

PAPER IV

Multicultural participatory development of a civic social media service

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MULTICULTURAL PARTICIPATORY DEVELOPMENT OF A CIVIC SOCIAL MEDIA SERVICE

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ABSTRACT

While social media has given rise to user communities and their active civic participation, the public sector lacks ways of involving citizens as co-innovators of public services. In this paper we describe a case study of participatory innovation of a social media service for promoting and strengthening immigrants' civic participation. In our community-driven design approach several challenges were identified related to working in a multicultural and multi-organizational context facilitated by several researchers. Shared ownership is a necessity for co-innovation of social media service, but a challenge for effective design process. Our results indicate that the project was not only important for co-innovation of the new service but also for shaping the participating organizations and individuals.

INTRODUCTION

Social media provide a means for reaching also minorities that are not active in traditional democratic processes. In a relatively new country of immigration such as Finland, enhancing political participation of immigrants is becoming of growing importance, since this group currently has disappointingly low participation figures (Wilhelmsson et al 2010). The question of how to enable participation and involve these people in the society and its political processes is crucial when trying to achieve inclusive society and democracy. At the same time, processes initiated by researchers or government agencies may not become truly owned by the participants (Mäkinen 2009).

In this paper, we describe a case study of involving immigrants in the participatory design process of a civic social networking service called Monimos. In this process immigrants became also owners of the service that was developed. We describe how the innovation environment is different in a case with multicultural organizations and participants, and how the collaboration process related to the experience of ownership. We present findings based on the researcher reflection as well as interviews with participants. Based on the reflections and interviews, we discuss the challenges as well as the successes of the participatory innovation processes in a complex collaboration environment like this.

RELATED RESEARCH INVOLVING USERS IN DESIGN PROCESSES

Participatory design (PD) has a long tradition in information system development especially in the workplace context. The concept of PD is strongly linked to the ideal of democracy (in work organizations) and every individual's involvement in the decisions affecting their daily (working) lives (Damoradan 1996). PD aims at creating a closer relationship between users and developers by offering a common space where the knowledge from both sides can be combined (Muller 2002). Users are involved as active design partners in the development process (Druin 2002) using methods like workshops, scenarios and mock-ups (Schuler & Namioka 1993, Ehn & Kyng 1991).

The more recent approach called meta-design is grounded in the assumption that future uses and problems cannot be completely anticipated at design time. Instead of finished systems, design should be targeted in creating open platforms that users can modify themselves during the use time based on the new problems and needs that the same service can be used for. Users are regarded as co-designers. (Fischer 2009) It becomes unclear where the design stops and the community starts (Hagen & MacFarlane 2008).

Meta-design approach stresses that participation culture is not determined only by the technology that is being developed but equally importantly by incremental shifts in human behaviour and social organizations (Fischer 2009)

USER PARTICIPATION

IN SOCIAL MEDIA

Social media services differ from the traditional information systems in that sense that the content is created by users and the ways of using the service cannot be fully anticipated in beforehand. Moreover, since no separate releases are needed for new software versions, social media services are often developed continuously (beta development) and the service development cannot be separated from its use. Therefore, the traditional distinction between “users” and “developers” does not hold anymore (Fischer 2009).

The term “user” becomes questionable also, since individuals in social media services are not merely consumers, but rather people who are switching between the roles of a consumer and producer (also referred as a “prosumer”). Axel Bruns (2008) uses the term *produsage* to illustrate the social media based production. Content and community are equally (or even more) important design issues than the technical features.

When developing social media services, users and their needs cannot be studied only in an individual level, but moreover from the community perspective. Since social media is used with and in relation to other people, it must be designed to support collaborative actions. Instead of user-centric design methods, community-centric approach is needed (Brandtzæg et al. 2009).

Hagen and MacFarlane (2008) introduce the concept of seeding when designing social media services in which users very much define the success of



Figure 1: Ideation workshop.

the service. Designers’ role becomes to facilitate and encourage the use as well as create conditions for participation: to “seed” content, community and connections that can continue. Instead of recruiting research subjects or “users”, designers need to work with a potential community of contributors. (Hagen & MacFarlane 2008)

MONIMOS CO-DESIGN PROCESS

Monimos is a joint case study of the research projects Somus (by three research organizations) and EPACE (Exchanging good practices for the promotion of an active citizenship in the EU, coordinated by the Ministry of Justice) that both examine the possibilities of social media in civic participation and collaboration with the public sector. The Monimos case study focuses on developing social media tools especially for immigrants and multicultural associations in the Helsinki metropolitan area.

