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Unpuzzling Policies

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Abstract

"Puzzled by Policy?" (PbP) is a 3-year e-democracy pilot action project launched Oct-2010, funded by the Competitiveness and Innovation Framework Programme of the EU.

PbP has taken up the challenge to reconnect a disillusioned society to policy making by informing, consulting and empowering citizens at both national and European level, focussing on migration policies at four pilot sites: Athens, Turin, the Canary Islands, and Hungary.

PbP builds on pre-existing web technologies. Its web portal involves (1) *Policy Profiler*, a quiz positioning users between liberal and conservative attitudes to immigration, and among stances of stakeholder organizations. (2) *U-debate*, a structured forum lets users consult topics in their own language. Policy Profiler also runs as a (3) *widget*, a vehicle for viral marketing on social networking sites.

Dissemination events, migration news and forum posts are also wall-posted. Pilot leads generate regular feedbacks to and from decision makers on the accumulated opinions.

U-debate seems less popular than the quiz. While some cannot properly contribute to the debate tree, less structure makes summarizing the opinions for feedback more difficult. Citizens, NGOs and decision-makers all wait for others to attend before engaging the platform. A large immigrant population (as in Spain) can help attract a critical mass, but then a custom moderation regime is needed. Different topics of interests across countries also fragment the forum – automatic translation is little to pool users. Citizens increasingly depend on Facebook and waver at using different arenas, while portal operators need to keep adapting if they want to interoperate. Differences in top-down and bottom-up approaches to policy making could possibly benefit from dedicated frameworks in U-debate.

PbP may reach its target number of users, but can it accomplish a sustainable solution from a set budget, in three years of a fast changing economic, social, political and technological environment?

Keywords

eParticipation, immigration, project, policy, sustainability, tool

1 Introduction

The 2009 ICT PSP Work Programme of the EU funded several pilot actions under Theme 3 (ICT for Government and Governance), Objective 5, "e-Participation - empower and involve citizens in transparent decision making in the EU". The overall aim was defined as:

"to address with ICT based solutions today's challenges in policy making. These include: fighting the perceived democratic deficit, which requires a new relationship between politicians and citizens, and which is particularly challenging at EU level; reconnecting citizens with politics and policy-making and sustaining citizens' involvement; reducing the complexity of decision-making and legislation processes within the EU." (EC, 2009a)

Pilot Type B actions are expected to last 2 to 3 years, with one year of real operation in at least four eligible countries. Regarding applied ICT they are supposed to "take-up completed R&D work, may extend already tested prototype services or may combine / integrate several partial solutions to realise a new innovative approach" (EC, 2009b). The requirements can be summarized and matched to usual terms of project monitoring methodology as follows:

- Input
 - Exploit the experience of previous Commission-funded programmes
 - Exploit Web2.0 and social networking
 - Exploit tested ICT solutions
 - Build upon the needs of all stakeholder groups of the policy making process
- Output
 - Improve and quicken access to relevant policies
 - Improve the understanding of legal texts for non-specialists
 - Support the drafting of legislation
 - Ensure high accessibility

- Break the language barrier
 - Ensure legal and organisational feasibility
 - Produce and apply an appropriate evaluation framework
 - Perform effective dissemination
 - Develop a sustainable business model
- Impact
- Mobilize all types of stakeholders to directly participate
 - Prove concept with a significant number of users

The “Puzzled by Policy? – Helping you be part of the EU” (hereafter PbP) proposal (PbP, 2010) addressed the set of requirements successfully; the project consortium was awarded a grant agreement and the three-year project started on 1st October 2010.

