

Ons Geld Citizen Initiative, Netherlands

VOICE OR
CHATTER?

CASE STUDIES

AUTHOR

DELIA DUMITRICA

AUTHOR

Delia Dumitrica is Assistant Professor of Political Communication in the Department of Media and Communication at Erasmus University. Her research focuses on the discursive construction of social media in politics.

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Research coordination team

Lead Researcher: Anita Gurumurthy
Research Associates: Deepti Bharthur & Nandini Chami
Design: Deepti Bharthur & Swati Mehta
Editorial Support: Swati Mehta & Dara Casey

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A GRAND CHALLENGE
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1. Executive Summary

The Netherlands is often hailed as a leading example of the integration of ICTs within democratic politics, particularly given its high Internet penetration and usage rates, as well as its extensive e-government policies. However, from a policy perspective, the political role of ICTs remains construed primarily in terms of provision of governmental services and public information. While citizen participation in formal politics is hailed as an important policy value and enshrined through various channels for input into policy-making at the national level, it has not become a core component of Dutch e-government policy. This case study illustrates how ICTs and citizen engagement are used at the grassroots. In the Netherlands, citizen initiatives (*burgerinitiatieven*) are formal mechanisms through which citizens can participate in the process of governance by proposing, modifying or abolishing legislation and policy.

One of these initiatives, *Ons Geld* (Our Money), sought to put the policy on the creation of money on the public agenda. On its website, the organization behind this citizen initiative – *Ons Geld Stichting* (Our Money Foundation)¹ – lists four goals for this policy:

- (a) Money should only be created by a democratic and transparent institution acting in the public interest;
- (b) Money should not be created out of debt (such as mortgages);
- (c) New money should be used to support public infrastructure, lower taxes, pay off public debt, or to help citizens, rather than finance the banking system and real estate sectors;
- (d) Commercial banks should not be allowed to create new money.

The organizers made extensive use of digital technologies – websites, online forums, social networking platforms, electronic newsletters– to build support for their initiative. An in-depth examination of this initiative reveals that the potential participatory affordances of ICTs are different from their actual deployment and role in practice. Both civic organizations and state institutions should adopt a more nuanced view of the empowering potential of ICTs by focusing on the social context shaping the actual possibilities of use of these technologies. The case outlines several factors to be considered: the wider background of shared meaning on the political power of ICTs, practices of citizen engagement, social capital, availability of resources such as money, time, knowledge and skills, and institutional channels for civic participation.

In addition to these, the role of contingency in the success of an ICT -mediated civic initiative appears paramount. Citizen organizations, as well as policy-makers, need to consider these factors in their efforts to foster the use of digital platforms to facilitate citizen engagement. Importantly, the vision of citizen engagement as the outcome of a carefully planned process is problematic in its failure to take into account the role of unforeseen alliances between actors, ideas, and infrastructures. An e-participation framework should consider the development of suitable online tools that can allow citizens to start citizen initiatives in a way that is inclusive and deliberative from the beginning. Furthermore, such a framework should not limit itself to technological solutions, but also invest in the development of cultures of civic engagement, as well as provide resources for the development of these initiatives.

¹ The citizen initiative *Ons Geld* is a project of *Ons Geld Stichting*, in collaboration with other social actors. To avoid confusion, the report always refers to the organization behind the citizen initiative as *Ons Geld Stichting*.

2. Rationale & Context

Ons Geld (Our Money) is a Dutch citizen initiative seeking to put the question of money production on the public agenda. Under Dutch legislation, citizen initiatives (*burgerinitiatieven*) are formal mechanisms through which citizens can participate in the process of governance by proposing, modifying or abolishing legislation and policy. Citizens or citizen organizations can submit their proposed changes to the lower chamber of the Parliament, the House of Representatives, and the latter has to then debate and respond to them.

Loosely informed by the anti-austerity movements that emerged after the global financial crisis, this initiative pushed for legislation that would ensure commercial banks cannot create new money when providing their clients with credit lines². Furthermore, the initiative asked that when money is created by the state, it should be used in the public interest and not for bailing out commercial banks or real estate companies. The initiative was launched in 2014 by a coalition between two formal groups – an activist theatre troupe called *De Verleiders* (The Persuaders) and a civil society organization called *Ons Geld Stichting* (Our Money Foundation)³.

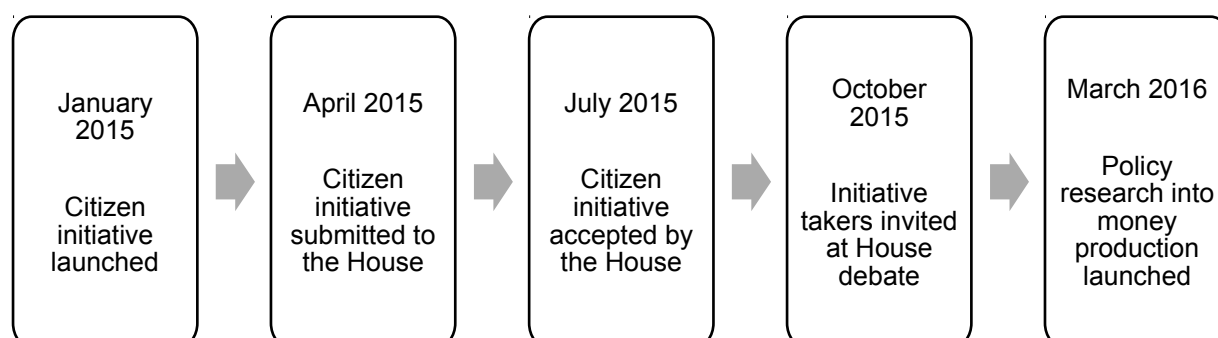
Drawing inspiration from the online materials of *Ons Geld Stichting*, *De Verleiders* produced a play on the topic of the production of money in 2014. When promoting the play, the actors cited the foundation and its goals as their source of inspiration and information. The subsequent media attention this topic and the organisation received led to the creation of a coalition between these two groups who formally announced the launching of a citizen initiative on January 13, 2015 on a popular Dutch TV show. The goal of the civic initiative was to put money creation on the political agenda; in this way, the initiators hoped that the defects of the financial system – including the power of banks to create money through debt – would become more well-known and addressed by state institutions.

