Love your city! An interactive platform empowering citizens to turn the public domain into a participatory domain

Nathalie Stembert and Ingrid Mulder

Faculty of Industrial Design Engineering, Delft University of Technology, Delft, The Netherlands;
Creating 010, Rotterdam University of Applied Sciences, Rotterdam, The Netherlands

In the past years, governments have recognized the potential of interactive technology to bridge the gap with their citizens. The right tools and guidance could enhance citizenship and enable co-creation between citizens and (local) governments. However, this opportunity does not automatically lead to a participatory practice. In the current article, a participation model addressing six participation parameters, i.e., certainty, communication, freedom, responsibility, sympathy, and support, is introduced aiming to guide the design of a means that facilitates people to participate and co-create, with other citizens and local government. We describe and reflect upon the participation model and the resulting concept. The 'Love your city' concept is an interactive platform allowing citizens to personally tackle issues they encounter in their direct environment. Moreover, 'Love your City' contributes to a participatory domain as it empowers citizens and involves them as frontline professionals in the public domain in an active way.

Keywords: Citizenship, co-creation, empowerment, participatory design, public domain

1. Introduction

In contemporary individualistic society direct contact and communications on public issues is getting less common. Nevertheless, citizens do come across public issues almost every day; issues concerning citizens in a more or less personal way, and which can be on a local-, regional- or national societal level. Although there are elections once every four years and participatory procedures in which citizens can give their opinion, citizens experience the Dutch political arena as far away. More specific, citizens experience feelings of powerlessness and have difficulties in expressing themselves to have influence while authority does not succeed in facilitating an understandable and effective possibility to give their citizens a voice.

Authority increasingly realizes the importance of citizen involvement and is, therefore, looking for ways to involve citizens and realize practices. At the same time, citizens are increasingly convinced that authority will discard their input and loose motivation to invest their time. To engage citizens in policy-making processes, authority could learn from successful methods of collaboration platforms used by commercial partners. The desired process of more active participation of citizens can be seen as a form of mass-collaboration: crowdsourcing. Tools such as smart phones (or new media in general) make co-creation between citizens and authority possible. These new digital means have the potential to organize and stimulate communication between citizens and authority, and allow citizens to participate from their own environment. These opportunities, however, will not develop automatically into a good solution just because they are promising. It is crucial that social standards like trust, openness, and consideration of mutual interests are guaranteed. It can be said that enlarging citizen engagement in the public domain is challenging; it requires a mutual initiative, and results should be visible for both parties. In the current work, we aim to address this challenge from a participatory design perspective. Could we design a means that facilitates people to participate and co-create, with other citizens and authority, in the Dutch public domain of 2030? In other words, would it be possible that future citizens could practice DIY (Do-It-Yourself) principles in the public domain? The current work, therefore, not only aims to leverage interaction between authority and citizens, but also aims to improve the interaction between citizens themselves.

This article reports the main findings from our studies on current participation models in the public domain as well as existing participatory design practices, leading to a participation model addressing six participation parameters. This participation model informed the design of the 'Love your City'. The DIY government and participatory aspects of 'Love your City' are explained and motivated, after which, we conclude with a discussion.