THE USE OF ICT IN PUBLIC DECISION-MAKING PARTICIPATION

Cunha, Maria Alexandra, Pontifícia Universidade Católica do Paraná, Street Immaculate Conception, 1155 Curitiba, Brazil, alexandra.cunha@pucpr.br
Coelho, Taiane Ritta, Universidade Federal do Paraná, Av Lothario Meissner, 632 Curitiba, Brazil, taianercoelho@gmail.com
Pozzebon, Marlei. HEC Montreal, 3000, Chemin de la Côte-Ste-Catherine, Montreal, Canada, marlei.pozzebon@hec.ca

Abstract

This paper investigates social representations in processes of public decision-making participation where information and communication technologies (ICT) have played a role. The City Hall of Belo Horizonte, a Brazilian municipality, decided to use web-based technologies for the first time in 2006, creating a project called digital participative budget (DPB), whose purpose was to allow citizens to participate in prioritizing public works to be implemented in the next two years. The project was repeated in 2008 and 2011, but, intriguingly, citizen participation decreased. This study seeks to understand why popular participation has decreased over time despite the use of ICT to help connect citizens to the process. The theoretical approach is based on social representations theory (STR) and the methodology on critical discourse analysis (CDA) of 101 texts – 60 selected from the press and 41 signed by public organizations or governmental representatives. The results suggest that current political strategies, like those deployed in the Brazilian case, are not fully exploiting the potential for social interaction and collective construction offered by the Internet. The prevalence of processes of anchoring new practices in voting results mainly in its trivialization and reification, helping to outline reasons for the decrease in citizens’ participation.

Keywords: digital participative budget; information and communication technology; social representations theory; critical discourse analysis; electronic participation.
1 Introduction

The use and the social implications of information and communication technologies (ICT) have gained prominence in academic forums, configuring an emergent area of scientific production in the field of Information Systems (IS). The observation of this phenomenon in developing countries is particularly interesting, as it proposes new themes and draws attention towards innovation dimensions that have received little attention in mainstream IS research (Avgerou, 2008). A number of studies have emerged from this domain, from those exploring how practices mediated by technology could be put in place to support the improvement of social and governance services to those focusing on how deep or long-term the effects of ICT could be on social institutions in developing countries (Avgerou, 2008). There is growing interest among both academic researchers and governmental representatives in new forms of relationship between the State and its citizens, especially in the sphere of citizens’ participation in public decision-making processes.

The “participative budget” is an example of public participation at the municipal level, as it allows citizens to influence or decide on public budgets, usually the allocation of investments in their city. Although different methodologies and versions of participative budget exist, they usually rely on periodic open meetings and direct negotiations with the municipal government. The experience of Porto Alegre1 inspired governments in various parts of the world to integrate the participation of citizens in their process of budget planning and elaboration. In 1993, Belo Horizonte2 implemented its version of participative budget and, in 2006, created a digital version, the digital participative budget (DPB) in an attempt at using web-based technologies to draw in those citizens who are not participating in the participative budget in its traditional form, i.e., being physically present. The DPB was introduced as a new alternative, allowing citizens to vote on public works that would be developed in the following years, and the experience was repeated in 2008 and 2011.

Despite the belief that the use of electronic means has the potential to improve democratic processes (Dertouzos, 1997), surprisingly, public participation in the city of Belo Horizonte decreased over time: approximately 500,000 people took part in the first edition (2006), 124,000 in the second (2008), and 96,000 in the third (2011). What reasons might help to explain this reduction? With the purpose of better understanding such a process of using ICT in public participation decision-making, we designed a research project based on social representations theory (SRT) as our theoretical framework. Serge Moscovici (2001) argues that, by means of social representations, objects come to make sense to people. People build representations in order to make sense of social objects or concepts and, based on those representations, they perform their daily actions, interact and communicate. We seek to understand the social representations of the DPB created in Belo Horizonte. In terms of methodological approach, we adopted critical discourse analysis (CDA). Such a combination of SRT as theoretical lens and CDA as methodological design is original and represents one contribution of our research. In practice, our main contribution is directed to managers who come across challenges of designing and implementing more effective policies to deal with public participation using ICT.

