The Work to Make eParticipation Work

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Abstract

eParticipation is a new research domain focusing the development of ICT-supported participation in processes of government and governance. These processes may concern involvement of practitioners, citizens and politicians in electronic public administration, service delivery, policy-making and decision-making. The overall objective of this thesis is to discuss how eParticipation is enacted and shaped, in and by practice, and thus contribute to development of practice-based conceptualisation as well as development within the differing practices of eParticipation.

The study is based on interpretive case studies as well as theoretical perspectives assisting the analysis of the research field as multiple and co-related processes and relations of change and learning. The empirical data has been gathered during participation in several research and development projects, conducted within a local municipality in Southeast Sweden. Several of the projects were also part of national and international collaboration. The methodological approach comprises ethnographic studies, including interviews, participatory observations and document analysis. The approach of ethnomethodology was also inspirational for the close examining of how various actors organised their participation or non-participation in the various settings of preparing for or conducting eParticipation. The theoretical basis is multi-disciplinary, drawing on perspectives from technological and social theories, such as political science, ANT and feminist theories along with IS (information systems) research.

The concept of *symbolic eParticipation* is coined in order to explore how the preconceived ideas of managing participation seem to be constricting and limiting local and situated development. At the same time, symbolic eParticipation is inspiring development of local interpretations and participatory work. The mutual shaping of these activities leads to the formulation of the notion *malleability of organisations and citizenship*. The findings indicate that activities of for instance customisation of software or evaluation of consultation tools contribute in creating socio-technical mechanisms, of which they are themselves a part. Those mechanisms embed power relations, and thus become a delegated function of opening up or closing for participation.

An example of such socio-technical mechanisms is the notion of "active citizenship", which is given higher legitimate status if it is conducted mainly as an electronically mediated activity. The term "*symbolic active citizenship*" is suggested as a concept which describes the legitimate active citizenship. The process of becoming active is thoroughly addressed in this thesis, including variations such as pro-activity and active passivity. These are also mediated by processes of learning in communities of practice. Active participants alternate between being active and actively passive in the processes which are supposed to constitute, form and sustain activities of eParticipation. This fluidity of citizenship has implications for future design of technology and for how to perceive participation in these activities.

The interplay of symbolic eParticipation and organisational and civic malleability described in this thesis, underscores the significance of providing space for negotiations of situating eParticipation.