Rethinking the Business Model Concept with eParticipation

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RETHINKING THE BUSINESS MODEL CONCEPT WITH ePARTICIPATION

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Abstract

Enhancing citizen participation in policy making using Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) is emerging as a strategic issue for political organisations. ICT-mediated participation, or eParticipation, projects range from the more traditional public sector initiatives, such as petitions and consultations, to attempts at integrating new forms of participatory Web 2.0 media. In this paper, we argue that the potential of ICTs to deliver sustainable eParticipation has not been fully achieved. This is mainly because of the lack of (1) effective coordination at the implementation level, (2) appropriate infrastructure, and (3) effective service design and development. In addressing this gap, we examine eParticipation applications from a business model perspective. The potential relevance of different business model components is discussed and an illustrative case on online petitioning systems for local government is presented. This leads to important implications for theory and practice.

Keywords: Business Model, eGovernment, eParticipation, Citizen Engagement, Innovation, ePetitioning.

1 INTRODUCTION

During the last decade, public sector reform has been inspired and practised through the integration of Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) in various governance activities, with the aim of fostering increased transparency, financial gains, efficient service delivery, and citizen engagement. Indeed, the strategic objective of interacting with citizens for a range of activities has been gaining increasing priority in public governance transformation agendas. This is driven by concerns that the democratic potentials of ICTs are being marginalised by governments (Chadwick & May, 2003; Bekkers & Homburg, 2007) and discussions on how this interaction should be enhanced (Jaeger, 2005).

The eParticipation term, widely known from European Commission’s (2009) eParticipation Preparatory Action, has been used to describe efforts to open governance to the public by both developing the appropriate software tools and the corresponding strategies and policies. Since the eParticipation idea has been gaining increased attention, governments and other formal policy making stakeholders are attempting to implement relevant initiatives and strategies. First experiences indicate that although successful cases are emerging, the practical implementation of eParticipation is not an
easy task. In many cases, problems such as low adoption and poor sustainability are shared with a lack to assess the impact of such practices (Saebo, et al., 2008). This is understandable because eParticipation represents a complex intersection between the public sector context, the technology and the underlying political processes.

Indeed, neither the technological nor the social perspective alone can be successful when conceptualising and implementing eParticipation (Parvez & Pervaiz, 2006). To meet their intended outcomes, eParticipation initiatives should be developed using a comprehensive approach that takes into consideration a range of relevant aspects along with their interlinks. This includes the definition of services to be provided and their consistency with citizens’ needs (Evans & Yen, 2006). It also encompasses the need to examine the appropriate infrastructure to leverage such services, as well as understand the role and impact of their different associated actors (Flak & Rose, 2005). Interestingly, all of these aspects are covered by the business model concept.

The business model can be simply described as an “abstract representation” (Al-Debei, et al., 2008), that explains the way of conducting activities and functions so that strategic goals and objectives can be achieved. The aim of this paper is to approach eParticipation within the agenda of transformational government by deploying the business model concept as a paradigm (i.e. way of thinking) appropriate for improving institutional practices pertaining to the design of eParticipation initiatives and their electronic services.

The remainder of this paper is structured as follows. The next section argues that there is a need to address the gap at the operational level of eParticipation in discussing implementation issues such as resource allocation and dissemination. Next, the paper extends previous work to describe a unified framework for the business model concept whose components are then discussed in relation to the eParticipation settings. After presenting an illustrative case of implementing online petitioning systems for local government, the paper concludes by analysing the potential benefits and issues for future research.

2 THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

2.1 Transformational Government and E-Participation Implementation

The potential benefits of integrating ICTs in eParticipation activities are not yet fully achieved. Even governmental initiatives which are considered successful, such as the UK government’s ePetitioning system\(^1\) fail to indisputably demonstrate a sustainable impact on traditional policy making mechanisms.

