

1. Introduction

Today we hear a good deal of more or less loose talk in the mass media and elsewhere about social networks, and in this context there is currently a good deal of focus on a increasingly wide range of specialized digitally mediated environments and instruments, such as Facebook², Twitter³, MySpace⁴, LinkedIn, YouTube, Second Life and Twinity to name but a few, designed specifically to facilitate more or less real time interactive online communication, sharing of digital content and more generally speaking, different forms of *at-a-distance* network-building and maintenance, often of interregional and intercontinental dimensions.

But of course, social networks as such are by no means a new phenomenon: from the very beginnings of known historical time, we human beings have created smaller and larger networks defined largely in terms of kinship, friendship and other forms of sociality in order to further the chances of survival of ourselves, our children and elderly parents in an often hostile natural world. As time has gone by, this more restricted “basic survival” understanding of ourselves, our lives and our loved ones as fragile, ephemeral beings that are more or less at the mercy of the massive, often wayward, contingent and *unmanageable* natural forces that are characteristic for our ever evolving universe and the physical world we inhabit – while still to some extent present for us today as we view and take stock, in local and more global terms, of our world, the universe and our own special place in all this mind-blowing complexity – has gradually become complemented and tempered by our increasing mastery of many of what we once considered to be the most threatening aspects of the natural world we live in. This mastery of at least some sides of nature’s more capricious aspects has been made possible by the invention, diffusion and systematic application in real life situations of a vast pool of knowledge, tools and skills built up and shared by way of the multitude of scientific, cultural and educational institutions and networks that we have created and developed in the course of our really quite short human historical time frame. Amongst the various cultural institutions it is natural to include in this wider picture of things, is a still fairly recent one that we, in making reference to a complex totality of configurations of ideals, rules, habits and everyday practices related to contemporary forms of government, communitarian task organisation and resource management, have come to know as *democracy*. In order to obtain the label or brand “democratic” in an increasingly globalising world, any given society interested in doing this will be required – at the very least – to designate that most of its vitally necessary communitarian tasks, and the responsibility for making sure such tasks actually are carried out – the latter in the past being something normally organised and managed by physically and geographically proximal (i.e. “local”)



Moral Agency, Democracy and Social Network Facilitated Decision-Making

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configurations and networks of family, friends, neighbours, village, town or city authorities – ought to, over time, become the object of larger scale social, economic and cultural policies that are developed, ratified, organised and executed by a network of larger, more distant and more overreaching socio-cultural entities such as provinces, regions, states and increasingly more complex federations, or unions, of states such as the United States, the European Union and the United Nations.

All *trans-regional and trans-national* political entities of this latter kind are required, or at least presupposed, to be constituted on the basis of democratic elections, organised in ways that are as secure and transparent as possible, to select responsible, well-qualified citizens to fill a limited number of key governance positions and roles in relation to a fairly restricted group of core political institutions, their operational bureaucracies and their respective implementing organisms or units. Their job is then to seek to create as broad a consensus as possible within the populations of the various involved states and their sub-entities, regarding a limited number of macro-level policy directions designed to facilitate the recognition, coordination and management of the key socio-cultural communitarian tasks mentioned above in the most possible effective and equitable way for all parties involved. In the next instance, these *global governance* institutions are then required, or presupposed, to take upon themselves overall responsibility for the development of adequate economic, financial and other resources, norms for personnel recruitment and training, administrative procedures and practices, and more detailed policy programs that serve to define conceptual frameworks for concrete forms of political action to occur at increasingly *local* levels of governance, that often too, in the final instance, will have (hopefully positive) effects reaching all the way “back down” to, and influencing, how essential communitarian tasks like

those mentioned previously are designed, managed and carried out at more “grass roots” levels by linking together and exploiting traditional social networks that bind together individuals, families, friends, neighbours, villages, towns, cities and provinces into increasingly larger relational configurations.

Increasingly, we can see that most of such larger scale “global-to-local” policy, governance and management development processes and the emergent social networks they involve, are becoming more and more incorporated into systematic, broadly diffused efforts to develop and integrate modern ICT-based⁵ systems that are designed to enable, make more transparent and efficient the processes of task definition, delegation, recruitment, management and execution mentioned above at both *global* and more *local* levels of application and functioning. This broader technology-based global-local governance digitalization project is often referred to in international and European contexts as *E-Governance*.

Here in Italy, for example, the present centre-right government, led by Silvio Berlusconi – based on many different types and levels of cultural, economic, legislative and technological groundwork laid down over time by previous governments, and supported by the European Union within the broader frameworks of the *Lisbon Treaty Agreement*, the *European Research Area (ERA)*⁶ and *Research Framework Program*⁷ initiatives – has recently presented a national Master Plan for development of E-Government digital networks and practices in Italy from now until 2012. This short- to medium-term innovation program⁸ lists around 80 E-Government projects clustered around four principal high priority action areas:

- 1) *Sectorial actions*, directed towards to state central administrations and universities;
- 2) *Territorial actions* that aim to interconnect regions and their respective capitals;
- 3) *Systemic actions* targeted at general infrastructure development, e.g. projects designed to reduce the “digital divide” and improve the accessibility of services for citizens;
- 4) *International actions* aimed at maintaining a strong commitment to future development of European infrastructure and innovation networks and “best practice” networks.

