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Countering tokenism in e-participation: Potentials of participatory design in democratic policymaking

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Abstract: The implementation of e-participation platforms in policymaking has removed spatial and temporal barriers to citizen engagement; however, digitalisation also introduces new challenges which undermine democratic values and risk participation outcomes becoming symbolic and superficial. In this paper, we conducted a narrative literature review and examined barriers in e-participation through the framework of narrow and broad sense tokenism. Through a theoretical discussion, we position participatory design (PD) as a steward in addressing tokenistic participation, focusing on PD's notion of creating carefully designed participation 'spaces' and 'approaches' that foster more democratic, deliberative, and inclusive forms of digital participation, thereby countering tokenistic tendencies.

Keywords: E-participation; Participatory design; Policymaking; Tokenism

1. Introduction

Over the past few years, traditional face-to-face forms of citizen participation—for example, citizens' assemblies, analog surveys, and interviews—are no longer the default strategies in policymaking. E-participation has received increasing attention and has been experimented with and implemented worldwide (Shin et al., 2024). One emerging phenomenon is that politicians are increasingly utilising social media such as Facebook and X (formerly Twitter) to construct a fast, accessible pathway for societal participation. Yet the democratic values of such engagement are often questioned due to algorithmic bias, lack of transparency, and data security concerns. As a result, attention is shifting to platforms designed exclusively for societal participation—such as Decidim, YourPriorities, and GoVocal—to foster more constructive civic conversation and place greater emphasis on safeguarding democratic participation (Adnan et al., 2022b; Randma-Liiv & Lember, 2022). However, it is important to note that the adoption of e-participation through dedicated platforms has not always been synonymous with improved participation quality.

E-participation is often described in terms of increases in the number of people participating in these efforts, whereas a focus on the quality of the democratic dialogue generated by

these initiatives remains understudied. Many initiatives struggle to move beyond symbolic gestures of inclusion, often reproducing tokenistic forms of participation (see García-Espín, 2024, 2025; Mariani et al., 2025). Substantial literature has highlighted that e-participation can exacerbate the existing digital divide and lead to superficial outcomes, potentially resulting in misleading policy decisions. Further challenges lie in the lack of a robust evaluative framework for assessing the effectiveness and democratic outcomes of e-participation. Building upon ongoing debates about the design's role in policymaking (see Clarke & Craft, 2019; Kimbell et al., 2023), this absence further blurs the positioning of design within this context and hinders a clearer understanding of the value that design approaches bring to policymaking processes.

This paper begins with a narrative literature review to identify challenges in e-participation. Building on this, we apply Grant's (2017) framework to distinguish broad and narrow definitions of tokenism and develop a framework to uncover the underlying factors and tensions that reinforce both interpretations. Using this foundation, we explore how participatory design can address these tensions through a theoretical discussion. Finally, we examine the theoretical implications and practical challenges of implementing participatory design in e-participation initiatives.

This paper makes two main contributions. First, it introduces an analytical lens to examine contemporary challenges in e-participation. Second, by unpacking the tensions embedded in both levels of tokenism, it positions participatory design as a steward within democratic policymaking processes. In doing so, the paper deepens the understanding of design's potential roles in countering tokenistic participation and advancing meaningful democratic public participation.

2. Background

Since the early 2000s, improvements in Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) have revolutionized the digital landscape, enabling governments to engage citizens beyond one-way communication (Adnan et al., 2022a; Benlahcene et al., 2024; Simonofski et al., 2017). This ICT-enabled approach to public participation is referred to as e-participation (Blanc, 2020): an advantageous way to broaden spaces for public discussion by transcending geographical and temporal boundaries. E-participation enables people to interact with Governments in various ways, at any time, from anywhere, and with varying degrees of involvement throughout the policymaking cycle (Royo et al., 2012). There is also a growing recognition that e-participation helps governments uncover pluralistic perspectives, leading to more robust policy outcomes (Benlahcene et al., 2024; Clarke & Craft, 2019; Monteiro et al., 2022; Sæbø et al., 2008). This focus echoes the New Design Orientation approach in the policymaking sphere, incorporating design thinking, emphasising the inclusion of diverse citizen voices, and integrating behavioral insights into policy processes (Clarke & Craft, 2019; Mortati, 2019).