This paper is structured as follows: First, we review concepts regarding electronic democracy and participation. Second, we introduce SRT, CDA and we describe the case of DPB in Belo Horizonte. Third, we present and discuss our results, invoking voices from the press and from the government, in order to understand the processes of inclusion and participation in public decision making. We conclude by presenting a reflection on implications of our theoretical-methodological choices, so as to better comprehend this particular case of ICT and public participation.

---

1 The City Hall of Porto Alegre, capital city of the state of Rio Grande do Sul, Brazil, created in 1989 an innovative and revolutionary system to formulate and follow-up the municipal budget – the “Participative Budget”. The city of Porto Alegre has over 1.4 million inhabitants.

2 Belo Horizonte is the capital city of the state of Minas Gerais, Brazil. The city has over 2.3 million inhabitants.
2 Internet, e-democracy and e-participation

For decades, researchers, politicians and activists have been articulating political implications of the use of ICT, which has been pointed out as having the potential to revolutionize various aspects of society, including business, education, government and democracy (Castels, 2000). In the field of democratic implications of ICT in general, and particularly of the Internet, the opinions vary broadly. On the one hand, we have the enthusiasts or optimists, who see the potential of the technology to build “a better world” (Negroponte, 1995; Dertouzos, 1997). On the other hand, we have the utopians (Kling, 1996) and the romantics (Winner, 1986), for whom the Internet has been used to provide information to those who are already politically engaged, “preaching to the converted”, and reinforcing the status quo (Bimber, 1998). Pinho (2011) shows that in Brazil as well there are those with optimistic perceptions regarding electronic democracy and those who raise pessimistic considerations.

Electronic participation, or simply e-participation, is a sub-field of electronic democracy (Macintosh, 2004). Susha and Grönlund (2012) outline two sources of discrepancy between these two concepts. First, there is a lack of internal logic in linking e-participation uniquely to democratic regimes of governance. Second, there is incoherence in the scope and methods used in both areas. Although e-participation research appears as a rather instrumental domain, largely oriented towards the utilization of ICT tools, its scope is much broader and encompasses citizens’ participation in virtually any public service and not necessarily in the political, or governance-related, field (Susha and Grönlund, 2012). E-participation refers to the use of new technologies, particularly the Internet, with the implication that the technology has the ability to change or transform citizen involvement in deliberation or decision-making processes (Sæbø et al., 2008). E-participation connects with opportunities for consultation and dialogue between government and citizens using a series of ICT tools, including e-voting – the use of ICT to support the democratic process of voting (Macintosh, 2004). However, e-participation is much more than just voting (Rose et al., 2007), as it includes the extension and transformation of participation in societal democratic and consultative processes mediated by ICT (Sæbø et al., 2008). This process involves the use of ICT by three spheres of governance – political, civil, and administrative (Grönlund and Horan, 2005). The focal point of e-participation is the citizen, i.e., the purpose of e-participation is to increase citizens’ abilities to participate in digital governance (including participation in the processes of public service provision at various stages in the production chain – planning, decision making, implementation, evaluation) (Grönlund, 2001; Sæbø et al., 2008).

There are still gaps to be filled regarding new strategies of citizen inclusion in public decisions. The Belo Horizonte experience combines two phenomena which have been studied separately: on the one hand, various modalities of public budgeting; on the other hand, the use of Internet to bring citizens closer to their governments. In this study, we seek to better understand the use of web-based technologies in public participation decision-making processes by investigating a particular participative budget modality called DPB with a view to explaining the reduction in popular participation over the years. The research question guiding this research is: How to explain the decrease in public participation in a public decision-making process mediated by web-based technologies?