At a more detailed level of description, the principal priorities for the Italian e-government project are enunciated as follows on the same website:

- I) *Facilitation of digitalized interactions between schools and families*. Parent-school communication is to be simplified by making documents issued by schools available on the Internet;
- II) *Digital classrooms*. All schools are to be equipped with at least three computerized classrooms with interactive whiteboards and personal computers for students;
- III) *Digital legal communications and plea notifications* are to facilitate civil legal processes by electronically transmit-

ting these documents from courts to lawyers and other legal staff. Online digital archives of all court documents pertaining to legal proceedings;

IV) *Online judicial certificates* are to allow courts to issue certificates directly through other administrative branches in Italy and abroad, such as certification of currently pending criminal charges;

V) *Transmission of electronic crime reports* from police to prosecutors to facilitate activities of prosecutors in investigation and pre-hearing stages of the criminal trials, giving prosecutors access to the same information as police, with automatic updating of the crime report archives and electronic archives for the Public Prosecutor and Magistrates;

VI) *Digitization of prescriptions and medical certificates*, allowing their substitution by digital documents in accordance with Electronic Health Record Standards.

VII) *Electronic Health Records* are to offer citizens access online to their own medical histories with full confidentiality guaranteed;

VIII) *Business in One Day* - A single network access point for setting up new businesses (registration, modifications, approvals, etc.), created in accordance with European Directives and in cooperation with Chambers of Commerce;

IX) *E-passport and Identity Card*. Police and consulates to issue an Electronic Passport, with anti-forgery micro-processor for recording data of the holder;

X) *Unified Municipal Property Register*, with all municipal data to be integrated in a larger Regional level cadastral and topographic database, with digital dissemination of land and property modification data in a national information system;

XI) *Certified electronic mailbox* for citizens, public administrations, businesses and professionals - Citizens and businesses to be provided with a certified e-mail inbox to dematerialize exchanges of documents with the public administration;

XII) *Electronic invoicing to the Public Administration* - Reduce costs for businesses and public administrations through digital integration of the invoicing and payment process;

XIII) *Direct online payments to the Public Administration* to be made possible through use of information and communication technology. Technical infrastructure is to guarantee secure payment transactions.

At a more “global” level of operations, a good example of one current conceptualisation of the role of E-governance and the aims of its development and diffusion can be found in the following fairly concise description on UNESCO’s *Communication and Information Portal*⁹:

“E-governance is the use of ICT by different actors of the society with the aim to improve their access to information and to build their capacities. E-Governance is the public sector’s use of information and communication technologies with the aim of improving information and service

delivery, encouraging citizen participation in the decision-making process and making government more accountable, transparent and effective.”

It is also interesting to note that on the same website, UNESCO has recently given priority to supporting the setting up a number of smaller pilot projects, based on to a prior assessment of local needs and opportunities, designed that aim to develop special training modules on E-governance for public decision-makers in Africa¹⁰, Latin America¹¹ and the Caribbean¹². These projects are all focused on developing E-governance at municipal levels, and the rationale for this is described as follows:

“Why focus on the municipal level? Local governments are close to citizens, and constitute for many the main representation of government. The relationship of citizens and local authorities tends to be one based on proximity as the interests at stake for both parties are clearly entwined concerning issues such as public services, urban development, education, public transport, environmental concerns and local politics. It is at the local level that the impact of ICTs on the relationship between governments and citizens can be most effective.”

In this latter citation we see that a lot of faith is put into the idea of developing closer relationships between those who actually govern and citizens whose lives the ethics and practices of their elected governors will come to affect on a day-to-day basis in different, not always easily predictable ways. There is one key phrase I would like to focus on in some more detail here. It is to be found in the general definition of the notion of E-governance in the first citation from the UNESCO Communication and Information Portal above: “encouraging citizen participation in [...] decision-making processes”. Now, citizen participation is something that seems instantly and inherently desirable, and is of course fairly easy to envision and to talk about. But as anyone who has taken part in community organising or other socio-political activities on a voluntary basis well knows, this is not always so easy to achieve and implement in practice. There may be many different reasons for this, and in fact there is already a growing body of research¹³ in this more general area that tries to examine and explain in more detail why high levels of active citizen participation in political decision-making processes are often so complicated to achieve and manage. So let us now take a brief look at the configurations and conclusions of some of these studies.