2 The “Puzzled by Policy” approach

PbP responds to the democratic deficit reflected in a low level of activity in elections by supporting participatory actions of a wide range of stakeholders. PbP

“aims to end this detachment and disillusionment by providing all citizens – regardless of their literacy skills or subject matter knowledge – a unique platform/portal to learn about policy at the EU level and find out what particular policies mean to them on the national level so they can contribute to policy drafting and impact assessments. Equally important, Puzzled by Policy will help decision makers at both the National and European level better understand the impact of their policies on constituents by feeding citizen reactions” (PbP, 2010)

PbP’s web based platform is combining a series of pre-existing eParticipation tools. The module called Policy Profiler is based on EU Profiler, a Voting Advice Application created by a non-partisan consortium for the 2009 European Parliament elections. EU Profiler gives users a “political profile” based on their responses to a questionnaire of 30 statements, indicating their level of agreement to them (or choose the “no opinion” option), as well as the perceived importance of the issues. A user’s profile is offered while comparing it to a record of positions held by the political parties on the same 30 issues. While 28 issues were generic, two only applied to each of the countries. The project prevented party biases by the selection of statements by relying on an analysis of pre-existing manifestos and numerous expert opinions. “Country Teams” of about 4 people in each of the 30 participating country, often political scientists, researched and coded the relevant political parties, resulting in party profiles. “Their work is the backbone of the project, meticulously consulting and researching each party and finding evidence of their policy positions.” (EU Profiler, 2012) Each statement was also “coded”, i.e. measured in two dimensions, found to be the most relevant in the elections, representing scales running from the Socioeconomic left to Socioeconomic right; and from Pro EU integration to Anti EU integration. Eventually the tool calculates and ranks matches and displays the results graphically, including the placement of the respondent and the parties in a “compass”, a coordinate system of the aforementioned dimensions. The tool gave users greater awareness of the issues being debated and of the intentions of political parties. EU Profiler had been used by about 2.5 Million users by the time of the EP election and kept attracting more users even afterwards.

The PbP concept also supposed to support collective deliberation of issues. For this purpose, a structured forum was envisioned and eventually the module called U-debate, provided by the Athens Technology Centre S.A. was implemented. U-debate has its precursor in the LEX-IS eParticipation project running 2007 to 2008, funded from FP6. LEX-IS envisioned improving the legislative process in National Parliaments through enhancing public participation in the preparatory stages (legislation formation and debate) by using novel IT tools and methodologies, and involving especially younger citizens in the public debate. It enabled viewing the argumentation structure of a law that was under formation, using semantic annotation and argument visualization techniques. The forums have Topics at the top level, which contain Threads. Under each Thread users can post in one of several categories. At the root level, only Issues are allowed. For any Issue, users can post Alternatives (proposed solutions to the related issue). Alternatives accept the types Pro-Argument or Con-Argument. To Pro-Arguments or Con-Arguments, users can also link these same argument types. For any types, users can also post in the most neutral type: Comments. The sum of the posts will form a so-called discussion tree. (LEX-IS, 2009) This forum concept was successfully piloted in the Austrian, the Hellenic and the Lithuanian Parliaments, as well as at the Model European Parliament, a grassroots initiative of European Schools (Wikipedia, 2012a).

A third building block of PbP is the PbP Widget, based on the Beemboard Widget Syndication Platform, owned by Cyntelix Corporation B.V. The Widget works as a small website with interactive content, which can be embedded in Social Networking Sites, personal blogs, etc., also allowing quick and easy sharing, thus going viral. The solution has a strong position in localizing content and managing and monitoring widget use, and has had millions of users worldwide.

PbP chose to support policies around immigration in four pilot countries, i.e. Greece (Athens), Hungary, Italy (City of Turin) and Spain (Canary Islands), as well as across the EU. As it is argued:

“The EU is challenged on a daily basis to deal with migration: a challenge that is increasingly characterised by skill and labour shortages, competition for highly skilled workers, and the need to integrate migrants into host societies while managing the pressure of illegal immigration. Although significant progress toward harmonisation was achieved with the June 2008 adoption of the Return Directive, Europe still lacks a harmonised approach to immigration. Moreover, even supporters of the recent Directive complained about widespread public misinformation on the topic and a need for greater consultation – complaints which echo wider concerns at the EU level about a perceived democratic deficit and disconnect between citizens and policymaking.” (PbP, 2010)