The organizers, particularly the *Ons Geld Stichting*, have made extensive use of digital technologies – website, forum, social networking platforms – to build support for the initiative. The initiative received over 113,000 signatures (way above the required 40,000 threshold) in April 2015. It was accepted by the House in July and the organizers were invited to present their arguments in October of the same year. The hearing was subsequently made available on the website of the House, along with the accompanying documentation of the initiative. By March 2016, the House held an official debate of the initiative. The Minister of Finance was tasked with opening up a research process into the financial system, a task currently undertaken by the Dutch Scientific Research Council. The report is expected to come out in late 2017.

This case exemplifies the grassroots use of digital technologies for citizen engagement purposes in a larger political context in which the idea of ‘active citizenship’ and digital technologies are hailed as solutions to contemporary problems faced by democratic governments. Furthermore, this initiative is shaped by the type of citizen engagement envisioned in the formal mechanisms for citizen participation made available by state institutions. Thus, this case allows us to ask: how does digitally-mediated citizen engagement correspond to the policy-construction of the political role of digital technologies? What factors shape the use of digital technologies for citizen engagement purposes? And, how has the use of these technologies constructed the very idea of ‘citizen engagement’?

2 In a nutshell, the problem highlighted by this initiative is that, when offering someone a line of credit, a bank is actually creating virtual money that enters the market. A credit does not correspond to an actual amount of money, but is essentially a form of ‘money creation’.

3 Initially, the coalition also included an economist who later withdrew from the initiative on ideological grounds. He was not included in the description of this case study.

Figure 1: Chronology of the *Ons Geld* citizen initiative

This citizen initiative has been successful in momentarily drawing public attention to the role of private and state actors in the process through which money is created by commercial banks. It was presented to the House of Representatives and debated by politicians, leading to the establishment of a policy research team tasked with studying the mechanisms and implications of money creation in the Netherlands. However, the question of whether this policy research report will lead to any legislative changes remains open. Grassroots activists interviewed in this project⁴ have described citizen initiatives as inherently ambiguous tools of citizen influence on political decision-making. On one hand, they felt the design of this kind of citizen participation limits the potential for policy change. First, a citizen initiative has to deal with a topic that was not discussed – even in passing – in the Parliament for the past two years. Many current issues of relevance to citizens cannot be brought up if the Parliament has already talked about them. Second, when the initiatives do make it onto the agenda of the Parliament, they can easily be taken over by political interests and / or actual decision-making can be delayed – through, for instance, the creation of a policy research process that, as in the case studied here, can take up to a year. On the other hand, this formal mechanism is useful, as it allows citizens to get together in order to put a topic on the agenda of the government. While grassroots activists see the value of citizen initiatives, they also feel “policy change is very hard to achieve this way”⁵. This suggests that citizen initiatives require further attention from policy-makers with regard to various dimensions: how are they understood and experienced at the grassroots level? What forms of citizen participation do they foster? And, how can digital technologies be used to improve such mechanisms for citizen input in policy-making?

2.1. Context Setting

Given Internet penetration and usage rates, as well as the extensive development of an e-government policy (Dumitrica, 2017), the Netherlands is often hailed as an example of the integration of ICTs in democratic politics. Yet, although citizen participation is an important policy value, it has not become a pillar of Dutch e-government strategy. The latter remains anchored in an economic framing of the benefits of ICTs for improving internal communication within public administration and between government / citizen or government / business interaction. In this section, we describe the construction of citizen participation in

4 These discussions came up in several interviews: A. Nijeboer, personal communication, July 19, 2016; R. Rustema, personal communication, September 30, 2016; N. Verduin, personal communication, September 7, 2016.

5 A. Nijeboer, personal communication, July 19, 2016

the Dutch political context and its absence from strategic visions of ICT policy frameworks in the Netherlands. These two dimensions, we argue, are essential in understanding the context within which the citizen initiative examined here unfolds.

Citizen participation in politics is a complex policy matter in the Netherlands. The country is made up of 12 regions, further sub-divided into municipalities as well as water districts – each with their own forms of governance. Policy-making often entails collaborations between these different layers of governance. But, where the government has actively worked towards ensuring a coherent e-government framework across all its layers, creating opportunities for citizen participation has remained a local responsibility.

At the national level, citizen participation is enshrined by providing three avenues for submitting inputs to the House of Representatives, the Parliament's lower chamber. These avenues consist of: citizen petitions, citizen initiatives, and *referenda*. With the first two, citizens are able to put their concerns on the agenda of the House. Where the House does not have a standardized way of dealing with petitions (which may often end up being discussed by particular committees), citizen initiatives have to be addressed. These initiatives deal with the introduction, modification, or abolition of laws and policies, and the citizen-initiators are invited to present their proposals in front of the House⁶. *Referenda* are an advisory direct voting mechanism – which means that the Parliament is not required to take the results into account.

Citizen participation may take many forms at local and provincial levels, and, in some public policy areas, it may even be mandated by law (e.g. in housing or water management (van der Heijden and ten Heuvelhof, 2012)). Petitions and citizen initiatives can also be submitted to local administrations. The latter may also create specific opportunities for engaging with citizens on local issues (Dumitrica, 2017). Yet, while participation in local policy-making remains an important value in Dutch politics, “in most cases it is the local government that takes the initiative and leads the process” (Michels and de Graaf, 2010, p. 481). For example, in a study of two projects involving citizens in local policy-making, Michel and de Gaaf (2010) concluded that “the role of citizens is mainly to provide information on the basis of which government, sometimes in cooperation with other actors, can make decisions. Participatory policy-making, therefore, leaves vertical government decision-making intact, while at the same time creating more space for suggestions and ideas provided by citizens” (2010, p. 488). This often times translates into uneven opportunities for involvement (van Eijk, 2014).