Lately, the role of technology in engaging a wider range of citizens in different public sector services has become more important in the political context. Current technologies for eParticipation seek to incorporate public inputs in both governmental policy making and public service delivery mechanisms. Tony Blair, for example, emphasises the role of technology by stating:

“The future of public services has to use technology to give citizens choice, with personalised services designed around their needs not the needs of the provider”

(Cabinet Office, 2009, p.5)

However, designing and implementing citizen engagement exercises in this context has proved far from a simple task. The main challenges indentified by earlier literature still remain as significant barriers. According to Macintosh (2004), the challenges typically include listening and responding to massive scale input, building capacity and active citizenship, ensuring coherence within the policy

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\(^1\) [http://petitions.number10.gov.uk/](http://petitions.number10.gov.uk/)
making lifecycle and demonstrating commitment in analysing and using, as well as disseminating the results produced by citizen engagement.

To empirically examine these issues, the Hansard Society (2008) compiles an independent review concerning the use of ICTs to promote engagement between the central government and the public. After examining cases such as the social networking site developed by the Office of the Children’s Commissioner and several blogging applications across the UK government, one of the main conclusions is that:

“Our research shows that online engagement exercises with clear objectives have fared better than those with undefined goals. Websites that combine careful planning and appropriate marketing with the development of reflexive engagement strategies have a greater chance of success.”

(Hansard Society, 2008, p.6)

Few studies have addressed operational and management issues involved in eParticipation implementation. For example, Andersen, et al., (2007) focused on the management challenges and issues of cost in particular. They identified the paradox that although there is increased awareness of tools to support institutional eParticipation, there is also a managerial void concerning the ways to handle this interaction. Following the United Nations’ report on measuring global progress towards the objectives of connected governance (UNPAN, 2008), Ahmed (2006) identifies issues of consideration for promoting eParticipation and improving its operational practice. Such issues include matters of insufficient marketing, poor research on what citizens are willing or capable of contributing and internal administration problems, such as complex restructuring efforts.

Other practical issues to be addressed in eParticipation implementation involve decisions over targeted groups of citizens, as well as decisions over stakeholders involved with project implementation, for example technology providers or other public sector outsourcers. When examining the design of eParticipation initiatives, some motivating questions emerge as follows:

- What services along with their nature are appropriate to be provided to citizens through eParticipation initiatives?
- Who are the stakeholders involved in implementing an eParticipation initiative? Apart from the possible intended audiences among citizens, they include other governmental agencies, organisations involved in technical implementation, as well as internal governmental stakeholders responsible for promoting and managing the initiative including administrators and elected representatives.
- How are issues of set up cost, ownership and maintenance being resolved? Resource allocation is critical to sustainability, including issues of acquiring and managing the appropriate supporting infrastructure.
- How are the choices among different technologies, tools and communication channels being made? Do they involve research and testing before piloting or launching?
- How are the tasks of evaluation and impact assessment being conducted and taken into account as forms of public feedback?
- How are initiatives promoted and disseminated? For example, what are the direct or indirect connections between social media and institutional initiatives? What is the link between traditional offline and new online activities?
- How is public input managed and integrated into formal policy making mechanisms? Apart from issues of commitment, how does the public administration structure need to be reconfigured?
- How are other project operational issues being resolved? For example, risk management and contingency plans?
This paper postulates that the analysis and evaluation of the above questions can be better managed by utilising the business model concept. Indeed, the business model concept is comprehensive and considered an effective strategic-oriented tool (Al-Debei, et al., 2008; Shafer, et al., 2005). It helps in organising the way of thinking when designing and developing new technological initiatives. Therefore, the next section introduces the business model concept and analyses the different dimensions it addresses as an interceding framework between technological potentials and the achievement of strategic goals and objectives. This grounding is important to show the utility of business models when applied in the context of eParticipation.

2.2 The Business Model Concept

The answer to “what is a business model?” is not straightforward. Definitions vary and researchers have placed emphasis on different angles of the concept. A Business Model (BM) has been described as a way in which organisations create value for their customers (e.g. Amit & Zott, 2001; Magretta, 2002; Osterwalder, et al., 2005). This view highlights the value proposition dimension of the business model concept. Another view represents the concept as architecture for the organisation, including its assets, products, services, and information flow (e.g. Venkatraman & Henderson, 1998). Researchers have also illustrated the concept as a way in which an organisation enables transactions through the coordination and collaboration among parties and multiple companies (e.g. Gordijn & Akkermans, 2001; Bouwman, et al., 2008). The last recognisable view is that a business model is a way in which organisations generate revenue (e.g. Linder & Cantrell, 2000).