However, some tensions remain underexplored. One main conceptual tension is the absence of a clear framework defining "good" e-participation: despite the emergence of many experiments, this topic is still suffering from a lack of evidence and frameworks for evaluating their effectiveness (Mariani et al., 2025; Sæbø et al., 2008). This complicates

research's ability to determine whether these initiatives are tokenistic—meaning the governmental acts are performative or biased citizen representation is neglected. The absence of robust theoretical framing is attributable to the significant complexity of the political and social factors involved in theorising a notion of "good" e-participation and a highly dynamic and uncertain policy-making process often developing non-linearly and in high dependence on changing political priorities (Howlett et al., 2017; Migone & Howlett, 2024; Paul Cairney, 2013).

Recognising this complexity, this research focuses on the theoretical discussion in two key aspects. First, we employed a falsificationist-inspired lens, shifting the focus away from what defines "good" e-participation to examine what is considered "tokenistic" e-participation, thereby distinguishing it from meaningful participation. Although e-participation has the potential to further democratise deliberation processes (Adnan et al., 2022b; Ansell, 2023; Macintosh, 2004; Randma-Liiv & Lember, 2022), there is still an urgent need to examine under what conditions it limits the societal power that leads to tokenistic outcomes and explore ways to mitigate them. Given the increasing adoption of e-participation and the numerous critiques associated with it (Shin et al., 2024), a critical perspective is highly needed and timely.

Secondly, despite a wide range of discussions, the role of design in the policymaking arena remains a topic of debate between design and policy studies. Political scholars often critique design for its "naïve blindness to the politics of the policy process" (Clarke & Craft, 2019, p. 14), arguing that it overlooks the complex power dynamics inherent in governance. At the same time, design scholars have made substantial efforts to conceptualize and theorize design's positioning within policymaking contexts (see Capano & Pavan, 2019; Kimbell et al., 2023; Mortati et al., 2022). Bridging these perspectives may require a more situated and critical understanding of design's role in policy processes—building upon theoretical debates to examine specific design approaches in this context.

3. Tokenism in e-participation for policymaking

In this section, we examine the barriers and challenges to e-participation through the lens of tokenism proposed by Grant (2017) - in particular, we examine two aspects: the narrow sense of tokenism (hereafter, NT), which refers to whether citizens hold actual influence on policy outcomes, and the broad sense of tokenism (hereafter, BT), which refers to whether participation processes are truly inclusive. We also explore the inherent tensions in both interpretations and further detail why they are challenging to address. Adopting this lens is relevant to the analysis proposed in this paper because it provides a conceptually robust and transparent summary of the social challenges in e-participation, thereby facilitating our understanding of the potential of participatory design in subsequent discussions.

3.1 NT: What level of influence do people have?

NT refers to the bare minimum of actions taken by politicians to engage with society, meaning the actions taken are performative and do not intend to effect change (Grant, 2017). In e-participation, this occurs when governments implement digital participation

mechanisms solely to comply with regulations or project requirements, without recognising the influence of people on policy outcomes.

3.1.1 Level of people's influence

Arnstein's (1969) participation ladder (see Table 1) remains the most widely used seminal framework for describing the degree of influence of people in public participation processes. This work has inspired subsequent frameworks that have extended the analysis from whether citizens have actual power to how governments and citizens interact. These frameworks provide a critical understanding of the different forms that tokenism can take in public participation, thereby highlighting the barriers and limits identified in the literature (see Figure 1).

Table 1 Arnstein's participation ladder (1969), summarized by the authors.