Second, since the 1980s / 1990s, the very idea of citizen participation has been re-articulated in policy-making through the use of new terms such as ‘active citizenship’ or ‘do-ocracy’⁷. The Government of the Netherlands defines ‘citizen participation’ as an individual’s commitment to their neighborhood and ‘do-ocracy’ as an expression of citizens’ own desire for ‘less’ standardized governmental solutions and for a more “tailor-made approach and authorities that think along with them” (Government of the Netherlands, n.d.). However, this articulation entails a transformation of ‘participation’ into local and concrete types of action, such as building a new park or contributing to the revitalization of a particular area. Discussing the idea of do-ocracy, van de Wijdeven (2012) explains it as a process of “(co)creating the public sphere, not by deliberating, voting or bargaining, but by realizing concrete projects in the public domain of their neighborhood” (quoted in Blijleven, 2016, p. 3). Such forms of active citizenship encourage an individual yet, in our opinion, largely de-

⁶ The case discussed here is a citizen initiative

⁷ 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

politicized responsibility⁸ for the well-being of the community intimately linked to a neoliberal political agenda (also Lub and Uytterlinde, 2012; Tonkens, 2011; van Apeldoorn, 2009; Verhoeven and Tonkens, 2013).

On the one hand, active citizenship has been advanced as a replacement for the welfare state. On the other, it has been cast as a solution to the perceived lack of interest and trust of citizens in politics and political institutions (Verhoeven, Metze and van de Wijdeven, 2014). The popularity of these notions is also interwoven with wider debates about the alleged failure of the multicultural model in the Netherlands. Such debates are often wrapped in a rhetoric of anxiety over the 'erosion of Dutch social structures' as a result of the influx of labour migrants from post-colonial contexts. Thus, worries that immigrants have not 'integrated' have been used to legitimize the development of assimilationist policies where civic participation becomes a means of integration into Dutch society, as well as an expression of 'Dutch values' (Awad, 2012). This has led to a normative insistence upon local participation, where the 'good citizen' is one who takes an active role in taking care of and developing their neighborhoods (de Wilde and Duyvendak, 2016). Yet, policy interest in managing difference by managing neighborhoods is also an attempt to deal with the consequences of "general processes that produce deprivation in particular places", not by addressing the processes themselves but by managing their consequences on a local scale (Uitermark, 2014, p. 1432). The 2003 New Social Contract proposed by the Dutch government in fact defines the "good citizen" as one who "is able to cope for him / herself, has reached the age of majority, who is committed, [who] expresses itself not in the first place with claims, demands and appeals against the government, but in societal self-organization and initiatives" (quoted in van Houdt, Suvarierol and Schinkel, 2011, p. 416).

Since the popularization of the Internet, ICTs have been rhetorically presented as a 'technological fix' for prevailing problems of democratic politics – low levels of citizen engagement and of trust in government (van Dijk, 2012). Three main 'improvements' were associated with the use of ICTs in democratic politics: improving information retrieval and exchange between the various socio-political actors; improving the public sphere; and improving citizen participation in political decision-making (Tsagarousianou, 1999 as cited in van Dijk, 2012). In the realm of policy, this rhetorical construction of 'digital democracy' – or the use of ICTs to "enhance political democracy or the participation of citizens in democratic communication" (Hacker and van Dijk, 2000, p. 1) – is interwoven with the adoption of e-government as a policy objective. This has entailed, from the beginning, a managerial approach to the potential democratic role of ICTs which has, unfortunately, effectively displaced consultative and participatory models of e-government (Bekkers and Homburg, 2007; Chadwick and May, 2003).

In the managerial approach, ICTs are understood as tools for improving the efficiency of bureaucratic institutions. This places the emphasis on "designing and implementing front office electronic communication channels, which enable agencies to communicate electronically and unequivocally with citizens and businesses" (Bekkers and Homburg, 2007, p. 374). The development of an e-government framework in the Netherlands has followed the same pattern. From the 1990s onward, the focus of this policy framework has been on developing and improving the provision of public sector information and services to citizens

⁸ In their article, Verhoeven, Metze and van de Wijdeven explain that do-ocracy is "people governing by 'doing', through concrete action. If you want a clean street, just pick up a broom and do it; if you want more social cohesion, organize a social event; if the playground needs some painting, paint it together with your neighbours" (2014, p. 3). They further argue such actions are not apolitical, but rather a more practical way of 'doing politics' on a micro level. However, such a view misses out the fact that micro actions take place within macro contexts: why aren't the streets clean or the playground taken care of to start with? What is the relationship between these 'problems' at the level of the neighborhoods and the macro policies of shrinking public services and social welfare?

and businesses (Dumitrica, 2017). Thus, the Dutch e-government policy rests upon three pillars: electronic access to the government (whereby citizens can access governmental information and services); better services to the public (through the development of a 'single window' for public services), and an improved communication and information exchange infrastructure for public administration (van der Hof, 2007). Within this policy framework, citizens are addressed primarily as customers; occasional calls for including citizen participation in public policy decision-making do not appear to have been taken any further.