As we have seen, the concept has been depicted from different perspectives. To address this gap, (Al-Debei, et al., 2008) attempt to synthesise the literature, through which they define the BM concept comprehensively as follows:

“The business model is an abstract representation of an organization, be it conceptual, textual, and/or graphical, of all core interrelated architectural, co-operational, and financial arrangements designed and developed by an organization presently and in the future, as well all core products and/or services the organization offers, or will offer, based on these arrangements that are needed to achieve its strategic goals and objectives”.

(Al-Debei, et al., 2008, p.8-9)

Consistent with this definition, the main interrelated dimensions of the BM concept can be identified as follows (Al-Debei & Avison, 2010a, b):

- **Value Proposition**: a description of the core services that an organisation offers, or will offer, and the elements that intend to add value to the offering, as well as the nature of the target segment (individuals and businesses) along with their wants and needs.

- **Value Network**: a description of the core needed collaboration and cooperation an organisation conducts and maintains with other related businesses in its value system including a description of all core actors. Further, it depicts the types of communication channels the organisation constructs to enrich the relationships with its audience.

- **Value Architecture**: a broad plan that specifies all necessary core technological and organisational arrangements in terms of resources and their configurations, as well as core competencies that an organisation is equipped with in order to be able to deliver its offering in an effective manner.

- **Value Finance**: a description of the core arrangements needed to ensure the economic viability of the offering which includes costing and pricing methods. It also describes the way in which an organisation aims to generate revenue from the offering and how this revenue is broken up across different stakeholders.
The usefulness of the BM concept in the context of eGovernment has been noticed. For example, Janssen, et al., (2008) develop a taxonomy for analysing Web-based business models for eGovernment, arguing that the BM concept is appealing and of value in the public sector. To exploit the possible advantages of the BM concept, Janssen, et al., (2007, 2008) attempt to analyse different ways in which business model components might be applied by public sector agencies. They also emphasise that the BM should describe both the business and the coordination logics of creating new service offerings.

Claryfing the business model dimensions is a useful base for building up the following sections. In the context of eParticipation, the business model could be effectively employed as a mediating construct bridging the gap between technological potentials and the realisation of strategic goals and objectives, as we illustrate in figure 2. Its introduction mainly aims at deploying principles of efficiency in designing and managing the potentials of eParticipation. The next section explores this connection by discussing the different BM elements within the eParticipation settings.

### 3 Applying the Business Model Concept to e-Participation

#### 3.1 Value Proposition

The design of an eParticipation initiative requires appropriate examination and comprehensive definition of the value proposition. This involves decisions over the selected public eParticipation services to be offered, their targeted audience, and the value elements to be communicated to the defined target audience based on their provision. Services in this context can be distinguished as (a) core services or focus areas; and (b) support services. Core services are those significantly related to the operation of eParticipation, including but not limited to petitions, consultations, or deliberations. Support services on the other hand are those concerned with making the whole eParticipation solution more enjoyable and attractive in a sense of connecting eParticipation solutions with everyday Internet practices such as blogs and videos. For example, this may also include incorporating different Web 2.0 technological services pertaining to social networking.

One of the important initial decisions in eParticipation implementation is about the choice of focus areas in terms of services provided by eParticipation solutions, stages of the policy making lifecycle, and tools to be explored over a wide available range. Typical governmental focus areas with some examples include (Andersen et al., 2007; Wimmer, 2007):

- **Petitions:** signing online petitions to propose issues or questions to be considered by governments or parliaments. Apart from the UK government’s system, another important previous attempt includes the system developed by the Scottish parliament (Seaton, 2005).
- **Consultations:** interactive exchange of information and opinions concerning issues over public policies involving various actors (Tomkova, 2009).
- **Deliberations:** structured discussions or debates over public decision making issues. They usually involve argumentation support systems (Renton & Macintosh, 2007).
• **Spatial Planning**: citizen participation in urban planning and environmental decisions, usually with the assistance of geographical systems, e.g. (Whyte & Macintosh, 2003).