3 The tenets of social representations theory (SRT)

Serge Moscovici introduced and popularized the concept of social representation, proposing an innovative perception regarding the integration between individual and social perceptive phenomena (Moscovici, 1961). According to Moscovici (2001), the term social representation refers to a group of perceptions, concepts and explanations originating in everyday life, throughout the course of interpersonal communications. It constitutes one of the forms of understanding the concrete world, acting by means of observations and analyses of these observations as well as of notions and languages adopted by individuals. In the view of this theory, it goes through a process of appropriation
which is never neutral. On the contrary: it’s configured in the construction of images, ideas and connotations already present in that population (Auderbrand and Iacobus, 2008). Social representations and practices are interrelated and they influence each other over time (Vaast and Walsham, 2005). SRT is useful in the search for a better comprehension of collective practices, where representations are shared, helping us to give meanings to the objects in this world, to act and to communicate with each other (Abric, 1994).

A social representation is elaborated according to two fundamental processes: anchoring and objectifying. The representational process starts with the anchoring of the new phenomenon or object in something known. Through the process of anchoring, society converts a social object into a tool to be made available, and this object is placed on a scale of preference in existing social relations. In turn, objectifying makes tangible what was previously intangible, making concrete what was abstract, and placing in the physical world what only existed in the field of ideas (Audebrand and Iacobus, 2008). Objectifying makes a conceptual scheme real, making it possible for an image to materialize (Moscovici, 2001). It has the function of allowing a group to share the “reality” in which its members live. Thus scientific, technical and abstract concepts are transformed into comprehensible, familiar and unthreatening concepts (Vaast, 2007).

Anchoring involves two phases: categorization and integration. Categorization is accomplished by means of the choice of one of the prototypes stored in memory which is compared to the object to be represented, it then being decided whether or not it can be inserted in a given class. Integration involves removing something from anonymity and including it in the span of identity in our culture, conferring a functional value of the representational content and thereby rendering the object available for use (Audebrand and Iacobus, 2008; Moscovici, 2001).

In objectifying, three phases take place: selection, schematization and naturalization. Selection involves choosing and removing from context elements of what it will represent, thus rinsing out an excess of information. In schematization, parts of the environment are organized and, given its cuts, an order is introduced that adapts itself to what was already there, attenuating the shock of all and any new conceptualization. Proceeding in this way, the previously mysterious object is duly disassembled and rebuilt, becoming part of something effectively objective and palpable that comes to seem natural. Naturalization is the crystallization of the complex, in which the symbol becomes real and comes to be incorporated by subjects.

Anchoring is dialectically linked to objectifying (Moscovici, 2001). Each phase brings new elements to social representation of the object and participates in its construction, until the representation reaches a relative stability. In fact, the process can never be considered definitively over (Audebrand and Iacobus, 2008). Figure 1 shows the wave in which anchoring leads to objectifying and vice-versa.

![Figure 1. The social representation cycle (adapted from Audebrand and Iacobus (2008))](image)

Anchoring processes can fail in two ways: by deficiency or by excess. Deficiency describes a situation wherein the new social practice presents little or no distinctive consonance with other social practices. In this case, trivialization takes place, i.e., the act of making an object trivial, common, ordinary,
denying it its originality. Excess occurs when the new social practice is introduced with little or nothing in common with other social practices, assuming an exotic character (exoticization). Likewise, objectifying can fail by either excess or deficiency. Excess is involved when the social practice is emptied of its symbolic and emblematic aspects, so that it acquires the appearance of something ordinary, a process called reification. It can be problematic by deficiency when it is introduced as a social practice disconnected from the tangible world and concrete reality, remaining at such a high level of abstraction that it is unreachable (abstractization) (Table 1) (Audebrand and Iacobus, 2008).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Anchoring</th>
<th>Deficiency</th>
<th>Excess</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Trivialization</td>
<td>Abstractization</td>
<td>Reification</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 1. The representational processes and the forms in which they may fail

The use of social representations as a theoretical lens to study the implementation of IS has a number of exemplars: Pawlowski et al., (2007), Vaast (2007), Gal and Berente (2008) and Kanager and Vaast (2010). Those studies show that social representation theory represents a rich alternative in understanding how people make sense of new objects in their context. In our research, SRT is a selected lens to understand the arrival of DPB in the life of the citizens of Belo Horizonte. We see the web-based platform and the public participation processes that come with it as a new object which people should make sense of and integrate into their everyday life. Because this new object has apparently being failed to achieve its purpose – improving public participation in municipal decision-making processes – we argue that social representation processes and phases might help us gain such understanding.