The case study started with creating understanding of immigrants’ needs and current challenges in civic participation by interviewing civil servants working with immigration issues and the founder of a multicultural network in Helsinki. The issues and possible solutions were further discussed in two workshops with a group of emigrants and other people working with immigrants (NGOs, media, civil servants) (See Figure 1 and Figure 2). Based on common interests, we started to collaborate with Moniheli, the network of multicultural associations in the Helsinki metropolitan area.

The objectives of Moniheli network are very similar to the Monimos project goals. Moniheli aims to be a multicultural forum for the immigrant organizations around Helsinki metropolitan area and thus increase and improve cooperation between various organizations dealing with similar issues and aiming for the same outcome. Moniheli has just recently become officially a registered association and is in the final year of its “ramp-up project”. At the moment it has over 30 member associations. Moniheli has an active board, with 16 members, an advisory board of 6 members and 2 employees. Moniheli believes in the idea of civil society and better possibilities to influence on society as a group in which all members



Figure 2: Original 18 ideas with votes on them.

have the same objectives. When establishing the network, their aim is to involve all members actively and equally in planning and decision-making.

Our case study was based on participatory design (carried out in face-to-face workshops and online environments) and iterative software development. The original goal of the research project was to develop an information and knowledge platform for immigrant groups in accessible and understandable form based on their everyday life needs and issues. Further, goals were to enable immigrants’ participation in the processes of knowledge building and public discussion, and to establish open interfaces and interaction between immigrants, multicultural associations and various government agencies.

The more precise definition of the end result and partly also the participation practices were left open for negotiation with the participating user community. We first organized an open workshop for Moniheli members to evaluate initial ideas and choose the one to be developed further (See Figure 3). Based on the group discussions we decided to combine ideas of solutions arena extended with ideas of a multicultural event calendar. Since the Moniheli network did not yet have any online service, there were high expectations of creating a comprehensive solution for wide range of purposes (basic information, network administration, marketing, creating job opportunities, getting funding via websites etc.).



Figure 3: Concept definition at a Moniheli workshop.

After the first Moniheli workshop a core team was created that consisted originally of 10 immigrants and 2 employees of the Moniheli network as well as a web developer, a designer, and six researchers of different fields. One of the Moniheli project workers invited the team members so that they represented various backgrounds (nationality, gender, professions) and had interest in social media and joining the new service development. During the process, eight new immigrants joined the team or participated in some workshops, because of their role in Moniheli or other link to Monimos. The team was therefore not static, and original members also left the group during the process.

The core team held ten monthly workshops; in addition, researchers and the developer had weekly online or face to face meetings. The design workshops were the most important space for creating a vision for the social media service, making design decisions and managing practical issues, such as marketing and press release. Participants could also attend these meetings remotely, using Skype, EtherPad and Bambuser as communication tools. In the early workshops, the focus was in idea generation, use scenarios and use



Figure 4: Remote participation using Owela (Open Web Lab).

Code	Gender	Role in Moniheli	Participation phase	Nationality
P1	Male	Moniheli chairman	From start to end	Asian
P2	Male	Moniheli project worker	From start to mid	Finnish
P3	Female	Moniheli advisory board member	At the end (not official team member)	African
P4	Female	None, Moniheli outsider	From start to end	Asian
P5	Male	Moniheli board member	From mid to end	African
P6	Male	Moniheli board member	From start to end	African
P7	Male	Moniheli board member	From start to end	African

Table 1: Persons interviewed.

case descriptions, whereas later workshops concentrated on evaluating the Monimos website that was iteratively developed throughout the development process based on participants' feedback.

Between the workshops, the core team worked online in Owela co-design space (See Figure 4) and via email. Participation via Owela was open also for anyone outside the core team. People were able to make suggestions regarding the service concept, features, layout and the name of the service, and discuss and vote on these (See feature voting in the Figure 5). In final stages, three chat sessions were organized for co-testing the website.

The result of the process is a social media service called Monimos.fi that was developed iteratively based on open source platforms WordPress and BuddyPress. The service was launched publicly in June 2010 as a meeting place for internationally minded people in Finland (See Figure 6). The service has been used by immigrants, Finns and multicultural associations for networking, discussion and promoting events.

DATA COLLECTION

The audio from workshops were recorded and research diary was used for making notes during the process.



Figure 5: Online voting and deliberation on feature prioritization.

In addition, seven participants were interviewed by the authors of this paper during October 2010 - about a year after the project started and about 4 months after the service was launched. Interview transcriptions were read and annotated by two researchers, using a collaborative annotation tool for qualitative data, called Saturate. The persons interviewed and their roles are defined in the Table 1.