If the idea of a participative democracy where citizens are actively involved in the governance of their polis is to be taken seriously, then attention to how ICTs may actually assist this goal is much needed (Grönlund, 2010; Lee, Chang, and Berry, 2011; Linders, 2012). For instance, Meijer (2015) suggests a shift from e-government policies addressing citizens as consumers of public information and public services to e-governance policies focused on "engaging citizens and stakeholders" to "cooperate in the production of policies and services" (p. 199). Similarly, Chadwick and May (2003) elaborate on alternatives to the prevailing model of 'managerial' e-government policies. Thus, the 'consultative model' of e-government entails concerted efforts to use ICTs to enable citizens to communicate their opinion on policy issues to governments: "This model encompasses a continuum of consultation, stretching from low-level information-gathering towards (but not finally reaching) a fuller, quasi-deliberative level of interaction and consultation" (p. 279). The 'participatory model' entails the creation of horizontal and multi-directional interactivity: "it is assumed that while states may facilitate political discussion and interaction, they are but one association among many with a presence in civil society" (p. 280). In this model, states develop policies that foster the use of ICTs for interaction among citizens; this is achieved by ensuring "liberal-democratic values of free speech and expression... while also providing infrastructure and regulation" (p. 281).

These discussions are just beginning in the realm of policy-making (Ahmed, 2006; Albrecht et al, 2008; Grönlund, 2010; Lee, Chang, and Berry, 2011; Linders, 2012). Since 2004, the UN has started to assess e-participation around the world, re-defining e-government policy as a process that starts by establishing an online presence for the government but then continues to transforming the government into a 'connected entity'. The latter – deemed the "most sophisticated level of online e-government initiatives" – consists of establishing 'connections' with public administration units and other social actors, including citizens (UN, 2008, p. 16). In this context, e-participation is understood as using ICTs to "reduce barriers to public participation in policy-making" (p. 16). The UN measures e-participation along three dimensions of the government's online presence: availability of e-information, e-consultation and e-decision-making. The last two are of interest for the case discussed here: the UN defines e-consultation as the presence of websites through which elected officials communicate "directly with their constituents. [The website] maintains an archive of their discussions and provides feedback to citizens" (UN, 2008, p. 16). The definition of e-decision-making is even vaguer: "the government is willing to take into account the e-inputs of citizens into the decision-making process. The government informs its citizens on what decisions have been taken based on the consultation process" (UN, 2008, p. 16). This suggests that policy-solutions for e-participation are still nascent—and the same applies to the Netherlands (van Veenstra, Janssen and Boon, 2011).

3. Methodology

The *Ons Geld* citizen initiative has been approached here through the lens of structuration theory (Giddens, 1984). Digitally-mediated engagement at the grassroots has been conceptualized as an interplay of three layers: the visions and capabilities of the citizen-

organizers (agency); the wider socio-political context within which the efforts to foster citizen engagement takes place (social structures); and the available technological infrastructure (technological structures). The following research questions were explored;

1. How were ICTs imagined as political spaces and tools by the citizens-organizers?
2. What kind of citizen participation was elicited via the use of ICTs?
3. What factors other than ICTs played a role in this case?

These questions were addressed through a case study approach (Farquhar, 2013; Stake, 1989; Yin, 1989). Case studies take a holistic approach to the study of a phenomenon in a particular context, collecting data from various sources (Yin, 1989). This study has relied upon interviews, a review of the functionality of the online spaces employed by the initiative, and a content analysis of websites and social media accounts.

Interviews: Two in-depth interviews were held with the founder of *Ons Geld Stichting* and a long-term volunteer. The interviews gave us insight into the vision and capabilities of the organizers of this citizen initiative, particularly in terms of their expectations and existing resources for using digital technologies to mobilize others. Both the founder and the volunteer were responsible for the development and daily management of the online presence of the foundation and of the citizen initiative. The volunteer had been working with the founder from the beginning and consequently was well-versed with the details of the foundation and of the citizen initiative. The selection of these two key informants was guided by the fact that they had developed the digital strategy of the foundation, and one of them – the founder – continues to play a key role in strategy development of *Ons Geld Stichting* (Ons Geld, 2017).

Review of functionalities of websites: Websites of the foundation and of the citizen initiative, along with their social media accounts (Facebook and Twitter), were examined for the organization of content under tabs and sections, and the availability of interactive features⁹. The goal of this review was to capture the type of affordances for citizen information, interaction, mobilization, and self-organization that these platforms offered.

Qualitative content analysis: The foundation's website included a discussion forum that was brought up during the interviews. A qualitative content analysis of this forum was carried out, in order to capture how it was used by the organizers to communicate with their audiences. In particular, the ways in which the communication spurred forms of civic engagement were examined. The analysis was extended to the Facebook page of the foundation, as it was intensely used during the citizen mobilization (the Twitter account of the foundation was not analyzed as it was less used and it mostly replicated the activity on the Facebook page). Content was analyzed using the coding scheme provided by Lovejoy and Saxton (2012), namely:

- **Information:** this code was used for content that provided information on the organization and its events, other news, reports, etc. In the context of the forum, we also included here topics that presented the position/ opinion of the citizens posting (even though, technically, this may entail opinion rather than factual information).
- **Community-building:** this code was used for content that fulfilled a community/ dialogue function, including: giving recognition and thanks, acknowledgment of current and local events (such as holiday greetings), responses to messages, response solicitation (explicit request for response from audience). In the context of

⁹ The review was performed in August-September 2016, but it also used past versions of the websites retrieved through the Internet Archive's Way Back Machine (<https://archive.org/web/>)

the forum, this code was used for forum topics that make an explicit effort to start a discussion.

- **Calls for action:** this code was used for content with an explicit request for audiences to 'do' something for the organization (e.g. donations, advocacy work, etc.).

4. Analysis & Results

This case illustrates the need for a holistic approach to citizen engagement that does not focus solely on the use of digital technologies. Our research demonstrates that the participatory affordances of ICTs depend on the contextual specifics of their actual deployment. It is important that both civic organizations and state institutions adopt a more nuanced view of the empowering potential of ICTs by focusing on the social context shaping the actual possibilities of use of these technologies.