Expectedly, users access a fun and easy-to-use PbP platform either directly at the main portal or via a widget on social media websites or mobile applications. Then they can take a short quiz to find out how their views on immigration relate to those of major national and European stakeholders (parties or NGOs). Those accessing the widget are asked to share it and thus recommend the platform to their friends. Second, users may feel ready to participate in a visual online discussion about the topic. Third, they can review and evaluate the position of EU and national policy makers (responding to preceding user activity). PbP maintains a strong presence on social media sites, sharing news, guiding interested surfers to the Platform. The main measurable goal of PbP is to attract at least 6000 people to use its platform in a real-world setting, and at least 400 hard-to-reach users. This segment was defined as a mixed set of immigrants, the unemployed, the elderly (over 50), the young (less than 18 years old), and the uneducated (finished primary school or less).

The choice of available functionalities and their interaction in PbP is also a reflection on how the Consortium theorises what the policy actors might need to attain higher levels of engagement. As Lee et al note, eParticipation projects quite often fail not because of weak IT solutions but because general barriers to participation remain. Such barriers are, notably, low interest in policy, low trust in government, or low level of understanding regarding politics and policy processes. Thus, it is worth revisiting the theoretical model of policy formulation (Lee et al. 2011). Lasswell’s policy stage (or linear) model (Lasswell, 1951) can be considered the ‘traditional textbook approach’ to policy modelling, breaking down the process into distinct, sequential stages from the identification of policy problems to the evaluation of a policy’s impact. However, the rigidity of this sequence and the exclusion of actors other than policy elites have been criticised in this model. Today Kingdon’s multiple-stream model seems more accepted for its reflection of the loose-coupling of real-world policy making (Kingdon, 1984). Here, policy change only happens in a “policy window”, i.e. when the “problem stream” (popular interest), the “policy stream” (legislative efforts) and the “political stream” (willingness of political parties to endorse an issue) meet, and there must also be some “policy entrepreneur” who champions (manages and sacrifices its resources for) an issue.

PbP also recognizes certain approaches that try to understand how knowledge is generated and utilized in the policy process. Jones advocates that the *participation* of citizens is a legitimate way of generating knowledge by adding their experiential knowledge on social issues. Another significant source of knowledge is of *interdisciplinary* nature: the combination of a variety of aspects, expertises, and experiences, including citizens’ participatory narratives (Jones, 2009). Weiss’ *enlightenment model* suggests that the existing knowledge base of policy makers can, over time, be broadened by the results of scientific research (Weiss, 1991). Thus, the involvement of different types of actors and the mediation of information or narratives might gradually “enlighten” decision makers, or indeed all stakeholders, and shift conceptual thinking towards demanded policy changes. The “policy window” itself could be understood as a condition when citizens, interest groups and policy experts not only have the same agenda but also have sufficiently grown aware of the other actors’ engagement, terminology, and points of view.

Building upon the multiple-stream model and the knowledge utilisation theories mentioned, PbP has chosen to pursue a three-tiered approach: *Inform-Consult-Empower*. These types of efforts reflect a growing commitment and are also in line with the three levels of participation in e-democracy initiatives: e-enabling, e-engaging, and e-empowering (Macintosh 2004).

At the Inform tier (e-enabling) policy actors are provided with existing knowledge. This is done at PbP mainly through the Policy Profiler, which covers a good sample of topical issues (problem stream) and possible policy responses (policy stream) about immigration policy. A statistical analysis of users’ responses on expected policies and perceived importance of subjects can also reveal general public sentiment about immigration to interested experts or decision makers. The distribution of page-views and contributions within U-debate (the forum facility) will indicate what topics are in the problem stream.

At the Consult tier (e-engaging), policy actors are invited to discuss existing issues (top-down consultation). Contributors are expected to be, to a certain extent, informed, be it through the Policy Profiler or otherwise. The deliberation helps formulate policy problems and potential solutions, thus enriching both streams.

