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Pocket Democracy – Developing a User-Friendly App for Following Local Politics

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Democratic innovations have been suggested as one way of increasing public participation in political processes. Civic technology may provide resources for improving transparency, publicity, and accountability in political processes. This paper is about the development of a smartphone application that provides users with information on municipal politics and representatives. We develop the application using a user-centered design approach. Thus, we establish its functions by hearing the end-users and considering their goals in the design process. We conducted three focus groups to find out what features end-users would like to see in an app. Six features were present in all three focus group discussions: receiving information, expressing opinions, creating/answering polls, receiving notifications, following issues and receiving emergency messages.

Keywords: civic technology, democratic innovations, focus group, user-centered design

1 Introduction and Aims

The gap between citizens and representatives seems to be widening despite a constantly improving communication technology. Some scholars argue that politics is difficult to understand and takes too much of citizens' highly valued spare time (e.g., Hibbing & Theiss-Morse 2002). People may struggle to keep themselves updated while they are busy living their lives and pursuing individual goals. Many citizens may appear passive but can, nevertheless, be characterized as “standby citizens” having a high political interest – willing and able to participate and being more likely to do so if an issue involves them personally (Amnå & Ekman 2014). These people are not “political junkies” or interested in party politics. They do not follow and engage in every issue that has a hint of politics to it. Rather, they choose when to get involved and usually in single issues. The standby citizenship can be understood in terms of emphasis on what a society can do for the individual and not the other way around (Amnå & Ekman 2014).

Municipalities produce large amounts of data every day. Much of it is public, yet often hidden in not-so-interactive websites. Politicians represent their voters, and citizens need to know how well politicians are performing. The democratic ideal of transparency of government could increase if citizens had easily accessible information about the behavior of individual politicians and political processes in democratic institutions such as the municipal council. Arguably, there is a possibility to develop digital applications helping citizens to follow politicians and issues of interest using a smartphone, tablet or computer.

The goal of the project this paper refers to, Pocket Democracy, is to design a democratic tool suiting the needs of the modern citizen and combining the availability of data about municipal politicians and issues with a user-friendly design. There is a need to bring politicians' actions into public scrutiny in order to increase the transparency of municipalities.

To reach the project goal of creating a user-friendly app for following local politics, we apply a user-centered design process. We do this to make sure that the end-users can use the tool with effectiveness, efficiency, and satisfaction (International Standardization Organization 2010). The aim is to help citizens to follow local politics and representatives using a smartphone application. Good usability also means that using the application should make you feel positive and content, not forcing you to change your behavior in due to complicated features. To create such a tool, we must first involve the citizens who are supposed to use our tool, to find out what their goals are and how they want to reach these.

The aim of this article is to discover what type of features citizens would like to have in an application that provides users with information on local politics. We conduct three focus group discussions with citizens of a small Finnish municipality (population circa 5,500), where the tool will be launched and tested in a pilot project during the autumn of 2019. The composition of the focus groups differed according to age and work affiliation. In this paper, we focus on the following research question: Which themes/features are present in all three focus group discussions?

2 Theoretical Background

Democracies are facing declining levels of traditional forms of political participation such as voting and membership in political parties. Instead, citizens are increasingly favoring individualized forms of political participation (e.g. e-petitioning, boycotting) to express their political will (Dalton 2014). Some citizens are becoming more critical about the way democracy functions and demand improved democratic performance (Inglehart & Welzel 2010). In theory, citizens still prefer democracy as the best available type of government, yet they are not necessarily pleased with how it functions in practice (Dalton 2014). This dissatisfaction with the way democracy works tends to produce two types of citizens: critical citizens and disenchanting citizens. Critical citizens deal with dissatisfaction by widening their repertoire of political participation while disenchanting citizens abstain from political activity altogether (Åström, Jonsson & Karlsson 2017: 3).

The internet seems promising to counter the growing dissatisfaction with “politics as usual” because it offers new ways of participating for critical citizens and has the potential to lower the threshold for participation for disenchanting citizens (van Dijk 2012). Moreover, the recent development of smartphones and applications have raised the hopes of

improving ways to involve citizens in public decision-making processes. However, although citizens might welcome the introduction of new apps, usability challenges – i.e. difficulties in using the app – can lead to citizens abandoning the apps (Adenskog, Åström, Ertiö, Karlsson, Ruoppila & Thiel 2017).