4 Research Approach

This research seeks to understand the influence of ICT in e-participation processes. In order to study this complex theme, we combine SRT as a theoretical framework with critical discourse analysis (CDA) as a methodological approach. CDA will be described in the next section. This theoretical-methodological combination is coherent with the ontological and epistemological nature that permeates the view and choices of the researchers: critical interpretivism (Pozzebon, 2004). In this study, we define being critical to mean going beyond simple comprehension of social interactions arising from people who adopt and use ICT. We have in mind wider considerations concerning power and social control (Dollin, 1998). We consider that, to adopt a critical-interpretative vision, we do not necessarily need to rely heavily on Habermas’ critical theory or on the approach of the Frankfurt School, or even on the work of Foucault (as suggested by some authors such as Brooke (2002)). We aim to be critically reflective in examining complex phenomena in the IS field. Both SRT and CDA represent theoretical and methodological currents inserted in a critical-interpretative ontology and reflect a constructivist epistemology.

4.1 Methodological procedures

Our methodological approach aims to explore discourse as constitutive of social phenomena. CDA has been described as a suitable approach to produce relevant insights into how discourse reproduces (or resists) social and political inequalities, abuse of power and domination (Ainsworth, Hardy and Harley, 2005). One of the seminal CDA authors is Fairclough (1995), who explored the imbrications among language, social practices and broader political and institutional structures. CDA “questions” texts, aiming to expose deep structures, systematic communicative distortions and power relations underlying discourses (Cukier et al., 2008). Among the studies using CDA in IS, Thompson (2004) is particularly didactical, elaborating the analytical method. He notes that Fairclough (1995, 1996) places social structures in a dialectical relation with social activities. The critical part of the method regards the use of language and the exertion of power, and the discourse analysis aspect highlights texts as one
of the main evidences of social structures, relations and processes. CDA relates texts from a micro-
level (text level) to macro power structures (social-cultural practice) such texts reproduce. In CDA,
discursive practice is the mediator between macro and micro levels. The interpretation phase can
involve a broad variety of concepts and analytical strategies. In our data analysis, the interpretation
phase included the identification of social representations.

4.2 Collecting and analyzing data

In our study, the CDA approach was carried out in three steps: (1) selecting and organizing data; (2)
reading texts and interpreting; and (2) explaining results.

Selecting and organizing data: We used multiple sources of empirical material, as suggested by
Ngwenyama and Lee (1997) and Cukier et al., (2008). In total, all 101 documents that could be found
were used – 60 from the press and 41 from public institutions or governmental sources.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Public institutions or governmental sources</th>
<th>Press</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2006</td>
<td>Documents produced by the mayor and found on his web site</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2008</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2011</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Documents published on the City Hall website</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Selected from regional and national newspapers (O Estado, O Estado de Minas, Globo Minas, Voz das Gerais, TV Alterosa and O Tempo) available on the Internet.</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>60</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2. Summary of data collection

All these documents were organized into two groups – those from the press and governmental ones –
and were treated separately. We stored these documents by category (press/government), date, title
and source in the ATLAS.ti® software.

Reading texts and interpreting: The texts were first read chronologically to make an initial description
and to identify social representations. This corresponds to the first step of CDA. Indeed, the classic
way of applying CDA, using Fairclough’s method, is in three steps: description, interpretation and
explanation. After the careful description of each segment of text, the second step is interpretation.
CDA suggests the use of sensitizing concepts in the interpretation phase as a strategy to give meaning
and to interpret the constitutive role of discursive practices. Such concepts might emerge from the
analysis or might be borrowed from a given theoretical approach. In our analysis, we mobilized the
social representation concepts of STR – its process and phases. We identified 441 quotations and we
connected those quotations by similarities. We generated 12 networks from the analysis. To the extent
that we read and reread the texts, we started to fill in the tables of the first and second steps –
description and interpretation – until we achieved a given stability in the concepts corresponding to the
interpretation step.