2. Is Citizen Participation Worth the Effort?

In an interesting article for *Public Administration Review*, entitled “Citizen participation in Decision Making: Is it Worth the Effort?” Renée Irvin and John Stansbury (2004) provide a substantial literature review over a good deal of relevant research in this more general

area, which in this instance is based around actual experiences in the field on the part of the *USA Environmental Protection Agency*. They also systematically analyse the available research data in order to put together a schematic overview of a limited number of conditions that seem to delineate a distinction between what can be seen as *ideal* and *non-ideal* conditions for the successful implementation of enhanced citizen participation within government agency decision-making processes. Irvin and Stansbury’s principal premises for setting up these clusters of more or less than ideal conditions are that in situations like this there will always a finite budget and a specific set of policy outcomes to be produced, so it will thus be imperative to decide which issues are most critically in need of stakeholder involvement, both before and during implementation. It will also be important, they add, to consider which types of decisions might just be too laborious (and expensive) to manage to accomplish within a participatory framework. On the positive side of things, they suggest the following set of “Low-Cost Indicators” that tend to contribute to creating as near as possible ideal conditions for enhanced citizen participation:

- Citizens readily volunteer for projects that benefit the entire community
- Key stakeholders are not too geographically dispersed, so that participants can easily reach meetings
- Citizens have enough income to attend meetings without harming their ability to provide for their families
- The community is homogenous, so the group requires fewer representatives of interest groups, as smaller groups speed decision-making
- The topic does not require representatives to master complex technical information quickly

As “High-Benefit Indicators” they suggest the following factors tend indicate a potential for obtaining as near as possible ideal conditions for enhanced citizen participation:

- The issue is gridlocked and a citizen mandate is needed to break the gridlock
- Hostility toward government entities is high, and the agency seeks validation from community members to successfully implement policy
- Community members with particularly strong influence are willing to serve as representatives
- The group facilitator has credibility with all representatives
- The issue is of high interest to stakeholders and may even be considered at “crisis stage” if actions are not changed

On the negative side of things, they suggest the following “High Cost Indicators” that tend to work against creating ideal conditions for enhanced citizen participation:

- An acquiescent public is reluctant to get involved in what is considered a job of government employees
- The region is geographically large or presents other

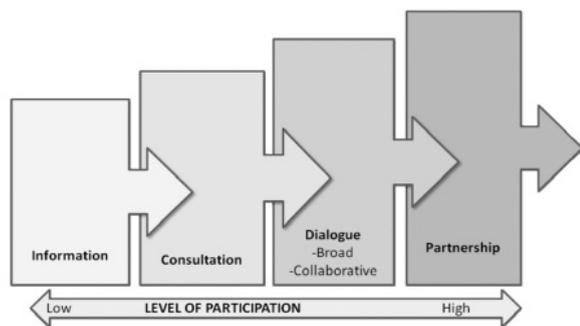


Fig. 1 - Levels of participation intensity

obstacles (such as heavy traffic) that make regular face to face meetings difficult

- Many competing factions and economic groups require a very large participatory group
- Low-income residents are key stakeholders for the issue at hand and should be included, yet they cannot because of work and family priorities
- Complex technical knowledge is required before participants can make decisions
- The public does not recognize the issue under consideration as a problem, nor are potential competing policy alternatives familiar to the public

Finally, as “Low-Benefit Indicators” they suggest the following issues that tend to indicate that less than ideal conditions exist for enhanced citizen participation.

- The public is generally not hostile toward government entities
- The agency has had prior success in implementing policy without citizen participation (that is the voting process is sufficient to guide policy-making behaviour)
- The population is large, making it difficult for involved stakeholders to influence a significant portion of the population
- The decisions of the group are likely to be ignored, no matter how much effort goes into their formation (the group does not have the authority to make policy decisions)
- The decisions of the group are likely to be the same decisions produced by the government entity.

In their conclusion, Irvin and Stansbury point out that in the specific context examined in their study (government agency sponsored environmental regulation projects in the United States), there is as yet little concrete empirical evidence available regarding how efficient the engagement of citizens in agency decision-making processes actually is. A part of the problem here too, they note, is that it is in general often quite difficult to measure the success of environmental projects, since they often need a very long time before they actually begin to show concrete results. They also express some concern that locally based forms of citizen involvement may result in undermining or relaxing already existing successful regulations, or perhaps increase costs of future projects so much that less will be able to be achieved

“on the ground”. As they put it in the final punch line of their article: “talk is not cheap—and may not even be effective”.

3. CoE: Code of Good Practice for Civil Participation

Another way of understanding citizen participation in decision-making processes is outlined in the October 2009 *Council of Europe* document: *Code of Good Practice for Civil Participation in the Decision-Making Process*¹⁴. This code is designed to assist government agencies in negotiating participation agreements with representatives of non-governmental organizations (NGO’s). The principal guiding metaphor for the code is envisioned as a kind of sliding scale of scenarios sketching out possible forms of citizen participation in political or other public decision-making processes. This scale is seen as moving forward (or upward) from an initial scenario where there is a relatively low level of participation – essentially a situation where NGO’s and their members merely receive information about what is being planned and what and how it is intended to be carried out, through consultation and dialogue scenarios, all the way up to a scenarios in which citizens actually become partners, or stakeholders, in ongoing projects, as represented graphically in Figure 1.