• **Participatory Budgeting**: citizen participation in the process of allocating public resources. For example, such an initiative took place in a Brazilian city (Peixoto, 2009).

The choice of focus areas needs to be supported by the appropriate tools or possibly their suitable combination. Newsletters, alert services, polls, surveys, webcasts, podcasts and search engines are classic tools also useful for citizen engagement projects. Blogs, chat rooms and structured or unstructured forums are very common practices for governmental initiatives, particularly for consultations and deliberations (Wimmer, 2007). A very important emerging category of tools involves typical Web 2.0 practices which, in our context, need to be exploited for eParticipation. For example, Saebo, et al., (2009) propose the use of social networks in connecting online citizen-driven political activity with formal policy making, and they argue that such connections require careful considerations. Another growing domain revealing potentials for citizen engagement concerns applications featuring mobile participation technologies.

The segment to be targeted mainly, but perhaps not exclusively revolves around citizens and particular citizen groups in corresponding activities. Decisions over promoting citizen participation for particular groups are strategically and operationally important. Coleman (2004) emphasises the need to recruit the widest range of public voices to democratic processes, focusing on those who are traditionally marginalised, disadvantaged or unheard due to barriers such as geography. In the cases reported by the Hansard Society (2008) evaluation exercise, targeted groups by governmental websites included children, older people, journalists, academics or other key thematic experts. Younger citizens form a frequently targeted special group in eParticipation initiatives. Reported cases on specialised implementation targeted on adolescent citizens draw on issues of special promotion and education over political processes, as well as interest to learn and participate in policy making (Scherer, et al., 2009).

The added value elements or benefits from eParticipation initiatives are centred upon the “civic engagement” effect. Civic engagement lies in empowering citizen groups to participate in decision making processes, reconnect with their governments, acquire quality information about public issues and form new groups around common interests (Saebo, et al., 2008). The initiatives of eParticipation offer openness for public policy making processes in terms of accountability and transparency, making such processes more authentic and legitimate in the eyes of the public. They also eliminate traditional social and practical problems in relation to offline participation, such as communicative or geographical barriers, as well as time limitations. In addition, they deliver educational benefits, since citizens usually have a chance to acquire useful information and specialised resources over issues of public concern (Tomkova, 2009).

### 3.2 Value Network

The second dimension in designing business models of eParticipation initiatives is building the value network. The main actors a governmental agency needs to collaborate with for designing their public participation strategies could be distinguished as service providers, other governmental agencies, and citizen groups. These actors, roles, and other related issues are as follows:

1. **Governmental Agencies (Central, Local, and Transnational)**: Whilst implementing eParticipation initiatives, an agency needs to collaborate with other governmental bodies and agencies. These bodies might be the central government, other local governmental agencies, and/or transnational governmental bodies such as the European Union. In many cases, the practice of Participation activities is shaped or even directly regulated by national or transnational policy documents which articulate specific guidelines or even mandatory arrangements. One example is related to the UK Local Democracy, Economic Development and Construction Act (2009), as explained in the illustrative case. The next motive for such collaboration is related to funding. This is because hierarchically superior governmental agencies are responsible for funding eParticipation programmes aiming to foster innovation...
towards creating novel tools and running pilot applications. Another need for this collaboration emerges from the fact that public policy making is a joint activity collaboratively developed across different governmental bodies as they handle different needed specialised information (e.g. ministries) and authorities.

2. **Citizen Groups (Political Parties, Lobbying Groups, and Ad-Hoc Groups):** this research differentiates three kinds of social groups (political parties, ad-hoc groups, and lobbying groups) that local governments might need to cooperate with when designing and developing their eParticipation initiatives. Because political parties form the executive power or formal opposition, being representatives of the public, they normally promote agendas in regards to eParticipation explaining the needs and requirements of the public. Lobbying groups, which are professional interest groups, may influence decisions over the implementation of eParticipation initiatives as they have powerful relationships with formal governments. Ad-hoc groups on the other hand are groups of citizens formed informally in a sense of citizens gathering around a specific interest. For example, groups of citizens supporting or opposing a particular policy or public initiative.