Explaining result: The third column is the explanation and it is the last step to be accomplished in a
CDA analysis. This implies connecting the interpretation to the political context, with an exploration
of deeper structures reflected by the texts. Table 3 contains an excerpt from the generated tables and
illustrates the reading, interpretation and explanation with some text fragments. It may seem that the
text excerpts were taken out of context, but during analysis this was not so. We present them detached
from their context to illustrate how we spotted anchoring and/or objectifying. We use the color gray to
highlight the explanation made at a different time, after reading/interpreting.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Text</th>
<th>Quotation (Examples)</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Interpretation</th>
<th>Explanation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2006</td>
<td>GOV-2006-005</td>
<td>“For the first time, a city administration submitted to vote on the Internet for what works would be performed all around the city.”</td>
<td>The government explains the concept of DPB, naming it as a form of voting or possibility of choice.</td>
<td>Process: Anchoring Phase: Categorization - Voting (5)* - Choice (6)* - Pioneering (1)* - Tool (1)*</td>
<td>The government does not offer information on the deliberative possibilities, introducing DPB as a tool, a process of choice, a form of voting. Elements such as e-Participation and citizenship do not appear in the anchoring. The representation of the technology as a tool illustrates an instrumental view, not a platform capable of promoting better interaction between government and citizens. The governmental representations exclude the political role of the citizen, trivializing DPB. The concept is known, but reduced.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2008</td>
<td>GOV-2008-017</td>
<td>“Mayor Fernando Pimental released, this Wednesday, the 12th Digital Participative Budgeting 2008.”</td>
<td>The government explains the concept of DPB, naming it as a form of voting, or as a possibility of choice, or, yet, as a tool for choosing.</td>
<td>Process: Anchoring Phase: Categorization - Voting (31)* - Choice (13)* - Tool (1)*</td>
<td>As in government, press anchoring presents trivialization of DPB, emptying it of some new characteristics, the possibility for deliberation, reducing it to what was already known: electronic voting.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2011</td>
<td>IMP-2011-013</td>
<td>“The voting is open for one more Belo Horizonte participative budget.”</td>
<td>The press explains the concept of DPB, naming it a form of voting or possibility of choice. It characterizes it as a mechanism for selection or election.</td>
<td>Process: Anchoring Phase: Categorization - Voting (23) - Choice (5)* - Election (1)*</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: * Number of quotations from the analysis

Table 3. Example of how the analysis table is filled out (Anchoring).

5 Presenting and discussing results

5.1 Study object: Belo Horizonte Digital Participative Budget

A variety of participative processes are being implemented in Brazilian public administration, such as public hearings and consultations, cooperation of civil society representative entities, participation of users in public service providing, participative budget, public meetings, surveys, use of focus groups and citizen councils. In general terms, a participative budget seeks public participation in the process of elaboration of a city budget and has been described as deliberative collective process involving government and citizens (Pinho, 2011).

In 1993, the local government of Belo Horizonte, capital city of the state of Minas Gerais, Brazil, implemented its own version of PB. The city has over 2.3 million inhabitants and over 1.7 million voters, and is divided in nine regional administrations and district forums. In a traditional participative budget process, each district forum would pre-select a certain number of public works (work sites) to be included in the budget. Each forum also elects its sub-regional deputies. Visits are arranged for the regional deputies to get to know, as a group, the pre-selected worksites. Regional deputies choose a maximum of 14 works per region and can supervise the performance of these public works. In 2006, the city government created a parallel channel to the existing traditional participative budget. This parallel channel was a digital channel for the participation of its citizens, based on an Internet platform: the DPB. Voters registered in the city, regardless of where they lived, could select online one of four public work project (each with a budget of around $1.1 million US) in each one of the nine regions of the city. In addition to the budget of approximately $40 million US allocated to the traditional participatory budget, the additional DPB included an additional $10 million US. The pre-selection of public works was done by regional deputies, along with the city administration. A communication campaign was developed by City Hall (TV, radio, leaflets, website), installing 178
Internet voting places, with over 500 computers and personnel trained to provide support to voters, for 40 days. To obtain mobility, some of the voting points were buses equipped with Internet access. City Hall had many volunteer partners, such as commercial associations, churches and community groups. They installed additional Internet public places to facilitate access for those who wanted to participate. A website (http://opdigital.pbh.gov.br) containing information about the DPB, citizen forums, news, pictures of the selected locations, FAQs and a list of the public places for Internet access. Around 500,000 votes were tabulated in 2006.