The text of the code makes it quite clear that an “enabling environment” will be required in order to ensure that contributions of NGOs are built into in political decision-making processes without any kind of discrimination.

The “conditions of an enabling environment include”, it states, “the rule of law, adherence to fundamental democratic principles, political will, favourable legislation, clear procedures, long-term support and resources for a sustainable civil society and shared spaces for dialogue and cooperation. These conditions allow for a constructive relationship between NGOs and public authorities built on reciprocal trust and mutual understanding for *participatory democracy*.”

The code proposal then goes on to describe the six principal steps in political decision-making processes normally taken by public authorities, which basically move from agenda setting through implementation to monitoring and eventual reformulation of the project strategies and goals. A further section of the code describes various types of instruments that may be applied at any stage the process of participation to provide participants with transversal forms of support. At the end of the document all these elements are combined in a so-called *civil participation matrix* offering a graphic representation of the inter-relational character of the various processes and moments involved.

4. CIPRA: Disseminating Knowledge – Networking People

Another useful case study in this connection is offered

Partnership	Work group or committee	Co-drafting	Joint decision-making Co-decision making	Strategic partnerships	Work groups or committee	Work groups or committee
Dialogue	Hearings and public forums Citizens' forums and future councils Key government contact	Hearings and Q&A panels Expert seminars Multi-stakeholder committees and advisory bodies	Open plenary or committee sessions	Capacity building seminars Training seminars	Work groups or committee	Seminars and deliberative forums
Consultation	Petitioning Consultation online or other techniques	Hearings and Q&A panels Expert seminars Multi-stakeholder committees and advisory bodies	Open plenary or committee sessions	Events, conferences, forums, seminars	Feedback mechanisms	Conferences or meetings Online consultation
Information	Easy and open information access Research Campaigning and lobbying Website for key documents	Open and free access to policy documents Website for key documents Campaigns and lobbying Web casts Research input	Campaigning and lobbying	Open access to information Website for information access E-mail alerts FAQ Public tendering procedures	Open access to information Evidence gathering Evaluations Research studies	Open access to information
Levels of participation						
Steps in the political decision making process	Agenda setting	Drafting	Decision	Implementation	Monitoring	Reformulation

Fig. 2 - Proposed Civil Participation Matrix

by one of six Question Team Reports (QT-5¹⁵) published by the *Commission Internationale pour la Protection des Alpes* (CIPRA) regarding new forms of decision-making in planning and carrying out sustainable development projects in the Alps, in the wider framework of a project entitled *Future in the Alps: Disseminating knowledge – networking people*¹⁶.

The working mandate for QT-5, which was made up of representatives from three partner organisations¹⁷ was twofold, and here for the sake of brevity we quote directly from the QT-5 website page:

“Task 1: To highlight the significance of participation and new decision-making processes. How can new forms of decision-making be used to arrive at sustainable solutions, particularly when it comes to negotiating the demands of regional planning in terms of sustainable development? Future in the Alps is to summarise the current standard of knowledge with regard to participation and publish the findings throughout the Alps. Special emphasis is to be placed on the issues of “decision-making” and “good governance”. Task 2: To publicise and implement new forms of decision-making. Future in the Alps is to gather examples of good practice for new forms of decision-making and participation. The examples are to be selected in accordance with their topical relevance to Issues 1 to 4 and 6. Examples of new regional compensatory models are also to be highlighted. By processing the examples of good practice Future in the Alps intends to contribute towards ensuring that new forms of decision-making, participation and good governance are applied more effectively in the Alps when negotiating the demands of regional planning.”

The conclusion of the QT 5 discussions, which took place both as face to café meetings, and at a distance via e-mail, telephone conferences, individual phone conversations, collaborative document composition and e-mail, were be summed up by the team in the Report document as follows:

1) There is a need for new standards for decision-making processes. Regardless of what decision-making strategies employed (market, technocratic, consultative, codecision or any combination of these), some common conditions exist that will always improve effectiveness and results: transparency, trustworthiness, respect and serious consideration of alternative opinions and options, open opportunities for all interested to give comments and participate in decision-making, willingness to accept critic and arguments, readiness for compromise and consensus. This will require the introduction of new procedures and knowledge sources, for example, procedures for: i) mutually defining problem definitions; ii) balancing existing power relations in participative procedures; iii) integration of diverse knowledge types (expert, local, scientific, practical); iii) active knowledge transfer between groups; iv) adequate, easily accessible information to all parties concerned and general public; v) procedural and negotiation skill development; vi) development of organised frameworks and platforms for negotiation, conflict resolution and making binding decisions.

