenge is to understand how the new wave of digital technologies is modifying the organization and management of service delivery. The transforming impetus of the DEG framework is mainly represented today by the 2.0 model of digital communication (social media); and also by a series of pervasive technologies that permeate urban and domestic spaces to create an interconnected fabric of information flows (Internet of things and big data) which have an impact on services, on the organizations that provide them and on the final users.

The New Public Management model stands on three pillars:

- Disaggregation: the transition from centralization to decentralization, the so-called 'agencification' of the main institutions' functions, with the establishment of a series of intermediary organizations that lead to the separation of the purchaser and the provider of a service.
- Competition: the progressive withdrawal from the model of monopolistic public supplies towards new mechanisms, such as the 'quasi-market', leading to a gradual deregulation.
- Incentivizing: motivation based exclusively on financial reward rather than professional improvement.

The clearest results of the NPM approach, which has spread widely across the Anglo-Saxon world and in economies with a rather liberal bias, have tended to privatise, the creation of public-private partnerships, and deregulation processes. From 1980 to 2005, many countries saw their institutions shift towards the NPM model, with considerable differences in modality, intensity and relevance from one country to another. The United Kingdom, Australia and New Zealand stand out for having adopted and put to practice this model. Other countries have only implemented single measures (such as the privatisation of railways and telecommunications such as in Italy).

Nevertheless the onset of austerity measures in many European countries after the financial crisis of 2008, and the subsequent criticism of the neo-liberal model – that gave birth to the New Public Management – have lead to a questioning of its principles and processes.

In addition to the NPM model, researchers at the Oxford Internet Institute and the LSE Public Policy Group are describing a new model, partially or even openly opposed to it: a model of management based on the impulses generated by the digital media in every field of social action. The Digital Era Governance model starts in parallel with the first wave of technology, linked to ICT infrastructures, and covers the decade from 2000 to 2010. From 2010 to today, it undergoes a transformation due to the disruptive onset of the '2.0' digital communication.

The DEG model clearly shows the importance of digital transformation, as well as the need to completely reconsider macro-theories on the development and management of the public sector and the public services (Goldfinch and Wallis, 2009). It is based on two pillars:

- The organizational re-integration of service management in national governments (in favour of a disintermediation between Institutions and citizens).
- A 'holistic' approach to services based on people's needs (transition from a segmentation of the services strictly based on business logic to a reunification based on customer needs), that has led to the reunification of public services around the concept of *citizen-customer*.

The participatory model of IRENcollabora

Such is the context of the Iren Group's decision to carry out a participatory project experiment in its territories. It is obviously a project that brings the Iren strategies close to the DEG model, as it sets up instruments, including digital ones, to involve local communities and thus allow the Group to: inform citizens about projects that have a significant impact on their territory (and that often lead to clashes and conflicts, as in the case of energy plants and incinerators); maintain a permanent interaction with customers and gather ideas and suggestions from citizens themselves. The goal is to stop communicating and to start involving the 'citizen-customer' in participation processes.

This approach is consistent with the identity of Iren, a multi-utility company with strong local roots, resulting from the conversion of municipal utility corporations into private entities that provide services of public interest.

This transformation also explains the 'hybrid' participatory model

adopted by IREncollabora, which considers two types of participation for citizens, on a territorial basis: the offline format, mediated by delegates of civil society who sit at the table of a local committee; and the online format (Bakardjieva, 2015), ‘disintermediated’ by digital media of the digital platform irencollabora.it.

The vision that supports the IREncollabora project – in its dual format of stakeholders’ table and online digital platform – is clearly present in the digital culture of the ‘smart citizen platforms’, which point to three main goals: massive (and transverse) participation, empowering (increasing the level of people’s awareness and providing them with tools for action), up to the ambitious objective of co-design (Laird, 1993; Enserink and Monnikhof, 2003).

This hybrid model puts to the test a particular way of governing the participatory processes, which stands halfway between a ‘from the bottom up’ non-regulated participation and a mediation-experts-guided participation.

IREncollabora has chosen to offer a double approach to citizen-users. On one hand, they can use a free, non-filtered space to submit brief topics/suggestions/ideas/opinions (the ‘proposals’ section of the online platform). While on the other hand, they can use a ‘controlled’ space, restricted to complex projects, to submit projects in accordance with a format suggested by the platform (the ‘projects’ section of the online platform). This second channel is supervised by a territorial committee; its duty is to meet once a month, to review the online proposals and to respond to them with a constructive attitude.