EVALUATION OF DATA

Interviewees were chosen based on their willingness to volunteer, and therefore only participants, who were active at the end of the development process, were interviewed. It would have been valuable to gain insight also from those people who were not particularly active in the workshops or dropped out during the process. However, the reasons behind passiveness were not necessarily related to the development process, but were understandable personal issues (e.g. maternity leave or taking care of sick family members) or lack of time. Also researchers from the EPACE project could have been interviewed as well as the immigrants participating in the process merely via online tools and not being part of the core team.

Five of the interviews were held in English, and two in Finnish. Except one, all the interviewees used foreign language in the interviews. Although



Figure 6: Monimos.fi screenshot.

their knowledge of language was good, there may be some nuances that are interpreted differently. Using foreign language may lead to simplifications and unintentional emphasises.

RESULTS

Team members' experiences of the participation process were studied in the interviews. The possibilities and challenges of the process are grouped according to the following themes: Multiculturality, Participator roles, Civic participation, Working in a forming ecosystem, and Multiorganizational collaboration.

MULTICULTURALITY

Multiculturality was a core element of the project, since the service was developed for immigrants and with immigrants. The team consisted of immigrants from Africa and Asia as well as Finnish researchers and developers. Although not all immigrant groups in Finland were represented, the distribution of members corresponded to the Moniheli member organizations, which was seen positively. Even the participants realize that bringing in people from various cultures and backgrounds will be difficult, however, that was taken as a defining parameter.

P4: "Well, because I know that there's like, when I entered the room and there are a lot of people from different countries, I already expected it to be chaotic. I'm sorry."

Several of the interviewed persons noted that research on immigrants tends to be observing and even considered exploiting the "research subjects". In the beginning, participants were mistrustful of researchers and the aims of the process, since they did not want to experience yet another research project, where their opinions are asked but nothing will be done in practice or the solutions do not fit the immigrants' needs.

Despite the need to get insight from various cultures, it is not just the range of cultures but rather range of opinions that is appreciated. The participants did not regard themselves as immigrants but rather as an entrepreneur, student, researcher, citizen activist, husband or software developer. Their knowledge and know-how of different issues, like marketing or project management, were more notable than their

nationality.

P2: "Of course the cultural backgrounds were important in this project, but also the fact that there were different people, who were able to question or ask something that the other person would probably not be able to."

Although the researchers considered the core team to represent the real end users: immigrants and other internationally minded people, the participants themselves did not surprisingly feel the same. It was often noted that the end users should be taken into account more, and more diverse people should be present in the workshops. The team members felt being a more privileged group of immigrants and worried about other immigrants' skills and possibilities to be active in online civic participation. Some participants took unofficially a role of a representative of a certain user group, e.g. refugees or business people, and brought their point of view into the discussion.

PARTICIPATOR ROLES IN THE TEAM

The roles in the core team were not defined explicitly in any point. All participants wanted to be regarded as equal team members, which was both a strength and a challenge.

P2: "I didn't feel like NOT being on the same level with the developers and Ministry people and others. At least I felt myself equal with others."

The workshops were very much based on deliberative discussion and decision-making was difficult and time consuming. Since it was unclear, who is actually the owner of the process, no one dared to make the decisions. Team members would have expected more facilitation in the workshops either from researchers' or Moniheli management's side.

P4: "In the way that it was facilitated, I think that's the downside of having this participatory thing, because you have to like really make sure that everyone gets a say on something. And if you do that, it just doesn't work without like... Without a person who's going to say, "Okay focus. This is what we're going to talk about." I think that's one thing we really lacked. No one's really facilitating."

The team members could not articulate what their role in the team was.

The team composition was supposed to be fixed during the whole process, but of various reasons, some people joined the team later on.

P2: "In a way, if a person wasn't involved from the very beginning, he didn't know the process we've been through, how we've come up with the things, so we had to go through it all again - and it didn't always get understood, what we've been through."

After launching the Monimos service publicly, different teams were founded to be responsible of content, community, marketing and administration. According to some participants, it would have been important to divide the group already earlier into those smaller teams which should have had clear responsibilities and power. However, guidelines and facilitation of the work would have been expected instead of letting the teams work on their own.

CIVIC PARTICIPATION

As the given goal for the project was to enable civic participation of immigrants, the goals were set high by the participants - perhaps unreasonably high. Since the discussion was much about democracy, the process was expected to be very democratic, causing difficulties for the researchers.

P2: "Well particularly good was the fact that everyone got their voice heard. In a way, though, democratically thinking, there could've been even more immigrants...but that would've made the work process even more complicated..."

The rather open goal setting had its problems and participants would have expected the researchers to define limits of what's reasonable to aim within the project and what is not.