Second, the study outlines several factors that shape the social context of use: the wider background of shared meaning on the political power of ICTs, practices of citizen engagement, social capital, availability of resources such as money, time, knowledge and skill, and institutional channels for civic participation. In addition to these, contingency plays an important role here. Citizen organizations, as well as policy-makers, need to consider these factors in fostering the political use of digital platforms. Most importantly, the vision of citizen engagement as the outcome of a carefully planned process is problematic in its failure to take into account the role of unforeseen alliances between actors, ideas, and infrastructures.

4.1. The role of ICTs in the emergence of the citizen initiative

The *Ons Geld* citizen initiative was made possible by the unforeseen intersection between an artistic project and an existing non-governmental organization against the wider context of the financial downturn of 2007-2008 and the rise of anti-austerity movements in Europe. The wider context sensitized citizens to the impact of economic processes on their daily lives making the creation of money a relevant problematic. The collaboration between the organizers of this initiative was accidental. Finally, the social capital of the activist theatre group, that was able to attract the attention of traditional media, was essential to the creation of the citizen initiative.

Ons Geld Stichting was created in 2012 by a young information science student who had become preoccupied with the role of banks in the creation of money. As he recalls, learning about this topic motivated him to become engaged:

This subject is so important to deal with, because if it was true that, as many documentaries are saying, the system is unstable because of the way this banking system works, then that means there is a deadline before this whole thing starts crashing down on a large scale. At that point, I was still a student, I was 22, I really panicked and became frustrated, trying to figure out if there was any organization in my country that actively tried to promote the proposals that we now propose. Because it seemed to me that we could change the whole thing with a small effort.

The volunteer, who also explicitly linked this interest in money creation to the Occupy Wall Street movement, invoked the same experience:

In 2011, you had that Occupy Wall Street movement and ...that was also the same period I became interested in the money system... Before that... I did not follow the news or politics... and suddenly when I watched those documentaries [about the money system – m.n.] and also when I saw the [evolution] of Occupy challenging the whole system and questioning everything, something was sparked [within me].

The civic mobilization linked to anti-austerity movements thus constituted a collective background of meaning for our participants. Although we did not have access to the activist theatre group, it is plausible to suggest that their very interest in creating a play on the problems of money creation was very much part and parcel of this background of meaning marking the (lack of control over the) financial system central to citizens' own livelihood.

Yet, it was actually the theatre play that had managed to place the organization's mission on the public agenda. The beginning of the partnership between the activist theatre group and the non-governmental organization was accidental. The individuals who were part of these initiatives did not previously know each other. In fact, the founder of *Ons Geld Stichting* found out about the play through a text message sent by a friend telling him that the foundation and its mission were discussed on one of the most popular Dutch talk shows, *De Wereld Draait Door*. The presence of the activist theatre group on this talk show set a chain of events in motion, leading to the creation of the citizen initiative. As the founder explained, once the *Ons Geld Stichting's* website was mentioned on the show,

the next day I was launched into this stream of happenings where I was invited by one of the biggest leftist newspapers, *De Volkskrant*, to... review the play... It was so revolutionary that this would [sic] start the movement, because for the first time, this topic was talked about in a way that was entertaining and that really reached the masses.

The volunteer, who felt the play managed to bring emotions to a topic that is often perceived as dull and technical, expressed the same ideas. The play was the 'spark moment' for the organization and its mission:

I think that was the thing that really triggered the citizens' initiative: the theatre that brings the story of the money system combined with stories from people that were getting into trouble because of debt, to make it personal to people [sic].

The activist theatre group's interest in this topic was thus crucial to not only making the citizen initiative possible, but also to placing the mission of the organization on the public agenda. The actors' access to traditional media was something that the organization simply did not possess; instead, the organization relied upon a website, a newsletter, and active participation in small, local public events to publicize its ideas and to network. The founder recounted how, upon setting up the foundation, he took to the Internet to look for anyone in the Netherlands with an interest in money creation and emailed them, asking them to collaborate with him: "that was how we found some people to work with us, even though it was really difficult to get members, when you don't have any money to pay [them]". Yet, once the activist theatre group attracted traditional media's attention, the situation changed dramatically. Not only was the organization asked to talk about their proposals on influential traditional media channels, but (particularly with the citizen initiative), donations also started to come in, providing, for the first time, financial resources for the organization.

Access to traditional media and to financial resources continue to remain important barriers to the success of grassroots engagement. While digital technologies can provide such

grassroots organizations with a public ‘voice’, allowing them to present themselves to the world, simply having a voice does not guarantee one is heard. Thus, the question of how the potential of ICTs for citizen engagement and mobilization materializes in practice is always open. In this case, accidental intersections and overlaps between various social actors made the citizen initiative possible.

4.2. The use of ICTs during the citizen initiative

The review of the use of ICTs during the citizen initiative reveals several other factors shaping the actual contributions of ICTs to citizen engagement. First, availability of resources such as time, money, knowledge and skills remains an important aspect of citizen capacity to make use of ICTs to mobilize and act politically. Second, technology use is adapted to existing practices—such as practices of daily Internet use or of civic participation. Third, existing institutional structures for citizen participation fundamentally shape the format of engagement by influencing the type of mobilization that organizations aim for. To make this shaping process visible, this section reviews the actual use of ICTs in the *Ons Geld* citizen initiative through reviewing the functionalities of the websites associated with this initiative and a content analysis of the discussion forum of *Ons Geld Stichting*, and supplementing these insights with highlights from informant interviews.

The online presence of the *Ons Geld* citizen initiative consisted of two websites and two social networking accounts¹⁰.

