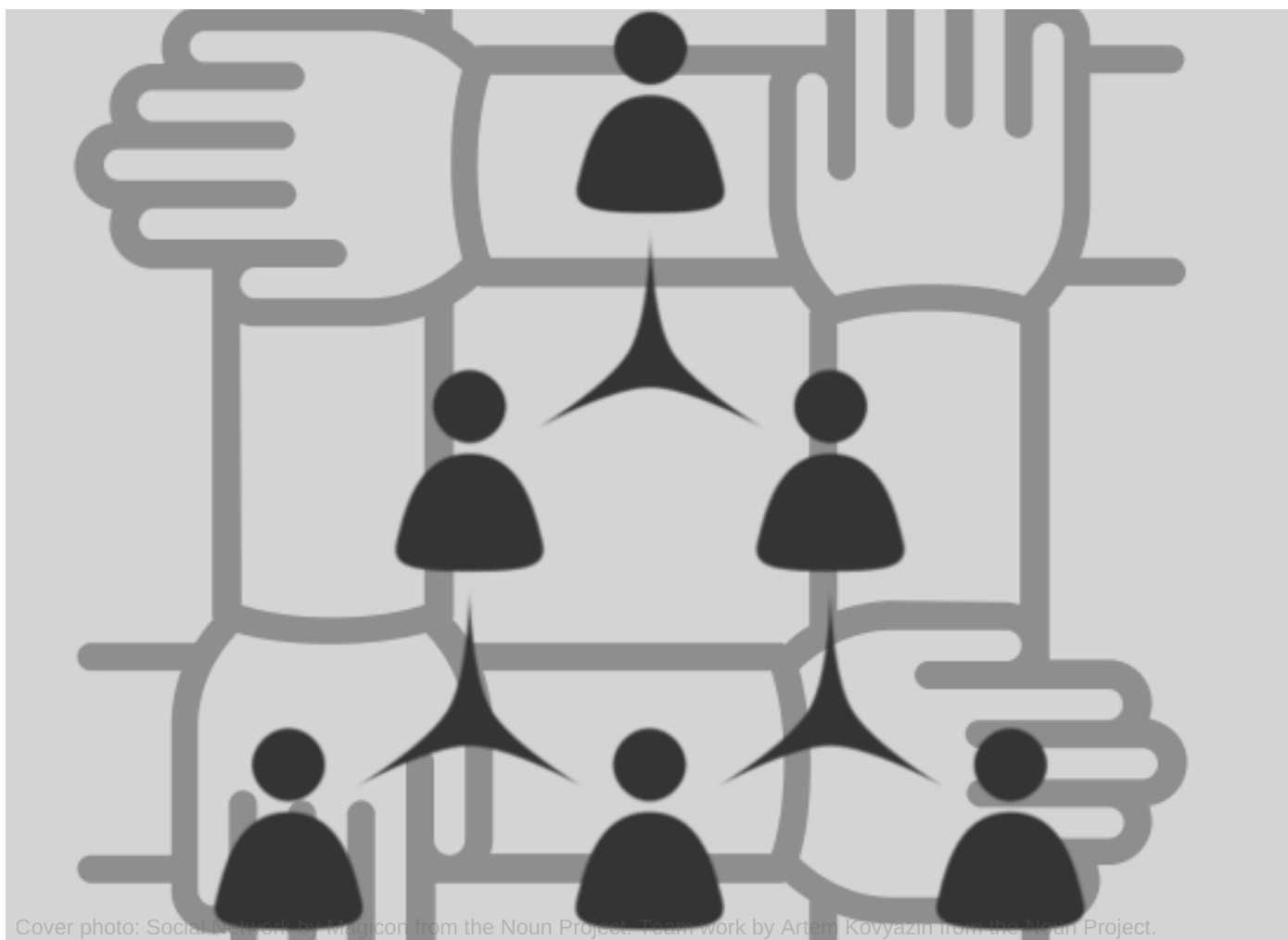# WHEN TOP DOWN VISIONS MEET GRASSROOTS DIGITAL ACTIVISM: NOTES FROM NETHERLANDS

RESEARCH BRIEF

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IT FOR CHANGE I 2017

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1. Overview

A well-developed democracy, the Netherlands is often described as a global leader in e-participation and e-government. This suggests the Netherlands is successful at integrating information and communication technologies (ICTs) in its governance processes. Furthermore, according to Worldwide Governance Indicators (The World Bank Group, 2017)[1], the citizenry appears to be confident in the quality of state governance. This further suggests a generally harmonious relationship between the state and the citizenry.