In 2008, the DPB was partially modified. The resources for investment were increased to 147% and 10 viable works were selected to be chosen among for one that benefited the whole population. In addition to Internet availability, citizens were given the opportunity to make their choice by means of a toll-free phone call. However, public participation was less widespread than in 2006, with approximately 124,000 citizens participating in DPB. In 2011, Belo Horizonte City Hall released the third edition of DPB. New safety rules were adopted. In order to vote, the citizen needed to install the City Hall applet to run the voting program and register an e-mail to receive confirmation of participation. 36 public work projects were pre-selected, four of them regional (according to public demand and budget availability), of which nine (one per each region) were to be chosen. The participation in 2011 was even smaller, with only 90,000 votes tabulated, 80% less than the first edition.

It is important to mention that the Brazilian population is familiar with electronic voting processes. Indeed, from 2000 all election processes in Brazil have been automated and placed online. The population votes in electronic terminals for Executive positions (e.g., President of the Republic, Governor of the State, Mayor of the city) and for Legislative positions (e.g., deputies, senators). Voting is mandatory for citizens aged 18 - 70 and optional for citizens aged 16, 17 or over 70.

### 5.2 Data Analysis

Despite all the communication effort put forth by the Belo Horizonte municipal government to familiarize the population with the DPB, this goal was not achieved. Our analysis of documents published in 2006, 2008 and 2011 show that the full scope of DPB functioning – what it is, when to participate, how to participate – was exhaustively presented, as it had been the first time. We find that precisely identical texts were offered in different years. Our analysis suggests that the following anchoring-objectifying processes took place in Belo Horizonte to give meaning to DPB.

**Anchoring**: The two phases of anchoring are categorization and integration. Anchoring consists in understanding an object as a function of another; the unknown is anchored in the known. It acquires its characteristics and takes its problems and qualities in an analogous manner. We could clearly identify the process of categorization taking place, an attempt to render the new familiar in terms of known objects. We found no significant differences in the anchoring process promoted by government and press. Indeed, the results were quite similar. The DPB was anchored, primarily during the categorization phase, to certain concepts with which citizens were already familiar: means of voting, process of choice, process of election and technological tool. The three first categories lead the anchoring process to make sense of DPB as voting and the last category leads to making sense of DPB as a technological tool. This categorization will influence the process that follows the objectifying.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Anchoring (from government)</th>
<th>Anchoring (from press)</th>
<th>Categorization</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2006</td>
<td>Means of voting; process of choice</td>
<td>Means of voting; process of choice; technological tool</td>
<td>DPB as Voting</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>DPB as Tool</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2008</td>
<td>Means of voting; process of choice; technological tool</td>
<td>Means of voting; process of choice; process of election</td>
<td>DPB as Voting</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>DPB as Tool</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2011</td>
<td>Means of voting; process of choice; technological tool</td>
<td>Means of voting; process of choice; process of election</td>
<td>DPB as Voting</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>DPB as Tool</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Table 4. Results from the process of anchoring*
Objectification: Objectification produces a vocabulary and image reservoir (concept as object) that can serve as reference for members of a group to select characteristics of this object that distinguish it from others. The three objectification phases in SRT are selection, schematization and naturalization. From the texts we have analyzed, we could identify that, from the two main categories produced in the previous phase – voting and tool – we recognize that the second – the tool – becomes the more prevalent. In other words, the DBP loses its processual character to be crystallized above all as a tool. The terms weighted its use as related to the use of Internet and computers, the use of electronic, digital, technology for democracy, and technology that enables popular participation. The focus is on the technology, the tool. However, in governmental texts, we found elements regarding democracy, participative governance and popular decision, identically repeated (though in lesser number) over the years.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Objectifying (from government)</th>
<th>Objectifying (from press)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2006</td>
<td>DPB is primarily objectified as technology (Internet and computers, electronic or digital technology); Marginally, democracy as the secondary focus (democracy, participative governance, popular decision).</td>
<td>DPB is objectified as technology (Internet and computers, electronic or digital technology).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2008</td>
<td>DPB is primarily objectified as technology (Internet and computers, electronic or digital technology); Marginally, democracy as the secondary focus (democracy, participative governance, popular decision).</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2011</td>
<td>DPB is primarily objectified as technology (Internet and computers, electronic or digital technology); Marginally, democracy as the secondary focus (democracy, participative governance, popular decision).</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 5. Results from the process of objectifying