Typology	Participation level	Definition
Citizen power	Citizen control	Communities seek sufficient authority to govern programs, shape policies, and negotiate external influence.
	Delegated power	Citizens hold decision-making power and are accountable for specific projects.
	Partnership	Power in this level is redistributed between governments and citizens through negotiation and compromise.
Tokenism	Placation	Citizens are granted the opportunity to provide input; however, decision-making authority remains with those in positions of power.
	Consultation	This level invites citizens' opinions. However, there is no guarantee that citizen feedback will be taken into consideration.
	Informing	One-way communication that solely flows from the government to citizens.
Non-participation	Therapy	The participation activities are focused on "fixing" rather than addressing the real social problems.
	Manipulation	Powerholders use citizen participation as a tool to educate citizens.

In Figure 1, Kumar & Vragov's (2009) framing presents a unique distinction compared with others. They identified three digital participation mechanisms describing government-people interaction: (1) voting mechanisms supporting aggregated bottom-up decision-making; (2) deliberation mechanisms facilitating two-way communication, such as surveys and discussion boards; and (3) communication mechanisms that enable top-down information sharing. Compared with other models of public participation (see Figure 1), deliberation mechanisms can encompass the Consult, Involve, and Collaborate levels.

However, the idea that "consult" is regarded as one form of deliberation remains debated. Political theorists argue that deliberation requires people to have access to relevant information, time for reflection, and opportunities for reciprocal learning (Dryzek et al., 2019; Farina et al., 2014; Gudowsky & Bechtold, 2013), elements that are not necessarily present in consultation processes.

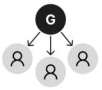
Author's interpretation					
Author's synthesis	One-way top-bottom communication	Limited top-down two-way communication	Interactive and collective two-way communication	Collaborative dynamic conversation	Bottom-up decision making
Mariani et al. 2024	Inform	Consult	Involve	Collaborate	Empower
IAP2 2024	Inform	Consult	Involve	Collaborate	Empower
Blanc 2020	Information	Consultation		Collaboration	Empowerment
Kumar & Vragov 2009	Communication	Deliberation			Voting
OECD 2021	Information	Consultation	Active participation		
Arnstein 1969	Tokenism		Citizen power		

Figure 1 The different participation levels proposed by various scholars, summarised by the authors.

3.1.2 Tension: Inevitable political influence

Although these frameworks seem to draw a clear distinction between tokenistic participation, in practice, the boundary is often blurred (Arnstein, 1969). For example, political realities—such as electoral cycles, institutional path dependencies, and resource constraints (Howlett et al., 2017; Paul Cairney, 2013) —can distort participation outcomes in unpredictable ways. Moreover, this political influence, as noted by Blanc (2020), is an inherent feature of governance that inevitably shapes policy outcomes positively or negatively.

To understand the divergence between public inputs and policy outcomes, Howlett and Mukherjee's (2014) policy formulation spectrum and Mortati's (2019) concept of policy design spaces together provide complementary and coherent perspectives. Inferring from their frameworks, the degree of divergence may vary according to (1) the governments' knowledge base: A lack of knowledge means policies are unlikely to be based on reasoning or logic. (Howlett & Mukherjee, 2014), (2) level of institutional recognition: whether the sector holds the authority for formulating legitimate policy outcomes (Mortati, 2019), and (3) degree of stakeholder involvement: whether people are being involved in a meaningful way (Mortati, 2019). Moreover, Migone & Howlett (2024) theorized the policymaking process using the concept of Plausibility Cones, illustrating that policy is only made possible when the windows of problem, solution, politics, and process align.

Given these inevitable political complexities, measuring e-participation solely by the level of citizens' influence on policy outcomes is overly simplistic. Instead of focusing solely on the outcome, research should also examine how participation processes are designed and facilitated (Sgueo, 2023). Are people given sufficient information to make informed contributions? Are they provided time and space to reflect? Is the process designed to facilitate mutual understanding, enabling stakeholders to reach consensus on policy outcomes?

Without careful attention to these aspects of process design, e-participation risks becoming a hollow exercise that limits opportunities for citizens to share deeply, ask questions, and receive meaningful responses (Farina et al., 2014; Itten & Mouter, 2022), therefore

reinforcing NT. These questions shift the focus from measuring influence to designing conditions that enable meaningful participation.