Young people, in particular, tend to drop out from participating in traditional politics. Voting, for example, is unequally distributed by age in Finland; turnout is lower among younger citizens (Grönlund & Wass 2016). Municipal elections have the lowest turnout, compared to presidential and parliamentary elections in Finland, only slightly higher than the turnout for European Parliament elections (Karvonen 2014; Statistics Finland 2017). Thus, turnout is lowest in the municipal elections, which, paradoxically, is the level of government where decisions are taken in closest proximity to the voters. Representatives are supposed to fulfill the wishes of the people who elected them. However, a vote for a candidate does not provide exact guidance on how to act on the voter's behalf in specific issues. Arguably, the communication between voters and representative needs to be more than sporadic every fourth year and convey more information than a simple vote can transfer. Moreover, if citizens are supposed to be able to have an impact on a decision made by, for example, the municipal council, they need to receive information at an early stage before a decision is made. When relevant information does not reach affected citizens in time (e.g., when it is mediated to them via news media), the opportunity to have an impact on policies might be lost. In short, politicians need to know what the citizens want, and citizens need to know what politicians have done to achieve their political goals.

A society needs “informed skepticism” from citizens capable of critical evaluation of decision-makers and decisions (Kestilä-Kekkonen 2016). Transparency, publicity, and accountability are central ideals in democracy. According to Lindstedt and Naurin (2010: 304), transparency means that it is possible to look into something, to find out what is going on. A transparent institution is one where citizens can acquire information and form an opinion about actions and processes within the institution. Transparency implies that the actions of politicians are documented and released, while publicity means that this information becomes known by citizens. Thus, transparency will increase the chance of publicity. However, this link is not automatic. If the available (transparent) information is left unattended, there will be no exposure of information about the actions of politicians to the public. A lack of transparency means citizens have difficulties holding politicians accountable. This is problematic since accountability is central to representative democracy (Warren 2014). If citizens are supposed to hold politicians and institutions accountable for their actions, they need information about these actions. This information, in turn, is supposed to inform citizens' voting decisions. If citizens think a politician performed well, they can reward her by voting for her. If the opposite is true, they might punish her by voting for someone else. To make informed political choices, citizens need to stay up to date with political decision-making.

On a theoretical level, different democratic models promote different types of participation by citizens. Some scholars argue that the representative electoral model of democracy where citizens participate in elections every four years does not provide enough input opportunities. Therefore, they believe some of the democracy's ills can be treated with more forms of political participation (see Bengtsson 2008). The internet, by creating more opportunities for political communication between citizens and politicians, seems to have the potential to bridge a widening gap between the represented and the representatives.

2.1 Democratic Innovations to Deal with Worrying Trends

Research has pointed out that Finnish municipalities have difficulties with fulfilling citizens' request for public information (Koski & Kuutti 2016). The researchers sent a request of information to every municipality in Finland via email in May 2015. The openness of government activities left room for improvement: out of the 301 Finnish mainland municipalities, 203 answered, 98 did not. This is worrisome since anyone in Finland has the right to access public authorities' official documents according to the Freedom of information law (Koski & Kuutti 2016). Albeit electronic communication ought to make communication easier, democratic institutions seem to lag behind in the use of digital innovations. Some scholars argue that the gap between the way citizens go about their daily lives and the way democracy is carried out contributes to declining trust and confidence in how democracy works (Simon, Bass, Boelman & Mulgan 2017: 4).

