

eParticipation and Transport Management: a practical approach

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ABSTRACT

eParticipation is considered to be one of the key tools to ensure effective state-to-citizen communication. We present an eParticipation project in the context of a transportation initiative in an Irish city. The solution combines SM and traditional digital media (such as e-mail), together with non-digital channels. The project has been realized through cooperation between the Mayor of Galway, academia, enterprise stakeholders, Galway Chamber of Commerce and the West Region of Engineers Ireland. The project has been established in order to identify key issues and possible short-term solutions that may alleviate traffic congestion in the Galway City area.

Categories and Subject Descriptors

H.4 [Information Systems Applications]: Miscellaneous

General Terms

Theory

Keywords

public participation, public forum, eParticipation, social media, digital divide

1. INTRODUCTION

Citizen participation is an imperative in every modern Democracy. eParticipation has been defined as the use of ICT technologies to tackle participation challenges and barriers to support greater engagement [4]. More recently, a loss of citizen's confidence in the political system has been noted in many countries around the world [2]. There are multiple

barriers that prevent citizens from active and effective participation [1] [5]. The literature identifies a number of success factors for eParticipation initiatives[6][3]. We present a solution that attempts to overcome eParticipation barriers. We focus our approach on the success factors identified in the literature in order to achieve engaged and sustained participation. Studies show that the most effective eParticipation has been performed at the local government level, especially in municipalities [2]. Transportation is one of the key fields where citizens engage to directly influence local politics and local government decisions. Recently, Galway City has been named the most congested city in Ireland. Transport difficulties have been identified by many stakeholders in the city as having an adverse impact on the economic and social well being of the city. We present how we have addressed the difficulties with eParticipation while running a volunteer initiative to solve Galway City transport problems.

2. GALWAY TRANSPORT FORUM

The Galway Transport Forum initiative followed the best practices and used state of the art technology in order to provide an engaged and sustainable eParticipation platform for citizens.

2.1 The stakeholders set

To ensure relevant input from a broad range of stakeholders, we have assembled a very diverse group in order to drive this initiative. The group includes: the Mayor of Galway, Engineers Ireland - West Region, representatives of the enterprise sector, academia (especially civil engineering, social science and computer science), along with independent volunteers. All types of citizens concerned with transport in Galway are being targeted to participate in the forum. This includes individuals but also businesses and employers and other relevant organizations.

2.2 The solution architecture

The basic solution architecture is described in Fig. 1. The architecture reflects the principles of "Combining online with offline channels" along with "Promotion" and "Quality of participation". The eParticipation initiative should involve both online and offline actions [7] therefore the cardinal project assumption was to have a digital forum supported by traditional paper exchange so that none of the

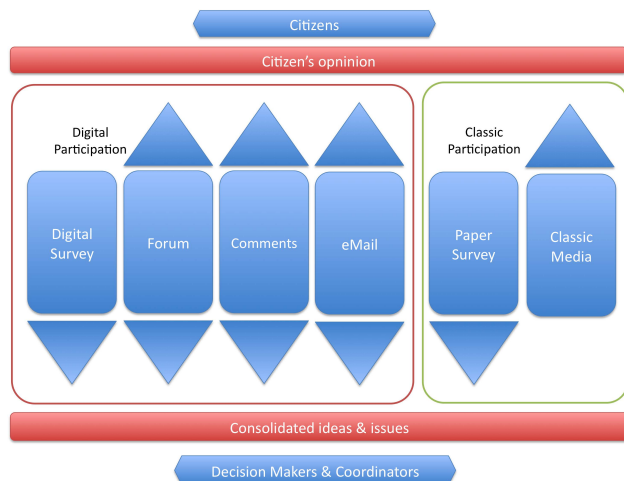


Figure 1: GalwayTF solution architecture

citizens would be discriminated, especially those not digitally included. The digital channels include online surveying and e-mail in addition to social media frameworks like a discussion forum and a commenting facility. To ensure high quality input, the surveys have been specifically prepared and developed by social scientists and academics from the civil engineering domain and contains a total of sixteen questions. While the survey is in principle a one way communication tool, all the other digital channels are bidirectional providing a wider communication bus between citizens and decision makers. Following the "Usability" principle, the wide social media experience has been expanded by a specially created Facebook¹ page and a Twitter² stream that is synchronized with the forum. All the posts published on the forum are automatically forwarded to both social media accounts. The non-digital communication channels include paper surveys and classic media. The citizens have been informed about the initiative and feedback collection via mainstream media through two local newspapers and a local radio station. In total, we performed six public announcements. Mainstream media had a key part in the project dissemination and in informing citizens about the objectives of the initiative. Two volunteers were assigned to collect surveys in some of the key public locations in the city. This street survey was reduced to five questions. Classic channels are mainly mono directional with the feedback coming from the target group.

3. RESULTS

The assessment of the results, captured while running the project from 21 Nov 2011 until 31 Jan 2012, did indicate that the expected range of audience has been reached and the message has been propagated well in Galway. The dissemination efforts which involved a combination of press, radio and targeted e-mails brought more than 2,500 people to the forum. After the closing date all the surveys have been processed together with all the ideas, suggestions, comments and e-mails collected. The total of 1,300 responses has been received including many high quality submissions. The ideas, issues and solutions have been extracted and clustered

¹<http://www.facebook.com/>

²<http://www.twitter.com/>

to be presented and published in a formal report. The manual results verification confirmed what has been indicated by the initial automatic topic extraction algorithm over the dataset. The concerns about public transport, especially buses and transport alternatives dominated the comments. The report has been presented on 21 March 2012 during official event in Galway City Hall with presence of all the stakeholders including local decision makers, business and press. Consistent with the longer term vision for Galway transport, we have identified almost 40 short term measures which, if implemented, will have an immediate and positive effect on the city traffic. All the stakeholders, especially responsible for transport, Galway Transport Unit have promised a detailed feedback on all the short term measures identified. The initial response during the meeting was very positive and key decision makers were satisfied that the voice of public reflected in the report confirms their future planning and presents a strong evidence supporting their decisions and empowering them to conduct new improvements.

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