3.2 BT: Does everyone feel welcome?

BT refers to the procedural inclusion of a small number of members from marginalized and disadvantaged groups to create an appearance of equal opportunities for all (Grant, 2017). Kanter (1993) first defined "token" as a representative of a community, functioning as a symbol rather than representing just themselves. Tokenism in this context is a double-edged sword: it simplifies diverse voices within disempowered groups and pressures individuals to represent an entire community (Kanter, 1993; Linders, 2012).

A substantial body of research examines the barriers to e-participation (Farina et al., 2014; Macintosh, 2004; Mariani et al., 2023, 2025; Shin et al., 2024; Teran & Drobnjak, 2013), which arise from the insufficient focus on democracy's core qualities—diversity, equity, and inclusion. To assess these, scholars often use a dual approach based on presence and voice (García-Espín, 2024, 2025; Smith, 2009). We adopt the same dual perspective in this section to gain a deeper understanding of BT.

3.2.1 Presence: Who enters the space?

Presence refers to participants' attendance, which is usually examined empirically using demographic data (Fedotova et al., 2012; García-Espín, 2025; Shin et al., 2024). This metric is valuable in assessing representativeness and determining whether participants' demographics reflect society as a whole. Beyond this, the literature also discusses the absence of participants, which is linked to digital literacy (i.e., the ability to navigate online spaces and understand the discussed topic), access to digital infrastructure (i.e., internet availability and access to necessary devices), and broader social factors such as trust in government (García-Espín, 2024). A central challenge here is, therefore, ensuring not only the effectiveness of e-participation processes, but also that all individuals—regardless of their background, digital skills, or resources—have equal access to the online spaces where participation occurs. (Itten & Mouter, 2022).

In particular concerning people's capacities in understanding the participation matters and experiences in policy making processes, Farina et al. (2014) proposed a nuanced lens for understanding people's diversity beyond demographic data through four stakeholder typologies: (1) Sophisticated stakeholders—experts in both policymaking and the discussed topic, directly affected by the outcomes; (2) Absent (or underrepresented) stakeholders—individuals directly affected by the outcomes and knowledgeable about the topic, yet inexperienced in policymaking processes; (3) Unaffiliated experts—those not directly affected but possessing relevant expertise; and (4) Interested members of the public—individuals without direct impact and specific expertise.

This typology underscores the need to account for individual differences beyond demographic data. The absence of people directly impacted by the policy outcome may require more attention and effort to address and promote inclusion.

3.2.2 Voice: Who can be heard?

Evaluating the effectiveness of e-participation solely by the number of participants and responses risks rendering participation superficial (Rowe & Frewer, 2000); the quality of interactions between participants is equally crucial. This is where the notion of 'voice' becomes relevant. Voice refers to whether participants feel welcome, valued in their opinions, and equipped with proper tools to express their needs and concerns in e-participation processes. However, creating such environments and tools requires dedicated qualitative studies (e.g., ethnographic) that focus on understanding the nuanced differences in various participants' experiences in e-participation (García-Espín, 2024).

That said, a substantial number of participants' presence in the digital space does not ensure the quality of responses. This is attributable to disparities in individuals' knowledge and skills; some feel motivated and share many thoughts, while others feel intimidated and exhibit lurking behavior, and still others choose to withdraw from the process due to various reasons. Suppose the final participants do not offer a balanced representation of society, leaving out the disempowered. The results may be skewed, potentially amplifying the voices of dominant groups and leading to elite capture and overrepresentation (García-Espín, 2025).