- (a) The website of the citizen initiative (<http://burgerinitiatiefonsgeld.nu/>) served two functions: information provision and signature collection. It contained an explanation of the initiative’s stance on the creation of money, several position papers (in PDF format) written by the organizers and third parties, and the government’s response to the citizen initiative, including a 2 hours and 22 minutes- long video of the House debate on the citizen initiative. The website provided links to the webpage of the House of Representatives and to a *De Volkskrant* (national daily) editorial written by one of the initiators of the citizen initiative. Interaction was limited to a button for donations, a form for subscribing to *Ons Geld Stichting*’s newsletter, and a Facebook icon. During the signatures collection period, the website also contained an online form where visitors could sign the initiative by providing the organizers with their names and contact details. The website of *Ons Geld Stichting* (<http://onsgeld.nu/>) also provided information, but took a more active role in making it more appealing for online audience. The website contained information on the foundation, along with links to publications and videos on the topic of money creation, links to media coverage of the issue, and a blog discussing related events or information (e.g. participation in conferences, updates on the citizen initiative, etc.). A synthesis of the money production process and of the foundation’s proposals was provided in an accessible language, keeping texts short and relying upon headings and illustrations. Part of this content was produced in-house and part borrowed from the foundation’s UK sister organization. In terms of interactivity, visitors were able to leave comments on most content on this website. The pages that describe how money works and how this production process should be regulated received the most number of comments (64 and 87 respectively). In addition to commenting on content, visitors could also discuss money

¹⁰ The online presence of *De Verleiders* and of the economist involved in the launching of the citizen initiative (see footnote 1) were not included here, as they made minimal references to this initiative. For example, the website of *De Verleiders* (<http://www.de-verleiders.nl>) is a promotional space for announcing new plays and productions. Two news items on this website brought up the citizen initiative. The leader of this group, a well-known actor, also discussed his involvement with the initiative on his personal website

production issues on the website's forum (<http://denk.onsgeld.nu/>). This forum was launched in January 2014, and by September 2016, it had 146 registered contributors and 69 topics with varying numbers of responses (from 0 to 78, with a total of 738 comments for the entire forum). Most topics and comments on this forum were initiated by visitors, but few actually managed to start off a conversation (30% of topics had no comments and 55% had under 10 comments). The announcement of the citizen initiative was the most popular topic, with 83 comments from 32 different users. The content analysis of the forum indicated that 61% of the topics were aimed at providing information or stating one's position on the foundation's aims. The rest of the topics explicitly sought to start a discussion (33%) and to solicit support for the citizen initiative (6%). The forum remained dominated by a small number of registered users, with most being supportive of the foundation's mission and citizen initiative. The forum's administrators were very involved in the discussion forum, responding to comments and ensuring the discussion remained civil.

- (b) The *Ons Geld* citizen initiative Facebook page (<https://www.facebook.com/onsgeld/>) had 16,000 likes in September 2016. Its main role has been to elicit signatures for the initiative and, to that purpose, only the foundation could post (citizens were only able to comment on the posts). The content analysis performed on posts between January 2015-August 2016 revealed that 80% of the 250 posts produced during this period included links to media coverage of the initiative or related topics, and to the citizen initiative website (to collect signatures). In terms of their function, 80% were providing information, 15% were requesting some form of action from visitors and 7% focused on community-building. The organization used its Facebook page regularly during the signatures gathering campaign. It repeatedly posted the announcement link to the citizen initiative signature form. Furthermore, the link to the Facebook page was also publicized on the launching day on *De Verleiders'* website and on the website of the TV talk show mentioned earlier. Within a matter of hours, posts started announcing the number of signatures gathered. The number of likes and shares these posts received (less than 100 for each) does not match the exponential growth of signatures collected, suggesting other communication channels may have played a role in bringing people to the citizen initiative site. After the submission of the initiative, the frequency of posting on the Facebook page decreased, picking up again during the House debate of the initiative.
- (c) *Ons Geld* Twitter account (<https://twitter.com/HervormOnsGeld/>) had 1,200 followers as of September 2016. The foundation produced 2,100 tweets, with most of them announcing the citizen initiative and re-tweeting links to related content. After the gathering of the signatures was completed, Twitter was rarely used (with only a few tweets per month. Many posts failed to include any hashtags at all.

The use of ICTs for the citizen initiative remained oriented towards information provision and signature gathering. Beyond eliciting signatures and actively responding to comments on the forum, the organization made little use of these platforms in order to engage with its potential stakeholders and to build a community of interest around its proposals. The type of engagement elicited from citizens through these platforms was thus limited to individual, one-time, and low-cost contributions (e.g. a signature).

When asked about his vision on the possible role of ICTs in the citizen initiative and beyond, the *Ons Geld Stichting* founder talked about the need to move beyond the information-provision paradigm, where websites could act as platforms bringing citizens together, assisting with the organization of protests or meetings, and facilitating debates on the creation of money:

This eco-system of ICT services would create and make a movement possible. I would say the role of ICTs in whatever strategy is next is huge... ICTs are 50% of the whole initiative... we couldn't do it without ICTs and people who know how to design and program.

For him, citizen mobilization was the biggest problem faced by grassroots organizations. ICTs, he argued, can enable people to "organize themselves". The solution he proposed was that of creating online 'modules' that would allow the launching of citizen initiatives and spur a "decentralized revolutionary banking activism". Yet, exactly how and why such modules would spark a decentralized movement is difficult to see, especially given the fact that the success of a mobilization attempt may – as in this case – be spurred not by sustained technology-mediated strategies, but rather by an unforeseen alliance of actors with high social capital.

This vision of ICTs being '50% of the whole initiative' was also contradicted by the actual use of the different online tools. *Ons Geld Stichting* had used its websites and social networking accounts merely to inform people about the system. As the founder explained:

The idea is that through knowledge, people become a catalyst for action... not only in the sense of going out on the streets, but also to change the way they think. A large percentage of people start thinking differently about the system, then change might happen on its own.