P4: "And I remember you saying that everyone can say anything that they want, that you're interested in knowing everybody's opinions, so I kind of thought, somehow thought, that that's a dangerous place to go to. I'm serious. Because it's just impossible to collaborate all these ideas."

The participation in the Monimos development was also considered as one kind of civic participation. The Monimos development represented a participation process, where people were heard and at the same time they were

developing a service that provides opportunities for civic participation. Being part of the team gave members new contacts and better understanding of how social media could be used in civic participation. Also the fact that the Ministry of Justice was part of the project, made the people feel empowered and they wanted to use their opportunity to influence.

WORKING IN A FORMING ECOSYSTEM

It came a little bit as a surprise to the researchers how immature phase the Moniheli network was in. Our hypothesis was that this project could strongly boost Moniheli and be an effective and modern tool to start getting people together for collective action.

On the relation to Moniheli and its formation processes, the participants had quite conflicting views. Some participants thought that the Monimos service was a good tool for the forming phase of the Moniheli and the way of working in the Monimos team influenced positively also Moniheli practices.

P2: "In a way this project shaped Moniheli practices, for example the meeting practices and such...and it taught how to deal with different people in this context."

Another viewpoint was that Monimos project became too chaotic, since Moniheli did not have clear structure and decision-making procedures and was therefore not yet ready to take the ownership of the Monimos service.

The relation between Moniheli and Monimos caused a lot of debate during the process, since it was not clear to the association itself. The Monimos service was not meant to be only for Moniheli members and a few people outside the Moniheli network also participated in the team. One of the team members that was not part of the Moniheli network found her role confusing.

P4: "Sometimes it's like they know a lot of things about Moniheli and they just -- make the decisions and sometimes it feels like, 'I can't make any decisions here because I'm the oddball'"

MULTIORGANIZATIONAL COLLABORATION

Different organisations participating in the process had their own visions of the end result and they could not be ar-

ticulated clearly enough in the beginning of the design process. Just after seeing the first drafts of the website, people realised what we are really developing and started to argue about the goals and to create a common vision, which took a lot of time.

The design process took a lot of time also because each participating organization brought its own slowness to the process. Some team members preferred discussion and unanimous decision-making, where as others wished to have a strong leader or facilitator in the process. Some decisions, like the name of the service, were handled too democratically according to some team members. On the other hand, design decisions made by a professional designer were not regarded democratic enough.

Although there was sometimes too much bureaucracy and discussion, it was still seen that the only possibility to create this kind of civic participation service, is to involve the immigrants themselves in the design process.

DISCUSSION

From the researchers' point of view, we experienced a paradox between conflicting expectations: on one hand there was a desire for a well-designed development process (traditional participatory design), and on the other hand, we wanted to let user participants make decisions and become the owners of the planned service (community-driven design). We tried to design a service that fulfils the needs of the Moniheli network, but at the same time we knew that social media services cannot be fully designed before their use. The owner (association) of the service cannot decide, how the members will use the service. The best way to see, how people use the service and what kind of features are needed, is to let them try it out during the development phase. We also did that in the Monimos project, but a more systematic way to make changes in the service design during and after the beta testing phase, would have been needed.

Unclear ownership and unspoken roles of the participating organizations resulted in a slow development process. On one hand it was seen extremely important that the immigrants felt empowered in the process and had their

say on the service that was being developed for them. On the other hand the participants would have wished to have more facilitation and stronger leadership in the process. Since the roles and responsibilities between Moniheli and the two research projects were not clear even for the researchers, no one clearly knew, who would be allowed to take the leader role and make the final decisions regarding to the Monimos service. Based on our experiences we claim that a "service owner" is needed also when creating community-based social media services.

Democracy was one of the goals of the Monimos design project, and deliberative discussion was considered important in the workshops and emails. However, democracy does not always go hand in hand with good design solutions: sometimes a professional designer knows better, what kind of things work in reality and what not, although the team members would wish something else. Sticking with decisions that were once made would have been beneficial for the development of the web service instead of continuous negotiation about the same issues.

One of the challenges in participatory design is finding the participants that represent the potential user community and are willing to be involved in the design process. In our case, the core team members were chosen based on their own interest for social media and they were not aimed to represent all immigrants in Finland or even all Moniheli members. However, the team members themselves felt that the "real end users" were not taken into account in the development process. From the researchers' perspective the team members were "end users", but a broader group of end users should have been taken into account, when defining the use cases of the service and especially in the testing phase. Team members represent the future community and have links to other potential users. During the beta testing, they could have been invited more friends to communicate on the online forum.