Participatory innovations aim to democratize democracy by including citizens into the decision-making processes and political will formation. These have a potential to improve the quality of democracy, to reduce the lack of legitimacy, to increase political satisfaction, to overcome political apathy, and to lead to better policies. However, it is not sure these innovations will actually achieve these goals and improve the quality of democracy (Geissel 2009: 2). Democratic innovations can be created offline, as in deliberative discussion forums known as mini-publics (Bächtiger, Setälä & Grönlund 2014), or online, as in the case of voting advice applications guiding voters to find a suitable candidate (Holleman, Kamoen, Krouwel, van de Pol & de Vreese 2016). For example, voting advice applications have been found to increase the chance of voting when users and non-users are compared (Garzia, Trechsel, & De Angelis 2017). Although high hopes have been raised for digital technology to encourage greater participation and achieve better decisions, the results from various digital experiments have provided sobering experiences, suggesting that the task of improving democracy is a complex (Simon et al. 2017: 4).

In Finland, the government introduced a democratic innovation in the form of the Citizens' Initiative to increase popular control over the political agenda using online tools (Christensen, Karjalainen & Lundell 2016; Berg 2017). However, scholars have been less successful in analyzing what kind of democratic reforms citizens wish for in general, and more specifically, which types of democratic online tools citizens would prefer. Top-

down democratic innovations may introduce an “if we build it, they will come”-mentality, which risks failure due to the lack of citizen participation in the development process. In an ideal situation, a theoretical push-effect asking for more politically active citizens accompanies a pull-effect from citizens demanding more input, ensuring that the tools created respond to actual needs of end-users.

Smartphones seem to gradually replace desktop computers and laptops as the preferred device for accessing information and services (Zefferer, Kreuzhuber & Teufl 2013: 127). The increasing use of mobile phones has led to research about how they are used in democratic processes (Kim, Chen & Yang 2016: 694). Smartphones can be used to improve citizens' access to government services. A study from South Korea indicated that the use of mobile phones for news and information leads to mobile-based political discussion, which, in turn, increases levels of political participation (Kim et al. 2016). When it comes to app design and social media, companies such as Facebook and Google might have different design goals compared to democratic institutions. This means that tools with a potential of improving democracy, can be hazardous to democracy at the same time (Graeff 2018). One frequently discussed example political online microtargeting (e.g., the Cambridge Analytica case). On the one hand, targeted online advertising can have a positive effect, by providing advertising that is more relevant for citizens or reaching those who are otherwise not interested in political communication. On the other hand, microtargeting can be seen as manipulative, privacy invading, and fragmenting political groups (Zuiderveen Borgesius, Möller, Kruikemeier, Fathaigh, Irion, Dobber, Bodo & de Vreese 2018).

A theoretical framework for assessing democratic innovations emphasizes four democratic goods: inclusiveness, popular control, considered judgement and transparency (Smith 2009). These criteria can be used to evaluate to what extent democratic qualities are present in different tools (Smith 2009: 15). Moreover, the potential for political participation is of importance and can be measured in terms of efficiency (the cost of participation for different actors) and transferability (operating in different political contexts and systems).

From a user-centered design perspective, the citizen perspective is missing in the theoretical evaluation of democratic innovations. Even if a tool fulfills democratic criteria, citizens are less likely to use the tool if they do not see a need for it. It is unclear how the use of smartphones and digital applications can help us meet the challenges democracies are facing, or how we can achieve the democratic ideals of accountability, transparency, and publicity on a local level. The potential to make politics more understandable using digital tools exists, although the question of *how-to* bring democracy to our pockets remains.

3 Methods

In this study, focus group methodology is applied. A focus group can be defined as a qualitative method where data is collected through group discussions (Mirzet 2002). A focus group is composed for a particular purpose, the discussion centers on given themes, and a moderator leads the discussion (Esaiasson, Gilljam, Oscarsson & Wängnerud 2007: 345). However, the goal is for the participants to discuss freely, without excessive involvement of the moderator. Using a focus group is particularly helpful when studying people's motives, experiences and thought processes on a more in-depth level (Gustafsson 2008). Hence, the purpose *is not* to generalize to a larger population, but to map the existence of different thought categories and reasoning. Moreover, focus groups are generally very useful when it comes to generating new ideas (Esaiasson et al. 2007: 347). When applying a user-centered design process, focus groups are a common method for conducting user research, trying to understand the end-users' vision, purpose, goals, and constraints (Gulliksen, Göransson, Boivie, Blomkvist, Persson & Cajander 2003). In this case, the end-users are the citizens of Malax, and the aim of the study was to gather different types of users (e.g. a variety in age and knowledge of municipal political processes).