Literature also suggests that digital mechanisms (e.g., interfaces, functionalities) can significantly influence the success of e-participation (Rowe & Frewer, 2000), while current mechanisms are argued to lack accessibility and enjoyment, thereby presenting barriers to individuals' motivation to fully express themselves (Blanc, 2020; Itten & Mouter, 2022; Macintosh, 2004). If e-participation simply replicates the current deliberation system in digital form, it will likely mirror, or even amplify, existing social inequalities (García-Espín, 2025). This also suggests that, to achieve genuine diversity, inclusivity, and equity, the approach to e-participation should be carefully designed and planned (Ansell, 2023; Clark, 2018; García-Espín, 2025; Martinez Palacios, 2016).

3.2.3 Tension: Balancing quantity and quality

The core strength of e-participation is its ability to involve a wide range of stakeholders; however, the tension in BT lies in balancing the quantity of participants' presence with the quality of their voices (how dialogue is facilitated and empowered). When the qualitative dimension of giving participants a voice is not realised—whether due to digital divides, education, or other reasons—BT risks being reinforced.

Here, crucial questions are: how to define "sufficient and representative quantity" for presence? How can participation processes accommodate diverse capacities of people? Without careful consideration of who should be included and merely pursuing presence in quantity, the participation outcome may become unfocused and lack quality. With an overwhelming volume of feedback from people, it can obscure quality insights and challenge policymakers to identify valuable input and translate it into actionable outcomes (García-Espín, 2025). Such compacted conditions may also limit people's opportunities to fully express their concerns, receive feedback, and learn from one another (Itten & Mouter, 2022).

The above discussion highlights the importance of social and cognitive diversity among participants, demonstrating that a one-size-fits-all approach to e-participation is inadequate.

There is a pressing need for the implementation of a more conscious participatory approach that accommodates the diverse levels of expertise, motivation, and policy relevance inherent in any participation process.

4. NT and BT: A combined view

Table 2 highlights two primary shifts in focus for making e-participation more effective, countering both NT and BT as identified in the literature. In countering NT, the main shift suggests moving from measuring citizens' direct influence on policy outcomes to ensuring participants have space to learn and reflect (Muller & Druin, 2002). In addressing BT, the challenge lies in moving beyond inclusion based on demographic data to understanding participants' varying capacities, designing a tailored participation approach, and equipping people with tools for participation suited to their abilities, thereby making disadvantaged groups feel welcome and supported (Farina et al, 2014). Together, these two dimensions work hand-in-hand: thoughtfully designed participatory spaces for learning and reflection lay the foundation for deliberation, while tools that empower people —regardless of their diverse backgrounds, skills, and access to infrastructure—to participate actively translate that foundation into action.

Table 2 The combined view of NT and BT by the authors.

	Space (NT)	Approaches (BT)
Tension	Policy outcomes are inevitably shaped by political dynamics that may diverge from citizen input.	Efforts to include everyone risk overwhelming policymakers with excessive, unfocused feedback.
Shift of focus	From evaluating citizens' direct influence on policy outcomes to providing them space to learn and reflect.	From demographic inclusion and one-size-fits-all approaches to understanding participants' capacities and tailoring tools used for participation accordingly.
Goal	Enable participants to access information, reflect, and engage in mutual learning, equipping them to understand policy outcomes better, thus articulating pertinent responses and proposals.	Equip participants with suitable tools that encourage balanced dialogue and voice-sharing. By doing so, disadvantaged groups feel welcome and empowered.

While e-participation expands opportunities for citizen engagement by overcoming traditional constraints of time and place (Royo et al., 2012), removing these boundaries does not reduce the effort or resources required for participation to be effective. Preventing tokenism in digital participation demands equal—if not greater—attention. Designing for reflection and learning thus becomes a critical practice to support democratic life, one in which adopting and adapting participatory design notions and methods can help counter tokenism.

5. Participatory design countering tokenisms

The practice of PD emerged from the Scandinavian workplace democracy movement in the 1970s with a foundational political commitment, focusing not only on user involvement but also on empowering and emancipating stakeholders through the design process (Bannon et al., 2018; Hansen et al., 2019). We regard this specific political commitment of PD as not only relevant but also a potent lens through which to reflect on current e-participation practices

and to better understand how PD might help mitigate tokenistic outcomes in e-participation contexts.