Although the founder had hoped for the website's forum to spur a movement that carried forward the organization's agenda, he felt this hope had not been met. In fact, the forum merely seemed to reinforce 'slacktivism' (Christensen, 2011; Thimsen, 2015):

[The] forum ... doesn't do anything to people. People talk about their personal beliefs about the system there, or about what they think should be in our proposals... We are not looking for comments on [our proposals]. We are looking for action. While the forum could, in theory, do that, it doesn't. So it's not enough. Even Positive Money disabled their forum, even though it was very popular and used extensively, but mostly by 40-year old men sitting behind their computers, complaining about the system without acting on it.

In reflecting about the use of the Internet for *Ons Geld Stichting*, the founder felt it had not been successful enough in mobilizing people into collective action, as it promoted talk rather than action. This bodes well with the 'Dutch civic culture': the Dutch, he explained, "are very content and passive. They would rather use Facebook and Netflix than go out to do something. The last protest movements were in the 70s... It's a cultural thing that needs to be taken into account."

For him, Facebook and Twitter were mere public relations tools with little mobilization capacity. These social networking sites were not designed to encourage people to be active. Rather, they were "built for people to stay on the platform itself and keep scrolling down, be a passive observer, consume and not act." Interestingly enough, he saw the electronic newsletter distributed to a database of subscribers as indicative of a higher level of citizen commitment.

The volunteer in charge of the social networking accounts offered an alternative explanation. The use of these platforms had not been well strategized and implemented because of the lack of resources. Thus, the organization was producing little in-house content and updating

the social networking accounts whenever the volunteer had the time. Launching a 'really big campaign' required resources that the organization simply did not have in the beginning:

When we had time, we would just make an article here or make a video there. There was no strategy. We were just doing something when someone had time to write something or make an image to share on social media.

In fact, the organization's initial use of the website and social networking accounts was marred by errors and design inconsistencies. Upon first creating the website of *Ons Geld Stichting*, the founder had to experiment with different design formats and website versions. In spite of having web-design knowledge, establishing the online presence of the organization had been a trial and error process. Furthermore, this online presence was emulated after the website of the UK organization Positive Money, pointing to how existing practices inform newcomers.

Setting up the Facebook page was also chaotic at first, as everybody associated with the organization was a moderator. This soon led to internal conflicts over the message that the organization wanted to be associated with, as the topic – the creation of money—was itself quite controversial. As the volunteer took over the sole responsibility of posting, he soon realized moderation was adding an extra layer of complexity to his job. He had to deal with trolls and disinformation, while also keeping the conversation on topic. Unlike the founder, the volunteer felt the Facebook page was a good tool to keep people informed and to draw them into a conversation. The forum, he argued, did not take off, partly because people had to come to the website, then make an account and start a topic. But Dutch citizens were already on Facebook, and as such it was easier for them to follow *Ons Geld Stichting's* posts and to comment on them. Lastly, the lack of proper resources for a sustained online campaign, relying upon in-house produced content, was also a major limitation as the organization could not take advantage of Facebook's algorithm to promote the citizen initiative properly:

If you get more likes and shares on an article, and the next day you post a picture, then it will reach more people. That we didn't really do because we didn't make the news, we just followed what came along. Then you see when the interaction slows down, the reach also slows down.

The particular use of the Internet as a broadcasting mechanism was also a result of the particular format of the mechanism of citizen initiatives. This form of civic input in policy-making consists of a proposal endorsed by a certain number of citizens. While the organizers of citizen initiatives are indeed free to develop their proposal –and, in that sense, could very well make the proposal-development process democratic—in reality their focus is on gathering the required number of signatures for submission. When we confronted the organizers on their lack of interest in involving citizens in the development of a collective frame for the issue or in the proposals included in the citizen initiative, they explained:

This has been a choice for me in 2012. I thought about these proposals... they are very simple proposals about how to change the essence of what money is and the system would be fundamentally stable. I consider this, personally, the solution to the system and how you could implement it. There are a lot of perspectives or ideas you could have. But this is the one political decision that I made and that is static, because if we would now discuss this and have it open for debate, even though I see this as the solution and the ideal, you shoot yourself in the foot.... There is enough discussion on the Internet about these

economic ideas and if people want to implement our reform differently, then they can start their own organization. But they didn't, so they follow ours. It is very important for a movement to have static visions.

A citizen initiative requires that the initiators make a clear proposal for the House of Representatives to debate. Thus, the citizen-activists have no incentive to focus their mobilizing efforts on fostering the type of participation in the polis that stems from dialogue or deliberation; or to include citizens' own voice in the proposal. In fact, as the volunteer we interviewed explained, the organizers were wary of being turned down by the House if their proposal were not clear and focused enough. They were worried about how the rules of submission would be interpreted and adjusted their actions accordingly:

One of the rules [for submitting the citizen initiative] is also that you give the government a clear solution or proposal, and *Ons Geld* had a clear proposal: make money creation for the benefit of the public and do not let commercial institutions... [sic] So later, we were reading that and thought that, perhaps, if we make the question and the proposal to the government too broad, they would be able to shoot it down. So then we thought: 'OK, let's go just for a solution, let the state create money'... we of course also encourage people to have their own state of mind about the subject and to participate in the discussion, but for us, as a citizen initiative, it was clear that we have a proposal and we're not going to brainstorm or change the proposal. This is our solution.

5. Conclusion

The case of the *Ons Geld* citizen initiative shows that the grassroots use of ICTs for civic engagement is constituted at the intersection between three different types of factors. First, the wider socio-political context within which technologies are used to foster civic engagement shape the type of participation that is sought after. The wider socio-political context of anti-austerity movements provided a context of shared meanings about economic inclusion that made the issue of money production relevant. The formal mechanism of the *burgerinitiatief* has informed the organizers' visions of participating in political decision-making, but also of mobilizing their fellow citizens. With its emphasis on the presentation of a coherent set of proposals, this mechanism made deliberative forms of engagement less appealing. Instead, the use of persuasive and promotional techniques to enlist support in the form of a signature emerged as the suitable form of citizen mobilization. Such types of mobilization construct engagement as an individual, one-time, and low-cost activity.