Both channels – ‘proposals’ and ‘projects’ – work independently of each other. The only meeting point between the territorial committee and the digital community of citizens is the platform, by means of the committee members’ compromise to analyse the submitted projects and to take action in making them achievable. The real moment of consultation/deliberation happens ‘in the presence’ of the stakeholders around a table, but it must be communicated via the online platform, following a principle of transparency that is essential to building trust between all agents: the multi-utility company itself, the local mediators and ordinary citizens.

IREncollabora is an example of ‘cross-genre’ activism, an example of ‘phygital’ participation architecture, in which the language and mechanisms of ordinary citizens’ bottom-up participation are guided and blended with the language and mechanisms of regulated deliberation

processes (which include shared and compulsory rules, transparency tools, mediation, etc.).

This 'hybrid' model is therefore a courageous attempt to put together, within a single platform, two goals and instruments that usually prosper in separate communication environments: the gathering of ideas ('proposals' channel) and the co-designing of projects ('projects' channel). The first aspect has a clear low entry level (low involvement), but the second involves a motivated community (high involvement) and is 'mediated' by territorial committee members.

The moment of deliberation, which happens around the table of the territorial committee's working group, does not put an end to the participation process, it triggers instead a new cycle of the project's life, as the project shares online its releases, comments and evolution. The deliberation launches the life cycle of the online project.

The hinge, the connecting point between the offline and online participation is therefore the project; and it is the territorial committee's responsibility to support it by setting up activities for its development.

In digital 'smart citizen platforms', the goal is to have a maximum (enlarged and inclusive) participation rate with a low entry level (low effort); this does not require special abilities or previously acquired skills (technological and cognitive-cultural), but motivations; it allows to focus on the local aspect of civic engagement, in order to better orientate it towards mutually agreed solutions. The 'smart citizen platforms' model clearly relies on the concept of proactive community (Castells, 1997). It provides new channels to collaborate with and to share from the bottom up, but in parallel it questions the role of the institutions and makes them confront the crisis of the deliberative model based on representation.

IRENcollabora seems to respond to this tension by trying a third way: it cautiously experiments to unite the consultative/deliberative model of traditional representation (where the representatives of a well organized civil society act 'in the name of ...') with the typical model of the web 2.0 disintermediated digital culture (where the citizens-users, unorganized, submit proposals 'in the name of themselves').

This cautious form of mediation between two models and two cultures is indeed a form of 'hybrid' participation, that means 'hospitality', both in the sense of hosting alterity (letting oneself be contaminated by alterity) and of being hosted by otherness (putting oneself on a different decentralized perspective). The result is a participatory

environment produced by the interaction or crossbreeding of two dissimilar cultures and traditions. A hybrid model is a composition of two or more distinct ‘infrastructures’ (private, community, or public) that remain unique entities, but are bound together by standardised processes that enable information portability and create new shared habits.

The ethnographic observation. Some results to discuss

The analysis of the IREncollabora case has been conducted mainly with qualitative tools: observing on-site, from July 2014 to July 2015, the work of the Piacenza territorial committee; conducting in-depth interviews with all committee members (consisting of 16 community stakeholders from the Piacenza area); and quantitatively and qualitatively analysing the users and communication flows of the irencollabora.it platform.

In order to analyze the structure of the digital platform, I have used the model proposed by Pais, Peretti and Spinelli (2014: 133-134) for ‘crowd’ platforms dedicated to the engagement of people and ideas. This model focuses on four dimensions:

- the ‘axis of personalization’: the projects are between between two extreme polarities, that of the ‘person’, when the project is strongly characterized by its submitter, and that of the ‘idea’, when the focus is on the project;
- the ‘axis of relationship’: the projects are supported by social networks that either have ‘bonding’ type links (strong bonds established among people who know each other and share common interests and a high sense of belonging to the community) or ‘bridging’ type links (new links that started with and are due to the project);
- the ‘axis of anchoring’: the projects can be divided, according to their territorial involvement, between ‘local’ ones (bond to the specific requirements of a region) and ‘global’ ones (the community is international and has general interests that aim beyond territorial settlement);
- the ‘axis of digitization’: the project and the communities involved both act ‘offline’ and ‘online’, according to the different engagement tools set up by the project.