5.1 Countering NT: Focusing on designing participation spaces

The earlier sections discussed that relying solely on people's influence in e-participation processes to identify NT is restrictive, as it oversimplifies the unavoidable role of political factors within a complex and evolving policymaking landscape. This makes transparency and mutual understanding crucial in building empathy during the e-participation processes, ensuring that people are welcome and heard. Building on this, this section discusses how participatory design (PD) notions and methods can help reimagine e-participation spaces that encourage reflection and learning, thereby countering NT.

5.1.1 The third space

When participation occurs without designing an appropriate space for deliberation —termed a "drive-through" approach by Farina et al. (2014) — citizens enter digital platforms, react superficially, and exit quickly (see Figure 2 for the route labeled B). This leads to aggregated, reactive, and shallow inputs that fail to meaningfully inform policy decisions. PD offers a constructive approach to addressing NT by rethinking how participation can develop within e-participation spaces, emphasising the creation of "third spaces" (Muller & Druin, 2002) that foster understanding, reflection, and reciprocal learning (see Figure 2, route A). Often, these spaces are characterised by slowing down interactions and nurturing the cognitive and technical conditions necessary for engagement.

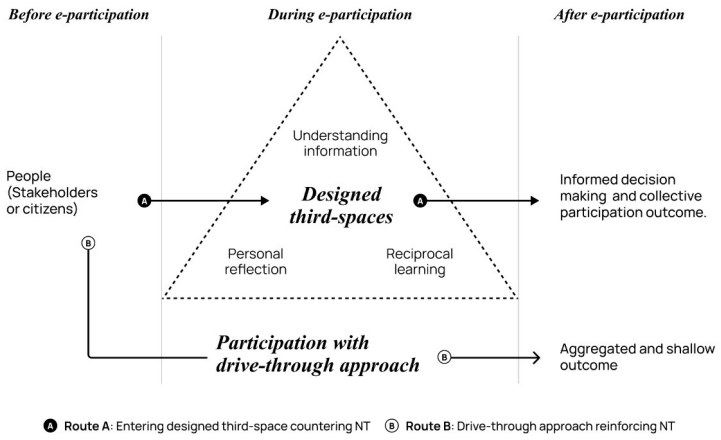


Figure 2 A visual summary of the difference between participation with the third space and without the third space (drive-through approach).

Drawing from Bhabha's notion of the "Third Space", PD conceptualizes the in-between space where multiple perspectives and forms of knowledge can coexist and hybridize (Muller & Druin, 2002). The third space belongs to no single group—it is a fertile arena where diverse knowledge can intersect, generating new insights and shared actions. Such spaces are designed to foster equality and openness, as participants are required to engage in environments that are not their own, facilitating people to learn both within and across their groups (Muller & Druin, 2002)

Within the third spaces, people become co-creators rather than mere information providers (Sanders & Stappers, 2008). This encourages behaviours that move beyond immediate reactions toward a deeper understanding of policy issues. PD methods, such as generative tools (Sanders & Stappers, 2012, 2014) or boundary objects (Brandt et al., 2012), can play a crucial role in fostering spaces for reflection and learning by making abstract ideas tangible, thereby creating secure arenas for creative dialogue to spark and tacit knowledge to emerge. In particular, boundary objects—such as visual dashboards, collaborative canvases, mockups, and more—can be vital in establishing a shared understanding from different perspectives and mediating interpretations from various angles around the issues.

In doing so, the spaces spur citizens' capacity to contribute to problem identification and solutions ideation through their direct experience and perception, while enabling policymakers to interpret input as situated knowledge rather than disjointed feedback. We argue that treating the e-participation space as a third space, as defined in the PD literature, can help transform e-participation from a procedural requirement into a reflective and relational process. We also recoginse the implication of the third space is not limited to but extends beyond e-participation; however, further reflection on what this third space implies in a highly autonomous and open digital environment should be further explored.