2) Upgrading of decision-making culture through capacity (education, training) and institution building. Many of involved players (individuals, institutions, businesses, NGO’s etc) lack procedural and negotiating skills. This

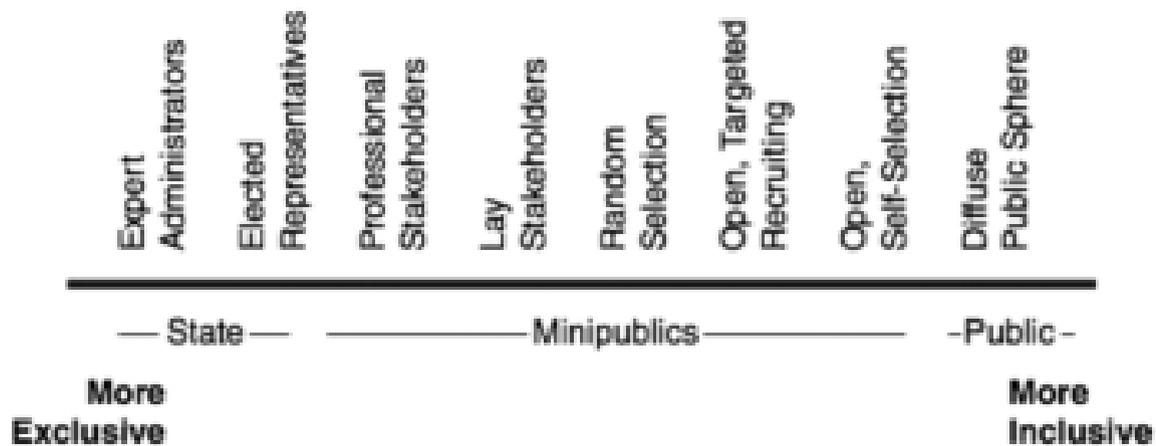


Fig. 3 - Participant Selection Methods

situation can only be improved through education and training. Training programs on offer in the market often do not meet specific participant needs. Young people should be trained in negotiation and conflict resolution skills. Existing regional or local traditions and institutions for collective decision-making such as agricultural cooperatives or regional networks can provide valuable knowledge to support processes of institutional change and institution building.

3. Open Questions, New Questions

The investigation brought up some new or unsolved questions which the authors of the report recommended be taken up to discussion in the near future:

“How can the recommended standards mentioned above for new forms of decision-making be implemented into existing processes? Who are the key players? What steps would have to be taken?

How to appreciate existing – often widely accepted – forms of decision-making while – at the same time – trying to introduce new forms of opinion building and decision-making which are more fair and transparent?

How to effectively bring “superior” interests (like e.g. security or a clean and healthy environment) into – often locally dominated – negotiation processes?

How can upgrading of decision-making culture be achieved? How to train, motivate and enhance the capacity for active, responsible participation in decision-making processes? Who should be trained? What frameworks, programs, contents, methods?

How to improve the representativeness and legitimacy of participatory decision-making procedures?

How can implementation gaps and their reasons be analyzed in a promising way? This issue is close to Question 6.

How to deal with decision-making in the view of increasing immigration? Will our (i.e. western/European) model for successful decision-making work equally well in a mixed community where members have very diverse cultural and political backgrounds?

How to deal with decision-making increasingly influenced by processes of globalization and international standardization?”

In making the above recommendations, they cite the *Impact assessment Guidelines of the European Commission SEC (2005) 791*, which state that in order to promote the development of new forms of decision-making processes, it is necessary to:

Treat actors and stakeholders on an equal footing, with due respect for their diversity, including cultural and linguistic diversity

Ensure the autonomy of social partners in the areas in which they are competent (for example, by guaranteeing the right to collective bargaining at any level or to carry out collective forms of action)

Ensure individual rights in relation to the public administration

Ensure individual access to justice

Improve public access to information

Ensure media pluralism and freedom of expression

5. Varieties of Governance Participation

Finally, another useful study to refer to in this context is one carried out by Archon Fung (2006), who in summing up, points out in the conclusion of his study (*ibid.* p. 74) that “participation serves three key democratic values: legitimacy, justice, and the effectiveness of public action”, and further, that “no single participatory design is suited to serving all three values simultaneously; particular designs are suited to specific objectives.” An important guiding idea behind Fung’s analysis is that it is necessary to consider potential intersections and interactions between different types of participatory activities within a broader theoretical framework that conceives of contemporary democratic institutions in terms of three principal dimensions that are in play within what he refers to as “institutional design space” (*ibid.* 66). The first dimension has to do with who participates: i) “scope of participation”, how participants exchange information and make decisions: ii) “mode of participation and decision” and links between discussions and policy or public action: iii) “extent of