Citizens were invited to the focus groups using the municipality's Facebook page. Moreover, the Youth Council, the Council for issues concerning people with disabilities and the Council for Elders were invited. In total, 18 participants (61 % male, mean age 42 years) participated, and were assigned to one of three groups. The strategy for group composition was to create groups where the participants felt secure and dared to express their views and voluntarily participate in discussions. Hence, homogeneity of the participants' background (age and work affiliation) was a starting point in this study (Mirzet 2002). The first group consisted of younger people (n=5), the second group consisted of people that were middle-aged or older (n=6) and the third group consisted of municipal employees (n=7).

The focus group occasion started with a brief presentation of the Pocket Democracy project and focus group methodology. The instructions to the groups were to brainstorm freely about which features to include in the app. After this, the groups and moderators moved to separate rooms. Initially, the moderator informed the participants of research ethics relating to the study and participants' rights. The moderator then initiated a discussion around four broader themes: communication with the municipality, the groups' own wishes for app functionality, feedback on the project idea and finally a summarizing discussion about the most important features of the app. The audio from group discussions was recorded and each group discussion lasted for about one hour. When the discussion was completed, the participants filled out a short survey asking about background variables such as age, education, work affiliation and media habits.

A research assistant transcribed all three focus group discussions. In the analyzing phase, the three researcher that worked as moderators in the focus groups each read their groups' discussion and compiled a list of the main themes brought forward. After this, all three researchers met and identified the features that were present in all three group discussions. Quotes from the group discussions are used to exemplify the themes. The quotes are translated from Swedish to English.

4 Results

In this section, the discussions in three focus groups will be presented. The first group consisted of younger people, the second group of middle-aged to elderly people, and the final group consisted of municipal employees. The main aim of this article is to find out what type of features citizens would like to have in an application that provides users with information on local politics. Six features were identified as being important issues in all three groups, and they will be presented in more detail.

Receive information

The first features concern the main aim of the tool according to the participants, to receive information. All three groups discussed that the tool should provide information about what is going on in the municipality, both on a general level and on a more personalized level.

- (1) "Yes, I think I would read about what is going on, what is forthcoming and so on. A general information channel." (Member of the group with middle-aged and elderly persons)
- (2) "It will be like the things that affect you. Right now. That is what's important information for you right now." (Member of the group with middle-aged and elderly persons)

The younger people discussed how the flow of information today is overwhelming, and sometimes it is difficult to know where to search for information online.

- (3) "Because in today's feeds with everything, you cannot find that information. Those who have peace and quiet and can sit and read Vasabladet [local newspaper] may see something but you can't go on Facebook and see something written there. You only get vented upon with spleen when you go in there and try to find something..."

Furthermore, amongst the municipal employees the discussion highlighted that a benefit of the app would be that you do not have to be actively searching for new information yourself. Instead, citizens would like to receive new and important information immediately.

- (4) "That's the thing, that you have an app that would automatically search for that information and notify you that there is new information." (Member of the group with municipal employees)

Express opinion/comment

The second theme that was mentioned in all three group discussions was the ability to express your opinion or comment on different issues.

- (5) “And so maybe one can give comments? Yes [SEVERAL PEOPLE AGREE]. Yes, just because then it will be that two-way democracy.” (Member of the group with middle-aged and elderly persons)

In the group with younger people, the arguments for including a comment section would not only be to give feedback to the municipality, but to be able to communicate with other app users.

- (6) “But not only commenting yourself, it is important to see what others think and what others are commenting on.” (Member of the group with younger people)

The municipal employees emphasized a feature for expressing opinions but argued that it should merely be a comment feature and not a question feature that the municipality must devote resources to.

- (7) “It would be that you cannot ask any questions, only give your opinion. You can't ask anything in this app, but you have the opportunity to give your opinion. So maybe there will be 700 opinions that the arena should not be renovated.” (Member of the group with municipal employees)

Polling feature

A polling feature, administrated from the municipality, was a popular feature in all three groups. This would help the decision-makers and provide input into the political process.