Against this background, we sought to understand what lessons can be learned from the integration of ICTs in the governance process in the Netherlands, with an eye toward the (possibly new) technically-mediated opportunities for citizen engagement. In particular, we asked about the visions and opportunities for citizen engagement opened up by the use of digital technologies in governance processes. This research brief first presents the top-down visions and opportunities for citizen engagement (part 1), comparing them to those emerging organically out of a case of grassroots digital activism (part 2).

2. Part 1: Top-down visions and opportunities for ICT-mediated citizen engagement

The Netherlands provides several avenues for citizen participation in formal policy-making. On the national level, these avenues consist of petitions, citizen initiatives and *referenda*, all submitted to the House of Representatives. Furthermore, the idea of citizen participation is held as an important policy value, as evidenced in the government's adoption of 'do-ocracy' and 'active citizenship' as guiding policy principles[2]. Efforts to enable citizen input in policy-making have taken different forms at the national and local levels. Local public administration in particular has turned towards citizen participation to enhance—and devolve the costs of managing—local communities.

Yet, even in a context where citizen participation becomes a policy principle, the desired format of and the actual opportunities for participation can be problematic. The Dutch case raises awareness on four pitfalls: the appropriation of citizen participation as a means to legitimise cuts to public services; the development of a limited (and limiting) vision of participation; the difficulty of a systematic review of the landscape of participation opportunities; and the limited approach to the role of ICTs in policy-making.

1. While citizen participation remains desirable, it may also be used to rhetorically legitimise the dissolution of the welfare state. Under the banner of participation in the management of their neighbourhoods, citizens are increasingly asked to take on particular tasks that were previously provided by the local administration, such as cleaning services, ensuring safety, assisting the elderly, etc. In such contexts, it is easy for citizen participation to be turned into a 'duty'[3] and an expression of 'national belonging', leading to the marginalisation of those who cannot or do not want to become involved for whatever reasons in the

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1 The World Bank Group (2017). Worldwide Governance Indicators.
http://info.worldbank.org/governance/wgi/index.aspx#home

2 This policy turn towards citizen participation is also part and parcel of larger dynamics within the European Union. Since the 1990s, the EU has integrated participation in its official discourse (Saurugger, 2010). Participatory democracy was included as a principle in the Constitutional Treaty of Rome (2004) and in the Lisbon Treaty (Beckert et al, 2010). However, a review of these treaties is beyond the scope of this case study.

3 Dumitrica. D, (2017) State of the Art (Netherlands), Voice or Chatter project, ITFC Bengaluru

management of neighbourhoods. It is also important to point out that this policy framing of participation remains silent on the costs of participation (e.g. time, financial and emotional resources) for individuals.

2. On the national level, the available avenues for citizen participation encourage a limiting and limited vision of citizen participation. While such avenues activate citizens organising a petition, citizen initiative or referendum, they elicit minimal investment from the vast majority of the population. Thus, the submission of a petition, for example, merely entails citizens enlisting their support via a signature. Once again, participation appears as a low-cost, issue-focused and individual activity that does not require any specific skills or resources.

3. Avenues for citizen participation in concrete policy areas or on the local level vary with institution and layers of government. Existing research[4] suggests that opportunities for citizen participation are uneven, as they depend on an array of local factors, such as willingness to open up the floor for citizen input, availability of resources and know-how, etc. On the one hand, this leads to an uneven development of civic skills and political interest across the citizenry. On the other hand, as 'success stories' become touted as (selective) evidence of citizen participation, it becomes particularly difficult to systematically assess the opportunity for citizen input and action across the different layers of government.