Since researchers and users worked together as a team and responsibilities were shared also for the immigrants, they became equal team members and kind of researchers or designers them-

selves. The members in the core team did not consider themselves as passive objects but were willing to take an active role already during the development process and divide into teams that tried to take responsibility of certain tasks. Even more tasks could have been given for smaller teams instead of discussing all issues in the monthly workshops with around 10 people. On the other hand, participation in the whole process and in all meetings made the participants feel themselves as owners of the service.

This could be seen as an ideal for designing social media services that support produsage way of doing. There are no users anymore, but all community members feel responsibility for producing content and building the community. This could have been better supported with the seeding approach, in which researchers' role is to support the community in content production and linking people instead of making design decisions (Hagen & MacFarlane 2008).

The workshops should have concentrated even more on the topics that help the community to stay alive after the research project. How to produce content, how to make community work, how to use viral marketing on the web, etc. Software design issues should not be so central. More importantly, there should be a mechanism for quick decision-making and changes in the system design based on feedback and experiences during the use.

While the goal of the project was to empower people and be even an enabler for organizational learning, the complexity of the participant and stakeholder network presented surprising impediments. Simply the fact that the Moniheli network was just being officially formed during the project surprised participants – the project process helped uncover issues in the decision-making process of the organization. Despite a strong will and belief in the project, it was difficult for people and organization to find resources for the project. At best, on the other hand,

people and organizations were able to initiate concrete actions as a result of the project. Organizations got new members, and one individual even founded a company based on public discussion on the service.

Although both researchers and other team members identified a lot of problems in the design process, the participants were still satisfied with the end result. Although the use of the Monimos service has not yet become as big as the team members initially hoped, they have had concrete benefits of using it. Also the development process has been beneficial as a learning process, networking opportunity and an act of civic participation.

CHALLENGES IN ACTION RESEARCH Mäkinen (2009) has identified challenges of action research, when developing social media service for civic participation with a community-driven approach. Some of the challenges are listed in the Table 2 together in parallel with how the issues were taken into account in the Monimos case study.

CONCLUSIONS

In this paper we presented a case study of designing a multicultural social media service Monimos together with its users. There were several challenges that resulted from the democratic participation of several partner organisations as well as individuals without clear roles and addressed responsibilities. Unstated roles of participants, the complex network of the participant organisations and blurry ownership both of the innovation process as well as the final product slowed down the process and sometimes frustrated participants. However, when creating a social media service, the system cannot be fully planned before its use. A bottom-up design approach (designing and refining the service during its use) is more useful although it makes the process more chaotic.

The design team members were both users and producers in a same way than they are in the final service as well. Therefore the division to users and designers does not hold in the design process either. Instead of designers and researchers, there is need for facilitators that support the “prosumer teams” in producing content and building

Action research challenges	Experiences from the Monimos case study
The project influences basically only those community members who participate in the project	Participation was made possible for everyone using online tools, but more attention should have been paid in concretely involving those people via existing social networks.
Continuity is a challenge, when project funding ends.	Monimos service was planned to be an integral part of Moniheli's way of doing things and part of their official web presence. The core team was divided into substance teams that can continue working after the research project ends.
Lack of time and technical challenges in participation	Workshops were held only once a month, and online tools enabled quick contributions between the workshops. However, more face-to-face guidance for social media way of working would have been needed.
Too ambitious goals in relation to resources	The web service was developed iteratively, but it took too long time for the users to see the first version online in order to see, what we are really speaking about.
Community expects that the researchers lead the process, although they should be just facilitators that empower the community to act	Thematic teams were founded among the participants to take responsibility on different issues without researchers' influence in decision-making. More facilitation and guidance for the teams would have been needed.
Misevaluation of community's needs, resources and participation possibilities	This was challenging in our case as well, but the development process also partly formed new practices and opened new possibilities.
Co-development project may not have real influence in the society	Monimos service was linked into the normal practices of Moniheli. Monimos discussions have also a link to real live events, in which the online discussions can be taken further.

Table 2: Typical action research challenges (Mäkinen 2009) and experiences from the Monimos case.

up the community. The success of the process cannot be measured only with the efficiency in systems design or the number of active members in the Monimos service. Interestingly, the process resulted in some unanticipated effects. Some members of the team mentioned learning a lot of multiculturalism, creating contacts with other immigrants, getting to know new tools for distance collaboration, or getting inspiration for creating an own company. In that sense, people could achieve during the design process things that were goals of the social media service.

The design process became a social media for multicultural civic participation itself.

The Monimos process helped also Moniheli make missing processes explicit and define its ways of working internally and with its stakeholders. The participatory innovation process catalyzed and facilitated the shaping of Moniheli processes and activities.

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