Second, the vision and capabilities of the citizen-organizers informed the strategic deployment of digital technologies. The organizers sought to raise public awareness on the necessity of renewing monetary policy. Their hopes of creating a decentralized social movement, where citizens would organize themselves to push for these regulations might not have been met, but they nonetheless spoke to wider discourses around the alleged power of digital technologies to spur collective action. Such discourses construct new media as removing organizational barriers and thus making group formation "ridiculously easy" (Shirky, 2008, p. 295). While the founder of *Ons Geld Stichting* drew from these discourses of new media's power to 'organize without organizations', the actual role of technology in organizing and mobilizing for civic action were not clear. Lastly, the imaginaries of citizen participation promoted by existing institutionalized practices of citizen engagement in the Netherlands also informed organizers' expectations of their fellow citizens. Interestingly enough, even though the organizers were keen on creating debate spaces, they were also not willing or interested in actually providing the opportunity for these debates to inform their

own citizen initiative. Instead, they regarded online discussions as merely a means of raising awareness on the topic of money production. Yet, they were less eager to deal with the possibility that awareness may create different positions on or solutions to this issue. As the founder explained, “there is enough discussion on the Internet about these economic ideas. If people want to implement our reform differently, then they can start their own organization.”

The organizers’ capabilities and resources for using digital technologies were also important. Knowledge of web-designing was crucial to the very emergence of *Ons Geld Stichting*. Yet, applying technical knowledge in the context of a civic organization was a learning process that required temporal and financial investments. Lack of time and money affected the daily management of ICTs. The use of a forum or of social networking sites, particularly once the citizen initiative drew the public’s attention, demanded constant attention and response. Furthermore, to sustain this public interest, the organizers felt the production of in-house content was necessary. But again, this demanded a type of specialized work that could not be sustained on a voluntary basis.

Finally, the available technological infrastructure also mattered. As already mentioned, creating a website and original content requires paid specialized labour. While putting up a website may be facilitated by the existence of blogging platforms such as WordPress, such platforms may not be particularly helpful when it comes to facilitating decentralized mobilization or communication campaigns. Similarly, social networking sites had pre-set functionalities that citizen-organizers had to adapt to. Lastly, the lack of a suitable online platform for the creation of a citizen initiative and for the submission of digital signatures to the House also added to the difficulties faced by organizers. As the *Ons Geld Stichting* founder explained, developing an online solution for the submission of citizen initiatives that would enable citizens who lack know how on and use of Internet forms would be particularly helpful.

While these factors are interwoven and, to some extent, mutually constitutive, it should also be recognized that the ability of citizen-organizers to affect social and technological structures is contextual. For example, citizens’ ability to influence the existing procedures for the submission of a citizen initiative is, at best, an indirect and limited one. We can reasonably imagine that the grassroots feedback on citizen initiative submission gradually forming within Dutch civil society may eventually make it back to the House and prompt improvements. However, in the case of one single citizen initiative, there are no opportunities for feedback on the mechanism of the citizen initiative submission itself. Similarly, when it comes to technological structures, citizens’ ability to influence existing platforms appropriated for citizen engagement purposes is dependent on their technical knowledge and skill, but also on the type of intervention that the platforms allow. Thus, proprietary platforms such as Twitter or Facebook allow user-customization, but they do not allow intervention upon, say, the algorithm for making content visible to other users. Furthermore, the appropriation of a particular digital technology for citizen engagement purposes is also dependent on the existing practices of use—influencing them may not be within the power of citizen-organizers.

Interestingly enough, in spite of the strong interest in integrating digital technologies within the governance process – both in terms of internal communication within public administration and in terms of government-citizen communication– these technologies seem to be almost entirely absent¹¹ from the formal mechanisms of citizen participation made available by the House of Representatives. Given the Netherlands’ role as a leader in e-

¹¹ The citizen initiative mechanism was put in place in 2006. Since 2009, the House also accepts electronic signatures for submitted initiatives. In practice, this means that the organizers can collect signatures using online forms, but still have to submit them in hard copy format. The House subsequently checks the identity of a sample of the signatories as a precondition for accepting the initiative

government and e-participation, as well as the high Internet adoption rates in this country, it is indeed surprising that digital mediation is absent from national-level mechanisms of citizen participation. Furthermore, it is clear that digital technologies have become incorporated in the practices of grassroots activism. ICTs are part of the 'established' repertoire of actions for reaching out to and asking citizens to act together in order to affect the process of governance. As our case reveals, in such instances technologies are used primarily as public relations tools, aimed at enrolling citizen support for the initiative. In our opinion, this use of digital technologies could be improved upon .

Against the background of the Netherlands as a world leader in e-government and e-participation, as well as Internet adoption rates, the rudimentary use of digital technologies for civic engagement in the case under review here appears striking. Given these rankings, the expectation of the research team was that citizens' use of digital technologies would be, on the one hand, more creative, setting examples for the rest of the world; and, on the other hand, conducive to more deliberative and long-term forms of civic engagement. We also expected that the citizen initiatives would include digital technologies –at the very least by allowing for the electronic submission of an initiative. This case study suggests that explicitly integrating ICTs within the formal avenues for citizen participation constitutes a good starting point for expanding the enlarging the current e-government policy framework. Such an enlargement entails the development of suitable online tools that can allow citizens to start citizen initiatives in a way that is inclusive and deliberative from the beginning. Furthermore, such a framework should not limit itself to technological solutions, but also invest in the development of cultures of civic engagement, as well as provide resources for the development of these initiatives.

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