According to this scheme, the IREncollabora experience of involve-

ment and participation is based on the 'idea' concept. It works and takes roots on a 'local' basis, through engagement strategies that can be both 'offline' (the territorial committee) and 'online' (the web platform). When it comes to the type of relationships, it shifts along the 'bonding-bridging' continuum: IREncollabora has very strong local/regional roots and therefore points to bonding type relationships; it has nevertheless the ambition to expand its community of reference, and tries to render 'general' the local interests of the different territories where new committees appear.

The platform was publicly launched in the fall of 2014, by means of a traditional press campaign in print media. The promotional campaign had a territorial basis, which took advantage of the territorial committee members (first from Piacenza, later from the other cities involved) to trickle down information on the existence and usage of the platform to their own communities (the 'snowball' model).

Throughout the platform's first year, the Piacenza committee had to encourage and manage most of the projects currently in progress, which is an obvious sign of the difficulties in involving ordinary citizens in the online participatory process. One year after its inception, only 9 proposals (the channel freely available to the citizens) had been shared, whereas 7 projects (the channel mediated by the territorial committee) had been proposed, almost always from the stakeholders' table.

For analysis of the online platform's participatory model, we shall again borrow a basic model from Pais, Peretti and Spinelli (2014): the activation model for 'crowdfunding' in social networks. It analyzes the ability to activate three related spheres: the involvement of strong ties (Granovetter, 1973); the involvement of the weaker bonds thanks to the strong ones that act as bridges encouraging the transmission of information to people who are two or more degrees away from the proponent; and the creation of new bonds, through the mobilization of strangers.

IREncollabora is currently at the first stage of involvement. It has brought together a community of people that are close to the first proponents and that mainly belong to the associations and organizations included in the territorial committee. The committee members sit at the decision table not as single individuals-citizens, but as representatives of separate communities, the civil society groups of the territory. This makes it more difficult to transition directly from the first level (strong ties) to the second level (weak ties) of involvement, a thing that would instead be much easier in the case of horizontal communication

between peers.

In terms of digital participation, the difficulty in creating a critical mass of actively involved users is probably due to the hybrid model itself, which puts together a vertical dynamic (that follows the course of action and the channels of traditional representation, by means of the territorial committee) and a horizontal dynamic subordinated in the ways and habits of digital participatory platforms.

The two trends need time to find a common path. In fact, the ethnographic observation has revealed the difficult transition from passive to proactive attitudes among territorial committee members. During the first year of the project, all slowly changed – some more, some less – their initial attitudes of resistance: resistance against the new mode of governance that they were called to create, and also against the digital environment that they were not able to avoid and which they had to learn (in order to present their proposals).

The solution to overcoming such resistance was the determined use of a ‘learning by doing’ approach. Working subgroups were created, divided by themes and by the single projects launched on the platform. In this way, every member spent time and resources giving shape to the project that they had voluntarily taken over.

The digital realm is, above all, a ‘practice. Change cannot happen by means of ideologies or a-priori choices. Instead it requires that people pragmatically get their hands dirty. It is the ‘by doing’ aspect that produced changes, however small, in the habits of social mediators groups (stakeholders representing civil and political society). IREncollabora is a smart citizen platform and its uniqueness lies in its attempt to bring together two space-time dimensions: the long and slowly flowing tempo of the offline world and its representative system, and the brief and hectic tempo of online participation. The project makes the organised subject (the socially involved stakeholder) act as a trigger of participation, including digital participation.

All this effort certainly seems in contradiction with the culture of ‘networked individualism’ (Welmann, 2001) generated by the spread of the Internet which ‘facilitates personal communities that supply the essentials of community separately to each individual: support, sociability, information, social identities, and a sense of belonging’. A culture in which ‘the person, rather than the household or group, is the primary unit of connectivity’ (Welmann *et al.*, 2003).

IREncollabora is a participatory experiment that struggles to

launch bottom-up participation among ordinary citizens, but it may certainly have a serious impact on the practices of the social mediators involved in the project, for whom irencollabora.it really seems like a different ‘technology of self-mediation’, a new ‘mediation opportunity structure’, ‘the tools through which a social movement becomes self-conscious’ (Cammaerts, 2012; 2015).

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