- (8) “If the politicians feel that they have a problem, how should they solve this? Then you can post such a question. One might ask; what do you think about this? And then have alternatives or something.”

“And what I think, with two-way communication. That the municipality or the board can ask their citizens as well as that this is an easy way to reach out to people.” (Members of the group with middle-aged and elderly people)

This feature could present more detailed information about voters to decision-makers, by presenting the polling results according to different age groups for example.

- (9) “Yes, it would probably be great to have so the city council will easily get information about what the municipal residents think.

And then just with these questions, when you write your opinion, it would be good that those who then make a decision would see what this person is saying and how old he or she is, they would also be able to take it a little into consideration, if it concerns, for example, the elderly. The decision they make. That their voice would be heard.” (Members of the group with younger people)

The focus group with younger people emphasized that a polling feature would increase the interest for the app.

- (10) “It would probably attract me to download that app very much if I could say what I think about political issues and what they voted for. And then see what the result is.” (Member of the group with younger people)

Moreover, the municipal employees discussed that the polling feature could be used not only in the political process, but also in connection to different events arranged by the municipality.

- (11) “Yes, as long as they don't come too often [LAUGHTER]. But like when you have had an event, you would like to know that what did they think about this now? Is there anything we could have done better?” (Members of the group with municipal employees)

Follow issues

Another key feature of the app would be the possibility to follow issues. Citizens wanted to be able to choose what to follow according to personal interests rather than getting information about everything.

- (12) “Exactly. That they can participate actively, receive notification on the information they are interested in.

Yes, but it will be like what affects you. Right now. That's what is important information for you right now.” (Members of the group with middle-aged and elderly people)

One of the reasons for following certain issues is the problem with information overload.

- (13) “You drown in information and should be really active yourself to find information. I think that is a big gain with this app, that you get what you want [SEVERAL PEOPLE AGREES].” (Member of the group with municipal employees)

In the group with younger people, the participants preferred following issues in addition to politicians.

- (14) “I think it is very important that you not only follow politicians, because it will be very boring in the long run. Since these are just some of the assignment that some politicians have, such as various committees they sit in and such. You'll have to follow almost everyone to know something.

If you are interested in the Youth Council, you would probably be able to tag it there and follow all issues that concern the Youth Council or where it is mentioned.” (Members of the group with younger people)

Notifications

Most apps today offer some sort of notification feature, and all three groups discussed the importance of getting notifications.

- (15) “That you get the beep and the cross, that I am interested in getting information regarding which procurements are underway. There is a new procurement, it beeps in the phone [SEVERAL PEOPLE AGREE]. Then you have received a message, if you want to influence the process, you continue in the traditional way, you call, send an email or make contact in some other way.” (Member of the group with middle-aged and elderly people)

Especially in the beginning, it was regarded important to receive notifications to remind users of the app. However, some of the participants commented that too many notifications could also be problematic.

- (16) “But if you only receive a few, those that are the most important one in the beginning, then maybe you look in there as well. If it's not too much.” (Member of the group with younger people)

Hence, being able to customize your settings was important and was discussed amongst both the younger and the older citizens.

- (17) “There should be good settings for what you want notifications for and not. I think that it is important, it bothers me with some other apps when it is like notifications on/off, so there are many different things that you would like to hear about, but not everything.” (Member of the group with younger people)

Another reason for using notifications is that the time schedule for the municipal political process is often very tight and receiving notifications would make it easier to follow the process before decisions are made.

- (18) “Because it is usually quite a short time between the agenda being published until the next meeting occurs [SEVERAL PEOPLE AGREE], you should actively go and look for that information so you don't miss it. So in that way, it would be better with an app that says “pling” [SEVERAL PEOPLE AGREE].” (Member of the group with municipal employees)

Emergency messages

The final feature that were present in all three focus groups was the existence of emergency messages. All groups referred to the same example: when the water is polluted, information should be sent out to the citizens as fast as possible.

- (19) “Should there be any kind of warning signal as well, the water is not drinkable in [information removed during peer-review process] [SEVERAL PEOPLE AGREE].