4. This project also sought to investigate the integration of ICTs in governance processes in order to enhance citizen participation. Our review suggests that the government has articulated ICTs primarily as a broadcasting channel for governmental information and public services. Surprisingly, the ongoing debates on the formal mechanisms for citizen participation seem divorced from the debates on e-government. In this context, the integration of ICTs in politics is understood as a technical issue, of interest to bureaucrats and the business sector. When included in these discussions, citizens are addressed primarily as customers or users of e-government services, with limited opportunities for participation in the process of governance.

3. Part 2: Bottom-up lessons for ICT-mediated citizen engagement

When examined from the perspective of citizen-organisers, the formal mechanisms of citizen participation – as well as the role of ICTs in this process – offer limited avenues for citizen engagement. The study of a specific citizen initiative (*Ons Geld/ Our Money*)[5] indicates that ICTs are widely relied upon to mobilise support for the initiative. Yet, ICTs were primarily used in a top-down fashion, in order to circulate the message of the organisers and to persuade fellow citizens to lend their support for particular proposals.

The empirical case study of *Ons Geld* revealed four lessons: technology is only one component of citizen participation; the current format of the formal mechanism for citizen participation is not conducive to a deliberative model of democracy; the cost of citizen participation requires more careful attention; and; ICTs are yet to be fully integrated within the existing formal avenues for citizen input into policy-making.

1. Although ICTs were widely relied upon in the studied case, mobilisation and participation require more than technology. Citizen participation is shaped by the wider political culture, the availability of resources, as well as contingency. If policy-makers are indeed interested in fostering civic participation, they should not limit themselves to technological solutions,

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4 See 3

5 Ons Geld (2017). Bestuur. Retrieved from: https://onsgeld.nu/over/bestuur

but also invest in the development of cultures of civic engagement, as well as provide resources for the development of these initiatives.

2. In their current format, the formal mechanisms for citizen input into policy-making do not seem conducive to deliberative processes or community-building. Instead, they encourage a top-down approach to politics that, paradoxically, entrenches itself as a 'practice' on the grassroots level. Citizen activists have little incentives to engage fellow citizens in elaborating joint proposals in a deliberative manner. Instead, they favour persuasive and promotional communication techniques. Just as in the case of policy, this vision of participation is not only limited, but furthers limiting forms of citizen engagement.

3. Successful use of ICTs for civic mobilisation purposes rests upon the skills and resources of the citizen organisers. This emphasises the necessity of investing in the development of technical literacy skills for civic purposes. Furthermore, the work of activating fellow citizens and mobilising them around an issue requires resources such as time and money. On the one hand, this can discourage individual citizens from becoming engaged with politics. On the other hand, a healthy civil society is crucial to such engagement practices, as non-governmental organisation already have a communication infrastructure in place. Striking a balance between enabling individuals to become civic organisers and ensuring a healthy civil society is particularly important in the effort to create political cultures fostering engagement and participation.

4. Successful use of ICTs for civic mobilisation purposes also rests upon the possibility to access suitable online tools – software or platforms. An online platform that can facilitate the creation and submission of a citizen initiative, petition, and referendum may decrease the costs of mobilisation, particularly for citizen organisers. However, such a platform needs to be developed in partnership with citizen organisers and civil society representatives in order to capture their needs and respond to their concerns. Furthermore, it needs to communicate seamlessly with existing popular platforms and tools (such as social networking sites, blogging platforms, etc.) in order to enable citizen organisers to tap into existing online audiences.

Author profile

About the project

Dr. Delia Dumitrica is an assistant professor in Political Communication in the Department of Media and Communication at Erasmus University. Her main interests focus on the discursive construction of social media in politics. She is currently researching the use of social media by grassroots activists in Canada.
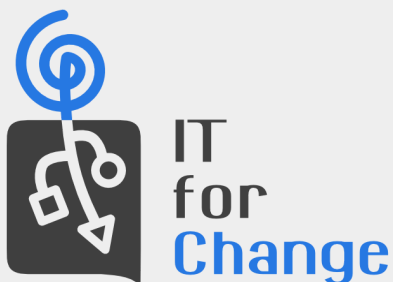
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