In addition to the DBP social representations we sought in government and press texts, we found elements in the data analysis, worth being highlighted. In the government discourse, in the three years of edition, there are countless fragments referring to prizes (both national and international) awarded to DBP as an innovative initiative in participative democracy. However, there is little mention of this element in the press discourse. On the other hand, in the press contains elements that were not discussed in the government texts. In 2008 and 2011, there are discussions in the press regarding frauds and the lack of followup related to completion of the approved work. For example:

IMP_2011_002: “In 2008, for the first time, he voted for a work, the repair of São Vicente Square, in Alípio de Melo Neighborhood, Northwestern Region of Belo Horizonte, but to this day, it was never put to practice. ‘How can they put a work to be voted if it is not performed afterwards?’ he complains. [...] ‘I am very disappointed and no longer interested in voting’, he stated.”

The government emphatically trumpeted the beginning of DBP works. In 2011, attacks on fraud emerged in both press and government discourse.

5.3 Discussion of results

In the first reading of the 2006 texts, we verified the absence of dissenting voices and of opposition and/or resistance to the mayor. This might represent silence on this specific article, or reflect political consensus that prevailed in Minas Gerais State at the time. The opposition of two larger political parties was very mild in the State - in fact, almost inexistent. Still, in a preliminary reading, before placing the texts under the theoretical lens, we noticed the governmental discourse being literally reproduced in the press. One should reflect on the importance of the public sphere in a democratic society and on the role of the media and other actors in formatting public discourse. In this case, the voice of the government was the same as that of the press, which can enable the more powerful actor to markedly imprint its representation on community awareness. For the most part, communication is repetitive, concentrating on informing the reader about the operational aspects of DBP, with important dates, places of voting and documents necessary for participation. There are few mentions of the deliberative potential of PB. One of them, in 2011, is an exact copy of a 2008 text.

For Moscovici (2001), it is by virtue of the representations of social objects that individuals and collectivities perform their actions. A social representation is a product of iteration and interaction of two fundamental processes: anchoring and objectifying. In anchoring, both press and government trivialize DBP. There are few instances of the new object being associated with something related to
improving democracy. The anchoring process associates the new object with well-known and obvious ones: voting or choice. For instance, the possibilities of broadening participation in public discussion, better governance with better decisions, co-responsibility of the citizen in making public decisions are issues that were hardly discussed. With this trivialization, too much emphasis is placed on known practices. In order to make the concept easier for the public to adopt, the discourse sacrifices the opportunity to point out questions of DPB’s value and impact. Similarly, the distinctiveness of the use of technology in establishing the participative budget is lost by comparing it to already established processes of voting. The texts mould frames of discourse which, in turn, produce a system of power relations and structure a context in which the action takes place (Hardy and Phillips, 2004). When writing about DPB as voting, election or choice, both press and government exclude the active political role of the citizen in deliberation and in the debate made possible by the use of ICT. In terms similar to the process of voting, concerns over provision of good and broad information are minimized, as are the potentials for enhanced communication among citizens in the context of public debate. The presentation of DPB as a technological tool trivializes possibilities of digital participation. DPB is described as a tool and not effectively highlighted as a transforming platform for the promotion of interaction between government and citizen. Presented in terms of voting or election, DPB reproduces the status quo.