5.1.2 Setting of the space

Recognising that a third space needs to be established is not enough; how it should be designed and set up also needs to be discussed. Sanders and Stappers (2008) mentioned that spatial environments have a profound influence on participants' creativity and openness. Ideal spaces for participation, they argue, should allow for elements like rearrangeable furniture, visible shared materials, and the coexistence of diverse behaviors—from quiet reflection to active collaboration (Sanders & Stappers, 2014). Although these elements are developed for physical settings, these indications offer valuable insights also for rethinking the "atmosphere" and interactions within digital participation spaces. The research challenge is, therefore, to translate these criteria into forms of digital interactions, going beyond typical ICT configurations and looking into ways in which tacit knowledge can be surfaced despite the apparent limit of digital environments (e.g., asynchronous participation, hidden identities, lack of immediate and serendipitous interactions), while enabling participants to pause, reflect, and learn collectively.

5.2 Countering BT: Focusing on designing participation approaches

The sections describing BT have explored people's different capacities to understand participation matters and their experiences in the policymaking process, highlighting the limitations of the one-size-fits-all approach. However, a further key question is the degree of facilitation needed—through tools, prompts, or scaffolding techniques—to truly overcome BT. Indeed, too much guidance also risks skewing and biasing participation by directly or indirectly influencing people's opinions. This section discusses how PD principles can be applied to develop an appropriate approach to facilitating e-participation spaces that encourage inclusivity and knowledge sharing, thereby countering BT.

5.2.1 Facilitation techniques

Sanders & Stappers (2012) propose that facilitation should adapt to participants' varying levels of experience and confidence, ranging from guiding and scaffolding to offering a completely open field for exploration. Building on Farina et al.'s (2014) stakeholder typologies, it becomes evident that different participant types require different depths of information, degrees of facilitation, and forms of engagement.

Inferring from Sanders & Stappers (2012) and Farina et al.'s (2014), facilitating dialogue between sophisticated stakeholders on a complex societal issue might work best with light scaffolding techniques or simply with a clean table; however, the same cannot be applied to absent stakeholders, unaffiliated experts, and interested members of the public who may need more guidance for expressing their thoughts and dream.

5.2.2 Depth of knowledge-sharing

The participation approach applied in e-participation spaces forms the quality and depth of dialogue. PD can play a vital role in the development of participation approaches, offering methods and techniques in directing desirable outcomes of participation. As shown in Figure 3, different methods can support knowledge sharing at various levels, from understanding what people explicitly say and think through interviews to uncovering tacit knowledge about what people feel and dream through generative sessions. (Sanders & Stappers, 2012). The selection of different methods can significantly shape the outcome, echoing the previously mentioned notion that the design of digital mechanisms must be carefully planned and executed.

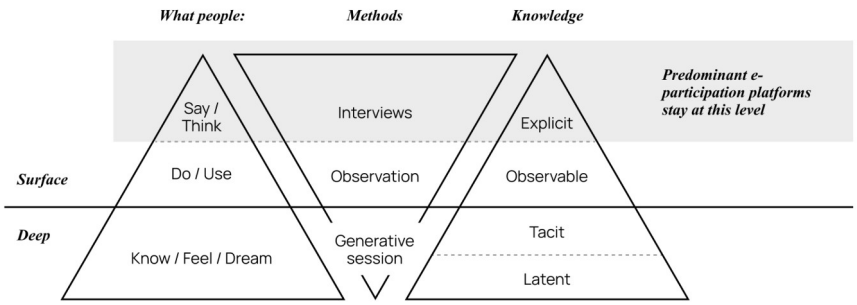


Figure 3 Different levels of knowledge with indication of the level of prominent e-participation platforms. Adopted from Sanders & Stappers (2012)

We argue that most current e-participation platforms remain at the "say" level, as the mechanisms of comments, polls, or upvotes in these platforms only enable the collection of surface-level opinions, according to Sanders & Stappers' (2012) level of knowledge framework (see Figure 3). For example, a digital voting mechanism, such as simply "agree" or "disagree," may encourage people to respond without taking the time to reflect, which could lead to misleading results. Such mechanisms further encourage drive-through participation, neglecting the third space that e-participation initiatives should cater to. Furthermore, questionnaires, which align with the interview method, are often formulated in a way that is unambiguously biased in favor of the government's (or whoever designs the questions)

intended perspectives, and also restrict people's opportunities to express themselves more deeply (Sanders & Stappers, 2012).