3. **Technological Service Providers and/or Consultancy Agencies:** These actors provide technological solutions for different eParticipation focus areas. These outsourced solutions may be customized or off-the-shelf systems. They may also provide installation, training, maintenance, and after-sale services. The hosting and management of such systems might be one of their responsibilities as well. However, these actors may also play a different role as consultants providing technical judgments and advice in regards to these technological solutions and their integration issues. In the latter case, they actually provide their knowledge and experience as a service to the public sector.

The aforementioned types are only categories where many actors from each category may be involved to form the value network of eParticipation initiatives. The consistency amongst these actors is very important and essential to success. Governments should make sure that all actors’ goals and objectives are aligned pointing toward the same end as stakeholders may chase different aims with the collaboration (Flak & Rose, 2005).

3.3 **Value Architecture**

The value architecture for managing eParticipation initiatives refers to assembling the available resources and configuring them in order to design some key distinctive capabilities. The resources include all available assets such as regulative, organisational, human, informational, technological, and investment set up whether they are tangible or intangible. For instance, in the public sector and concerning eParticipation in particular, the role of human resources is highly important. Such initiatives require varied techniques pertaining to administration and management as well as functions and operations. This includes managerial, human, political, and technological skills, adequate and proper requirements concerning regulative resources in terms of laws, regulations, and power; not to mention sufficient financial support.

However, it seems that core resources needed for eParticipation initiatives and their configurations noticeably differ in the public sector agencies compared to the business world. One main difference is on the way public sector administration is structured according to governmental hierarchies controlling assets at varying levels. Another difference is related to policy making bodies in general, as regulative assets are simultaneously input and output to citizen engagement efforts. This is because complex legal documents in many cases are needed as input for public policy deliberations or consultations. However, in their original form they are incomprehensible from non-experts and require additional effort to reflect common sense description and visualisation of public policy impact. This effort and knowledge to prepare appropriate information as input in participatory activities also reflects on managing the output of such activities.

Configuring such resources requires considerations on re-arranging or acquiring assets to support eParticipation ventures. Such configurations have proven in practice an important part of most
transformational government efforts. Bekkers and Homburg (2007) stretch that serious back office integration and coordination issues, usually articulated as technical problems, affect the implementation of eGovernment projects and the nature of the value proposition provided to citizens. In policy issues, integration is equally important as in joined up service delivery. Topics raised by citizens during policy formulation processes in many cases require information on legal, ethical and other types of specialised knowledge. For example, responding to online petitions requires holistic knowledge of public policy topics, previous attempts to affect them, as well as knowledge on authority to respond to particular requests.

In some reported cases which are considered successful, there is evidence that governments configured their resources towards developing specific capabilities. In the participatory budgeting exercise described by Peixoto (2009), city administration had to respond regularly to emails, moderate public discussion forums, as well as run an intense dissemination campaign. The salience of the initiative was to a large extent attributed to appropriate civil service reorganisation and resource support. Hence, we assume that the value of resources is significantly leveraged when resources are appropriately integrated and configured.

3.4 Value Finance

The cost of eParticipation initiatives is increasingly becoming an important issue as the concept is maturing from the strategic towards the implementation stage (Andersen, et al., 2007). Usually, eParticipation initiatives do not require a significant set up cost in regards to IT infrastructures. For example, technologies for setting up forums, maintaining blogs or creating newsletters and mailing lists normally do not represent the major cost of the whole initiative. Human costs and administrative redesign are sometimes more important for preparing information for consultations or even more for manipulating public input.

Indeed, eParticipation initiatives cannot be evaluated from a cost/benefit approach. First, because it is impossible to quantify benefits and second, because determining the cost of maintaining eParticipation initiatives can be hard since they might depend on unpredictable factors such as participation scale. In some cases, eParticipation initiatives are similar to the traditional service delivery aspect of eGovernment and can lead to financial gains for the public sector. This is the case for example when digitising long bureaucratic processes related to citizen engagement, e.g. petitions or urban planning activities. Peixoto (2009) reports that in the participatory budgeting exercise, the cost of participation was significantly reduced compared to the traditional offline approach.

This section has discussed the various business model components as applied within the eParticipation settings. In order to illustrate the potential use of the business model concept for eParticipation initiatives, the next section examines the case example of ePetitioning at the local government level, an activity which is increasingly drawing attention, especially in the UK.