Which one can't turn off. Which is information from the municipality. That the water is bad or something similar.” (Members of the group with middle-aged and elderly people)

- (20) “Or a message that today the water is not drinkable in Övermalax because there is something wrong with the pipes. Something like that. That it would be a message.” (Member of the group with younger people)

The discussion in the group with younger people and the municipal employees centered around the discussion on Facebook. The younger people were concerned because of rumors spreading fast on Facebook during emergencies.

- (21) “Instead of sitting and writing on Facebook that we were swimming in Åminne and now we have a rash on two children at home. And then they start writing on Facebook. So this happened this summer. And then there were 100 likes and 40 shares, and two days earlier they had tested the water and there was nothing wrong with it. [...] So, instead, all that can stop hysteria.” (Member of the group with younger people)

The municipal employees were positive to the idea of emergency messages, although that type of information will spread quickly through several channels.

- (22) “These messages, when something happens to the water. Should it be, is it more efficient that the information should come through the app then? [MULTIPLE PEOPLE SPEAK POSITIVELY].

And it is something that spreads when we publish it on Facebook, it goes everywhere.” (Members of the group with municipal employees)

The participants of all three focus groups agreed that in an emergency situation, all communication channels that the municipality has access to shall be used.

5 Discussion and Conclusions

The aim of this article is to find out what type of features citizens would like to have in an application that provides users with information on local politics. Three focus groups were conducted with people of different age and background. The specific research question asked in this study was: Which themes/features are present in all three focus group discussions?

Interestingly, although the group discussions were quite different due to the background differences (e.g., comparing young people to older people with far less experience in using smartphones), some features were present in all discussions. These findings thus show the features that are important for all end-users in the study. Such information provides a first step in the process of finding out what type of features that would be relevant for users when receiving information on local politics using smartphones.

Firstly, there is a need for an app that provides an easy way to keep track of what is going on in the municipality. The municipal employees and citizens alike agreed on the benefits of such an app. Transparency, publicity, and accountability are central ideals in democracy (Lindstedt & Naurin 2010), yet seem hard to meet today according to the focus group discussions. One of the problems with today’s system of publishing documents online is the danger of information overload. A feature that would help solve this problem is to be able to follow specific issues or topics, where users can pinpoint their own interests and

receive information on these only. Moreover, instead of actively having to keep track of the political process, notifications when new information is available would make the process more transparent. An increased transparency would help people evaluate politicians and institutions (Warren 2014).

Another important issue is communication. The citizens prefer two-way communication, being able to either give feedback to the municipality in polls, or to comment in the app and establish dialogue. However, the discussions in the focus groups also emphasized that the citizens understand that in the end, it is the politicians and public officials that are making the decisions, not the app users.

Six factors measuring democratic goods has been put forward by Smith (2009) for analyzing tools such as the Pocket Democracy project. Some of these factors are also present in the focus group discussions. Receiving information is relevant for both inclusiveness and transparency of political processes. Moreover, popular control (citizens being able to influence the decision-making process) and considered judgement (citizens' understanding of the issue as well as perspectives of other citizens) can be linked to the features of expressing opinions and polls. Hence, citizens do include democratic values in their discussions, but also emphasize the importance of user-friendliness.

A limitation with this study is that the focus group methodology uses a low-N sample. Hence, it is not possible to generalize the findings to a larger population. However, in comparison to other forms of data collection, the focus group method aims at deepening the discussion through developing ideas collectively. Moreover, when applying a user-centered design process, focus groups are suitable for identifying the needs and goals of the end-users.

The participants of the focus groups have a great deal of political interest and are willing to learn more about the issues that spark their personal interest (e.g. Amnå & Ekman 2014). Especially when it comes to local politics, the issues that are subject to political discussion are issues that affect citizen's everyday life, which could spark civic engagement. However, the communication system used today does not seem to satisfy the needs of the citizens nor make them interact in political participation or keep them updated on decision-making in the municipality. To summarize, the end-users see several positive features benefits with a smartphone application compared to the current situation. Hence, using a user-centered design process and actively involving citizens early in the app development will, hopefully, lead to a narrower gap between citizens and decision-makers.

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