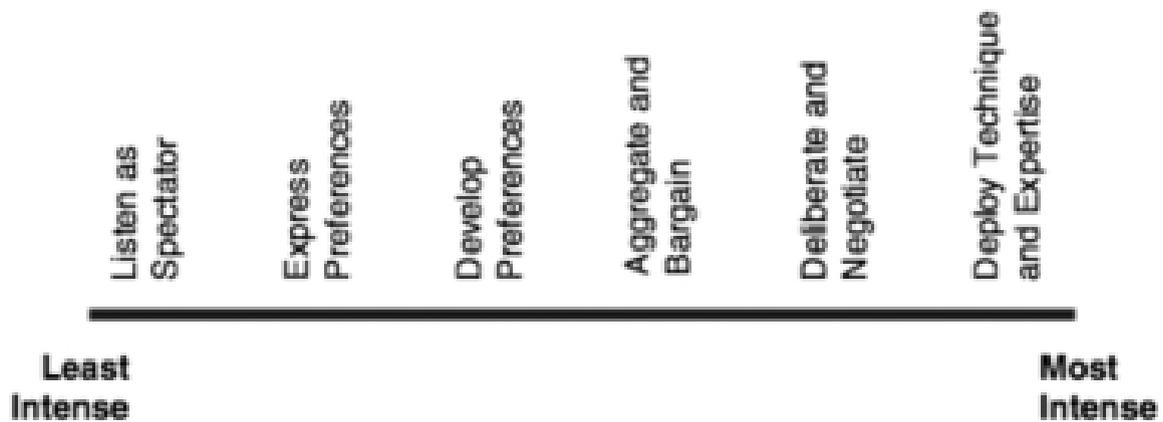


Fig. 4 - Modes of Communication and Decision

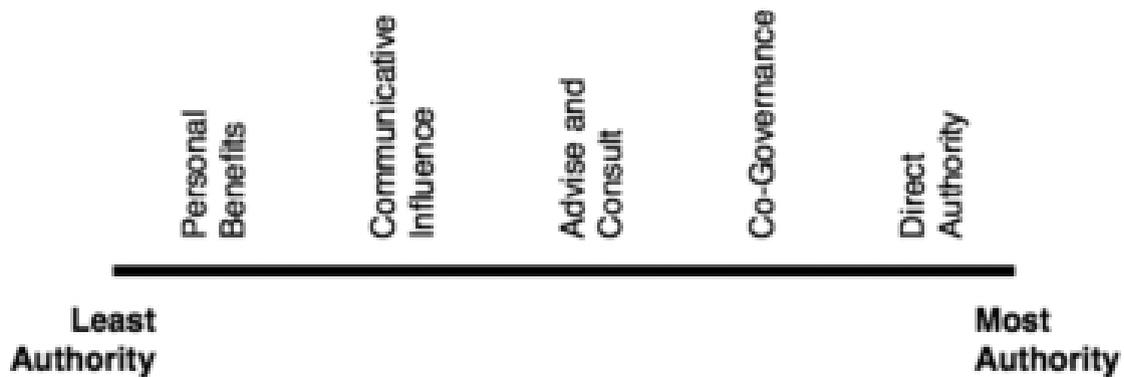


Fig. 5 - Extent of Authority and Power

authority”. With regard to the first dimension “scope of participation”, he proposes a sliding scale of selection methods that goes from More Exclusive to More Inclusive, with eight categories of anticipated participants, as can be seen in Figure 3 below (*ibid.* p. 68).

Regarding the second dimension “mode of participation and decision”, he delineates a sliding scale comprising three modes of communication (the first three) and three modes of decision-making (the last three) that goes from Least Intense to Most Intense, as shown in Figure 4 (*ibid.* p. 69). Intensity is understood here, as indicating the level of personal investment, knowledge and commitment required of participants.

Finally, regarding the third dimension “extent of authority (or power)”, Fung sets up a sliding scale that moves from scenarios of Least Authority to those of Most Authority, based on to what extent that which participants contribute with during decision making processes is related to what the public authorities and the participants themselves actually do, as shown in Figure 5 (*ibid.* p. 70).

The idea, then, is that all these three dimensions and their various components can be combined with one

another at will, to simulate a three-dimensional decision-making design space, which Fung baptizes a *Democracy Cube*. Into this design space different types of scenarios regarding alternative organizational or institutional scenarios, delineated in terms of combinations of issues at stake, projects, recruitment strategies, sets of participants, and the relative sets of values in play in each situation, and so on, can be systematically mapped out, in order to see how close together or far away from one another they end up being in relation to the three sub-scales mentioned above. Fung seeks to apply the model, with some success, to a few case study situations from real life: a move from organizing traditional Public Hearings to a model proposed by the Study Group Resource Centre, where participants selected to augment diversity of background are organized into small discussion groups, as well as use of Deliberative Polls, and Study Circles in another local government decision-making setting, as a way to augment the conceived of legitimacy of a set of proceedings in hand. A third case mentioned regards promoting justice-enhancing forms of economic reform in order to combat effects of existent political or social inequality. Here Fung uses

the example of a well-known move by the Brazilian city of Porto Alegre from more traditional project budget decision-making and implementation strategies over to a new mechanism known as Participatory Budget. As Fung points out (*ibid.* 71) “The mechanism shifts decisions about the capital portion of the city’s budget from the city council to a system of neighborhood and citywide popular assemblies. Through a complex annual cycle of open meetings, citizens and civic associations in the city meet to determine local investment priorities.”