4 AN ILLUSTRATIVE CASE: ePETITIONING FOR LOCAL GOVERNMENT

The practice of ePetitioning has been emerging as one of the most popular eDemocracy ideas. The Oxford Internet Survey has demonstrated that signing a petition is the most frequent form of online political participation in the UK (Dutton, et al., 2009). In fact, following the significant attention drawn by the UK government’s ePetitioning system which has managed to gather millions of signatures, the percentage of users signing an online petition doubled within 2007-2009, reflecting a fall in corresponding offline petitions’ numbers. Online petitions (i.e. ePetitions), although criticised as a form of low quality political participation, provide an attractive, easy and transparent way of allowing citizens to raise issues that according to their opinion public authorities should consider.
E-Petitioning has been equally popular at the local government level and quite a few councils have already developed such systems\(^2\). In recognising the importance and increased potentials of ePetitioning at the local government level, according to the UK Local Democracy, Economic Development and Construction Act (2009): “A principal local authority must provide a facility for making petitions in electronic form to the authority”. This facility needs to be provided complimentary to offline petitioning channels and automate the traditional process.

As a result of this mandate, but not exclusively, a number of technology providers have already promoted their solutions offering different functionalities related to the petitioning process, such as voting options, discussion forums, drafting counselling and statistical visualisation. UK local government agencies are therefore expected to decide their strategy towards implementing ePetitioning systems as a service to their public, a fact which requires configuring their way of thinking towards addressing the various elements of the business model concept:

1. **Value Proposition**: ePetitioning is the service of providing a digital space in which users can create online petitions as well as sign petitions created by others. Additional requirements to this service may include discussion forums, support to draft petitions, mailing services to receive updates, as well as appropriate background information on various petition topics. Assistance may also be required to campaign online petitions through means such as social networks. E-Petitions are addressed to all citizens eligible to sign (local residents) and their added value as an eParticipation activity lies in allowing citizens to officially propose issues to be considered by their local authorities, as well as in finding other citizens sharing common interests for potential public action.

2. **Value Network**: as shown in figure 3 (below), the value network for ePetitioning at the local government level involves the four main types of actors. E-Petitioning providers usually outsource their technological solutions including technical support or they might offer open source systems and only charge for customisation and maintenance. Consultancy agencies might be involved in providing design and implementation expertise. The central government is responsible for the regulatory arrangements according to which ePetitioning is mandatory for local councils, as well as for providing implementation guidelines. Furthermore, citizen groups are involved in using the service and providing feedback for its design and better use.

3. **Value Architecture**: in addition to financial, the appropriate resources for managing ePetitioning systems concern the necessary personnel to manage and support the process. Furthermore, support is required from local council members who in some cases are needed to sponsor petitions before they can be officially discussed. It is important that effective support of the ePetitioning process assists users in creating and disseminating petitions. From a technological standpoint, governments need tailored systems that fit the needs of the public. The issue of integrating such systems with other governmental systems must be taken into consideration. In other words, there should be adequate attention given to issues related to compatibility and scalability as the system capacity might need to be expanded over time.

4. **Value Finance**: when estimating the cost of ePetition solutions, local councils need to include not only the cost of setting-up the system, but also the cost of collaboration with stakeholders, the cost of allocating resources, the cost of maintenance, and the cost of running and managing the system during its lifetime. Estimating the cost by considering only the set-up cost (which is normally between £ 5-10k and considered one-time cost) can be misleading as the major cost of such initiatives are mainly related to management and maintenance which are running costs.

\(^2\) Examples include the city councils of Kingston, Bristol, Birmingham and others.
However, it is very important to consider the relationships between these dimensions as one action in one dimension may trigger alteration on other dimensions to keep the initiative effective. For example, what is financially feasible, may not be appropriate as a value proposition, or what we need as an infrastructure may not be able to be obtained from the formed value network. Therefore, a holistic view is needed when designing and implementing eParticipation initiatives where trade-off decisions might be taken.

The illustrative case outlined the need for employing the BM concept when implementing eParticipation initiatives. This spells out the BM as a comprehensive approach incorporating different needed domains to be examined in this context in a manageable and effective way. With this structured approach, the design of such initiatives is more likely to be creative and innovative.