In contrast, adapting PD approaches—such as cultural probes that invite emotional expression, trigger sets that evoke memories, and participatory prototyping that supports experimentation—into e-participation spaces can empower participants to express deeper insights, reflections, and aspirations (Brandt et al., 2012; Sanders & Stappers, 2012). These approaches may uncover the "felt" and "dreamed" dimensions of public knowledge, enhancing the quality of participation outcomes and increasing data granularity.

The current approach of e-participation and the core of PD underscores both a philosophical and operational distinction. Philosophically, current e-participation approaches prioritize efficiency and quantifiable feedback, whereas PD emphasizes exploration, ambiguity, and co-creation. Operationally, e-participation mechanisms tend to capture surface-level opinions ("say" level), while PD tools enable the articulation of emotional, imaginative, and reflective dimensions ("felt" and "dreamed" levels). Bridging these differences calls for designing e-participation platforms that facilitate dialogue, experimentation, and mutual learning—the very conditions that sustain the third space.

6. Discussion and conclusion

In this paper, we position PD practices as stewards safeguarding the democratic aspects of e-participation. The design of participation "spaces" and the design of participation "approaches" encapsulate the essence of PD (Brandt et al., 2012) and are inseparable and interdependent in countering tokenism in e-participation. It can also be seen as a continuous process of shaping not only outcomes but also the conditions, relationships, and mechanisms through which value is created and democracy practiced.

6.1 Practical challenges

6.1.1 Continuous facilitation in digital spaces

While PD has been widely studied in physical settings, its use in large-scale, policy-focused digital environments remains underexplored. Placing PD in a constant, asynchronous interaction space without a human to guide, prompt reflection, and manage conflicts can be challenging. Research and experiments are timely for understanding how emerging technologies (e.g., Generative AI) can support PD practices.

6.1.2 Counterintuitive behavior pattern

The settings of Web 2.0 value prompt reactions and responses from users; therefore, creating "spaces for a pause" seems counterintuitive in the typical design of digital experiences and interfaces. Yet, nudging the behavior for pauses is crucial for genuine participation. We call for future design experiments to better understand how PD approaches can facilitate the creation of this space in digital settings.

6.1.3 Break one-size-fits-all approaches with generative methods

As discussed, widely used text-based mechanisms in e-participation not only fail to account for individual differences in capabilities but also risk resulting in the exchange of knowledge at a surface level. Future research is encouraged to adopt and experiment with a more generative approach in e-participation, fostering new perspectives on digital democracy and participation that extend beyond the interactions enabled by universal tools such as surveys, debates, voting, and commenting.

6.2 Theoretical implications

Finally, this paper concludes by extending the discussion of PD as a steward to counter tokenism in e-participation and to address its broader theoretical implications. Studies involving practical experiments on PD implementation, with or without new technologies, could further illuminate how PD influences cultural norms of public participation, particularly in shaping emerging digital behaviors in policy discourse. Such a shift with digital mechanisms being more than just interfaces may transform the traditional relationship between citizens and government into a more dynamic and yet-to-be-defined form.

We conclude that PD holds the potential to safeguard democratic spaces for diversity, equality, inclusivity, and quality dialogue, and could act as a catalyst for scaling deep (Moore et al., 2015) in democratic participation practices. We encourage future design research to prototype and test PD practices within existing e-participation infrastructures, examining their capacity to foster reflection and inclusion, thereby contributing to more democratic participation processes.

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This study uses artificial intelligence, specifically Grammarly, solely for the purpose of grammar and spell-checking, under constant and rigorous human oversight.

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