In the objectification, there is reification, more frequently identified in the press texts. Social practice is emptied of its emblematic aspect of participation in making public decision and rendered in its aspect as a digital tool for voting. The name the government imprints on the new object denotes evidence of the digital characteristic that differentiates it, inscribing it as DPB. This specific form of e-democracy has implications concerning the meaning that is given to participation, and how the power is articulated. Following the classification proposed by Ainsworth, Hardy and Harley (2005), Belo Horizonte DPB, can be typified as consultative e-democracy, i.e., focused on communication between State and citizens. In fact, the possibility of interaction existed in the forums of debate, but this aspect was barely touched on in the texts, and given little prominence as one of the characteristics of DPB. The emphasis on prizes that have been received, part of the overriding focus on the technology itself, removes from DPB characteristics of participation, of co-responsibility, and of the possibility for deliberation, both between government and citizens and among all participants in the democratic process: public managers, politicians and citizens. DPB is far from being a deliberative process, an active making of decisions, in which concerned citizens, organizations, agencies and groups interact to decide. The government proposal is to include in the City budget debate groups that did not take part in it. Governmental information is shared with citizens through the website and e-mails, questions are answered, and the choice is received. However, the concern is more with distributing information than with promoting interaction among social actors using the technological platform. In this case, the electronic means foster no collective construction – the government consults society. This actor, being more powerful, may even increase its power, legitimating the results of the process of city budget by consulting the population. Note that budget involved in the DPB represents only 20% of the overall participative budget, and is only a fraction of the city total budget.

It is important to mention that our results reflect the production of social representation from the perspective of two social actors: the government and the press. We could not include the voices of citizens in this analysis. This would imply a different array of social representations. It is important, however, to outline that by analyzing the social representation from the perspective of these two social actors, we were able to identify plausible reasons to explain why public participation has decreased over time. Our future research will enrich this account including the perspective of citizens.

6 Conclusion

In this paper, we sought to understand public decision-making participation mediated by ICT through social representations. We investigated the case of Belo Horizonte DPB and the possible reasons that participation decreased over time, attempting to answer the following question: how to explain the decrease in public participation in a public decision-making process mediated by web-based
technologies? We found that both government and regional press anchored the introduction of a new digital process mainly on voting, trivializing it first, and then reifying it as an electronic device and a winner of prizes. First, because this anchoring process equated e-democracy with e-voting, those who wished to use ICT to improve democratic processes lost interest. The framing of DPB as just an additional platform for voting burdened the new object with a symbolic weight related to the mostly negative democratic experience in the country: Brazilian people distrust their political institutions and see the electoral processes as an often useless exercise. In addition, DPB as voting defined a discourse in which the citizen had no active role. Second, the reification process conveying DPB as a technology, a mere tool, helps to explain the drop in the number of individuals, particularly when rumours about frauds and delays started to appear in the press. Seen as merely a tool, DPB loses its transformative potential as a platform to empower the citizen in his/her relation with the government. Emancipating forms of ICT use require involvement of citizens participating in an active process, and acknowledgement of them as actors in the political debate.

Our literature review, although pointing out opposing views on the use of the Internet in democratic practice, leads us to believe that the interaction potential of the Internet can be a force for broadening democratic practice. Some studies comment on the failure to take advantage of this capacity of interaction as a political strategy (Ainsworth, Hardy and Harley, 2005; Bimber, 1998). Our study goes beyond this argument. The results show that the political strategy may be one of not exploring the potential of collective construction and interaction of the Internet, but of anchoring the new practice on voting, and thereby trivializing it.

Finally, we believe our work shows that research in the use and social implications of technology can be enriched by employment of an already established body of multi-disciplinary theory in other areas, such as SRT. The work begun in this paper can be amplified. Social representations are formed in communicative interactions in a given social group. It will be interesting to get to know the social representations of different groups and to compare them with those emerging from our study.

References