6. Is There a Role for Moral Agency in Network Facilitated Decision-Making?

In this wider context, the notion of moral agency (Ainley, Himma & Jeffery (ed) 2008) can be seen as standing for an important and innovative way of thinking individually and collectively about decision-making practices, not only in relation to everyday life together with our nearest and dearest, our friends and neighbours, but also more generally speaking in relation to other people, other ways of living, other cultures – and even in relation to the natural and physical world we inhabit together with millions of other living organisms – since we all in the long run, are mutually dependent in one way or other on each other’s continuing well-being in a wider ecological context.

Essentially, the conception of moral agency is bound to philosophical and practical considerations of our particular existential condition as human beings able to reflect upon, and make conscious, reasoned decisions about, how we ought, or ought not, act (or have acted) in any given decision-making situation that may involve not only ourselves and other people, close to us or more distant, but also the natural and cultural environments we live in and contribute actively to nurturing, developing and managing. Our conceptions of moral agency¹⁸ as such are closely tied in with the well-debated issue regarding whether we human beings possess free will or not. This is a thorny old philosophical question discussed with great passion in different historical and cultural contexts¹⁹ over the years. However, all this fervent discussion does not really seem to have led us to any kind of clear general consensus on this matter. One of the main problems discussed is our empirical situatedness in the world as physical, biological and, first and foremost, social organisms, who are always to some extent – in spite of our advanced *mindedness* and its potential for engaging us in rational forms of reasoning alone or together with others – simultaneously entangled with, and dependent on (if not absolutely determined by), complex autonomous, “mechanically” functioning physical, biological and social processes that operate well beyond the bounds of our immediate conscious comprehension of them, and thus too, beyond our self-conscious control as individuals or as collectives/communities.

Fortunately, our socially developed capacity for understanding, learning and exercising forms of moral agency offers one way of mediating between the so-called *determinist* and *indeterminist* perspectives on the question of free will. If we take a working definition of agency in general as the ability of all living beings to motivate and instantiate actual events and processes in the world through concrete forms of action, then no moral dimension regarding decisions to motivate or instantiate such actions is necessarily implied. Our capacity for moral agency, however, since it is bound to our own special existential condition as human beings with intentionality, languages, cultural artefacts and other tools placing individual and collective forms of communication and cooperation at our disposition does make it possible for us to reflect upon, discuss together, and make conscious decisions about, *how we ought*, or *ought not act* now, and in the future, or *how we ought or ought not to have acted* in the past, in decision-making situations that lead us, or others (which may also regard humanly created forms of artificial²⁰ or artefactual otherness) to plan, execute, or perform such forms of action.

This possibility of making informed predictions about possible moral implications of immanent present or future actions, and even more importantly, retrograde evaluations of what has occurred during the execution of past actions in different situations is, of course, especially important with regard to those decisions that result, or have resulted, in isolated or coordinated actions that have (or have had) wider, possibly profound, and even colossally traumatic, consequences not only for ourselves, but also for many other co-present or non co-present forms of “otherness”, human or otherwise – other people, places, things, artefacts, cultural practices and institutions, animals, organisms, our natural environment, and so on.

One of the most ostentatiously striking, frightening examples of this kind of trauma we have experienced recently was the global economic crisis in 2008 and 2009, caused, at least in part, by extremely fast and stressful “hybrid” decision-making processes that are continually taking place in the international financial markets. These processes are based on countless interactions 24 hours a day (and night) that involve not only millions of human traders, and their equally human clients all over the world, but also sophisticated AI-based software agents, all of which are wheeling and dealing with one another, more or less in real time, and handling truly vast amounts of real and virtual assets through currency exchange, loan and investment deals, issues of credit letters and other financial instruments. It is becoming increasingly clear that such extremely complex – and often only superficially transparent for the general public – decision-making processes all add up to a highly morally dubious situation where no less than the combined “destinies” of each and every one of us, and indeed, of the entire human race, can be

seen to be continually weighed and balanced on a more or less minute-by-minute – or even second-by-second – basis, with increasingly narrow margins for error.