5 IMPLICATIONS AND CONCLUSIONS

In the agenda of transformational government, there is noticeably increasing emphasis on technology for engaging a wider citizen audience, enabling their participation and awareness in public decision making and inclusive service delivery. Bridging the gap between the theory and practice of eParticipation requires a holistic understanding of different technological solutions, as well as the context within which they should be embedded in order to achieve sustainable impact.

This paper has explored issues related to implementing eParticipation initiatives, emphasising that in order to achieve their potentials, they need to be effectively designed, overviewed, evaluated and communicated within and across agencies and intended stakeholders. For this purpose, the business model concept has been introduced as a mediating construct aiming to bridge the gap between technological potentials and the realisation of strategic goals and objectives. The different business model components were discussed in relation to the eParticipation settings. This is followed by an illustrative case in regards to ePetitioning for local government, which is a citizen engagement service necessary to be implemented by all UK local authorities according to regulative arrangements.

Generally speaking, the current eParticipation strategies and practices suffer from low rate of adoption and public acceptance. They have yet to demonstrate an indisputable impact on traditional policy making mechanisms and the main barriers appear to be more and more related to the development and integration of such initiatives. Therefore, this research is motivated by the essential need for a holistic and effective approach that can guide their implementation course of action. For this purpose, the business model concept was introduced and proposed as an appropriate method in this context. The business model concept is deemed useful not only in the design of such initiatives, but also in the
evaluation course of action which is highly needed in eParticipation (Saebo, et al., 2008), as illustrated in the following points:

- The business model highlights the need to match citizens’ socio-technical requirements with the provided services’ nature. Importantly, this includes the choice of focus areas to be developed (e.g. petitions, consultations, spatial planning, etc.), and thorough examination of the role of supporting technologies in enhancing such practices. Moreover, the ability to deliver civic engagement added value elements, including but not limited to geographical reach, social and emotional value need to be taken into consideration when developing eParticipation initiatives.

- The business model points towards the importance of examining the value network in such initiatives and making sure that all stakeholders are identified, their roles are clearly defined and their objectives are all aligned. Based on the significance of their roles, governments should decide which type of relationship is appropriate with each actor. For example, governments may find it more appropriate to establish outsourcing relationships with technology providers, whilst it may be more fitting to establish strategic partnership with other governmental agencies. However, governments need then to manage the flows and communications amongst the selected actors by employing appropriate channels or mediums. These channels could range from being fully automated through computerised systems or totally manual. Finally, suitable arrangements should be made to make sure that governments are enjoying full governance in terms of control and power over the established network.

- Building appropriate value architecture facilitates the provision of powerful services and practices. Hence, the business model indicates that provisioning services as intended requires fitting technological architecture as well as organisational infrastructure including appropriate managerial mindsets. This also includes information/knowledge, experience, human, financial, and regulative resources. A link is needed to be established between resources and services they contribute to. The business model thinking also emphasises the re-organizational arrangements and back-office integration issues.

- The business model emphasises the need to consider the cost of managing eParticipation initiatives during its lifetime and not only the cost of acquisition. Actually, we assume that employing the concept of “total-cost-of-ownership” is essential in this context. By utilising this concept, estimating the cost of eParticipation initiatives would be more rational in taking into account different fixed and variable costs incurred within the design and development of such initiatives and solutions.

- The business model indicates that the design of eParticipation initiative requires a holistic view that takes into consideration the relationships amongst different related aspects. This is very important as it allows decision makers to look at the whole solution from a wider perspective and consider trade-off decision points.

- The business model allows the division between the strategic and the operational level assisting in performing, monitoring and gaining consensus over decisions, as the strategy implementation is split into manageable parts.

The proposed approach represents a new paradigm, or way of thinking, aiming to make the implementation of eParticipation initiatives more manageable, effective, and creative. It is argued that employing business model thinking organises the design of such initiatives and makes them more powerful. Future research should explore the various components and elements of this paradigm through appropriate case studies and/or action research projects, aiming to better understand current practices and highlight how they overcome major drawbacks in current eParticipation implementations.
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