7. Epilogue

Clearly, we will never arrive at a perfect situation where every single vital decision-making process that we take part in at all possible levels of individual or collective, (cultural, social, financial, political and so on) significance, can be guaranteed *ad hoc* not to have any possible negative future consequences for ourselves, those we hold dear, or for an unspecified multitude of co-present or non co-present forms of otherness. What *is* most important however – and this, I believe, is where the notion of Moral Agency most usefully may be brought into play – is that if we are willing to do so, we will always have an increasing number of opportunities to recognise, share information about, and seek to learn from, our most glaring errors of judgement during all the possible kinds of decision making processes we become involved in as individuals or groups. This can most easily be managed by asking ourselves, as often as possible: “*ought* that to have occurred?” In the event of us receiving a clear negative response from the community to this question, we must then be prepared to activate all other possible forms of (individual and collective) agency in the most effective ways possible in order to avoid something even remotely similar to this occurring, even one more time again in the future.

An interesting question today, is just *where* it might be possible or feasible for such forms of moral agency to be employed and exercised? The increasing digitalisation and corresponding “glocalisation” of our governance institutions and practices mentioned initially, and of our more traditional social networks (Coppock 2009b) seems to be opening up new fields of play in this connection. Actual world local, regional and national networks both large and small are beginning to create new, increasingly dynamic links with one another, and are converging and merging more and more with the newer forms of digitally remediated social networks also mentioned above, which have a more global reach and constructed and managed largely online.

These hybrid combinations of traditional person-to-person and digitally remediated social networks, though the latter are quite in their infancy, and still considered by many as constituting merely ludic, “non-serious” types of cultural *genius loci* (Coppock 2009a,b), have already begun to show they can have a quite powerful potential by enabling individuals in their local communities to enact, in increasingly efficient ways, quite radical forms of cultural and political action that can have repercussions at regional, national and even transnational levels. This was probably most effectively demonstrated by the deployment of a mix of e-mail, web-logs, YouTube, Facebook and Twitter as core organizational components of the successful Barack Obama 2008-

2009 election campaign (Coppock 2010). Their combined ability to reach very deep down into, and create spontaneous, dynamic linkages and relations between, everyday lives of individual voters at very local levels of action and meaning has, in a sense, contributed show how we can manage to bridge the pragmatic divide between physical and “virtual” forms of action, so that one medium complements the other as instruments for exercise of our democratic rights, and also our considerable human capacity to act in reasonable ways as moral agents.

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some more contemporary philosophers like Ted Honderich, Carl Ginet, Daniel Dennet, Peter and Galen Strawson, Daniel Wegener. See also the Wikipedia entry for "Free Will": http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Free_will for a condensed overview of the historical and conceptual background of the debate, with some of the more discussed issues in this connection and numerous bibliographical links. The online Stanford Encyclopaedia of Philosophy entry: "Free Will": <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/freewill/> also offers a brief discussion of many key issues that have been taken into consideration in this connection over the years, as well as a substantial bibliography.

20 Himma (2007)

Note

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2 <http://www.facebook.com/>

3 <http://www.twitter.com/>

4 <http://www.myspace.com/>

5 "ICT" stands for Information and Communication Technologies

6 http://ec.europa.eu/research/era/index_en.html

7 <http://ec.europa.eu/research/index.cfm>

8 http://www.governo.it/GovernoInforma/Dossier/piano_e_gov_2012/

9 http://portal.unesco.org/ci/en/ev.phpURL_ID=3038&URL_DO=DO_TOPIC&URL_SECTION=201.html

10 http://portal.unesco.org/ci/en/ev.phpURL_ID=4291&URL_DO=DO_TOPIC&URL_SECTION=201.html

11 http://portal.unesco.org/ci/en/ev.phpURL_ID=23315&URL_DO=DO_TOPIC&URL_SECTION=201.html

12 <http://e-gov.dec.uwi.edu/index.html>

13 See for example the information on the websites of The Center for Urban Studies (CENTER): <http://www.centerforurbanstudies.com/> and The Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations: <http://www.fao.org/participation/ourvision.html>

14 http://www.coc.int/t/ngo/Source/Code_good_practice_en.pdf

15 <http://www.cipra.org/en/future-in-the-alps/questions/question6/questions/question5/new-forms-of-decision-making>

16 <http://www.cipra.org/en/future-in-the-alps/questions>

17 1) Future in the Alps (Wolfgang Pfefferkorn), 2) Urban Planning Institute of the Republic of Slovenia (Mojca Golobič, Sergeja Praper), 3) Swiss Federal Research Institute, Section Landscape and Society (Marc Zaugg Stern, Matthias Buchecker)

18 See Ainley (2005); Himma (2007) and Jeffery (ed.) (2008) for recent publications in this area. See also the Centre for the Study of Mind in Nature website: <http://www.csmn.uio.no/research/moral-agency> for presentation of several areas of current research in this field, carried out by a group of philosophers based at the University of Oslo in Norway.

19 Some well-known "classical" philosophers who easily spring to mind in this particular context are Thomas Hobbes, John Hume, John Locke, Arthur Schopenhauer, as well as