At the Empower tier (e-empowering), new issues identified (bottom-up) by policy actors may be added to the problem stream and new ideas or solutions may be added to the policy stream, again, within U-debate. Empowered users are expected to actively contribute in the long term and perhaps become policy entrepreneurs, addressing stakeholders in whatever ways and channels needed to ensure a common understanding of the challenge and help

sustain the momentum through the sequence of policy process from agenda setting to implementation or beyond. Empowering, in a more general sense, is also happening through a system a feedbacks provided by national pilot facilitators. In every few months consultation reports are prepared and published on users' activity for each pilot site. In turn, decision makers are invited to officially comment these reports, also to be published on the platform. This practice directly addresses "a low trust in how government uses citizens' input", possibly the second highest barrier to eParticipation (OECD, 2009).

In the course of integrating the chosen tools into a coherent Platform, they had to be more or less adapted.

The number of statements in the Policy Profiler was set to 15, because the same quiz was to appear in the Widget, and experience suggested keeping the number of pages low. Only one statement remained country specific. The policy landscape of the EU and the trial countries was carefully assessed to arrive at specific sub-domains of immigration, i.e. Immigration for (1) employment purposes, (2) studying purposes, or (3) reasons of family reunification; (4) Long-term residents and naturalization policy; (5) Illegal immigration. These categories later also served as forum topics. The compass positioning respondents now had the specific and expressive "less/more immigrants", and "less/more rights for immigrants" on the horizontal and the vertical axes, respectively. The tasks of "Country Teams" in the EU Profiler was performed by pilot partners of the PbP project, however, political parties were less responsive and their manifestos failed to address immigration policy more often than in the setting of the original tool.

U-debate has also undergone some changes. Unlike earlier, U-debate in PbP promises to bring together local debates in more languages. Its interface has been localized for each pilot site and is also available in English. For debate content written by users, automatic translation has been implemented. In addition to national topics, U-debate was to host European debates, too. These have been placed in a quasi fifth trial site, displaying content in English as default. Initial Topics, Threads and even posts have been mostly added to the Forum by trial partners and the policy expert partner (for the EU debates) in the consortium.

Some functionalities were changed later into the project. First, the Spanish pilot site enjoyed a rush of contributors, much attributable to the exceptional topicality of immigration issues there. Users even created new Threads but failed to notice similar or practically identical content already at hand, obstructing moderation. Subsequently, users were not allowed to create Threads by themselves, but a new tool (Disqus) was added to the platform, allowing them to propose new topics. However, to date this facility seems under-utilized. For other sites with less activity in general – like Hungary, with a foreign population of only 2% as opposed to 14% in Spain in 2008 (PbP, 2011) – the restriction had no benefit, while possibly losing some users. Second, users reported that posting categories were too difficult to follow. Often, they were stuck not knowing which category to choose or finding that the one they wanted was not available. In response, rules on posting categories were lifted. Third, the U-debate interface was upgraded mid-term to address some user comments, most importantly enhancing the visibility of posts on each page.

The PbP Widget implementation had to retrieve data from a repository shared with the Policy Profiler operating directly on the PbP Platform, in the preferred language of the user. Current efforts aim at enhancing the fun aspect of the tool, shaping it even more like a quiz.

3 Main results

The public PbP platform was launched with strong media coverage in February 2012. Up to October, 2877 users completed the Policy Profiler, of which 559 were considered hard-to-reach. The trials are scheduled to run about till March 2013, meaning that while the latter figure is already a success, reaching the target regarding "mass" users also seems realistic. The PbP Widget was loaded (displayed in a browser) over 40 thousand times and copied 800 times, and the quiz inside was completed by 167 users. 769 contributions have been posted to 122 Threads in 38 Topics of U-debate, which attracted over 35 thousand page views (PbP, 2012a, 2012b). Although there is no specific target on the usage of forum module, internally a higher number of posts were expected. A gap is even more salient if we consider the low post/view ratio. In addition, a good part of posts have been created by facilitators, and many of the rest are coming from a single country, Spain. Here, we have to note a high ratio of immigrants and an extensive use of workshops with users.

Workshops seem to emerge as a good practice for engaging users. These are controlled environments for a relatively homogeneous set of potential users (like students, or immigrants) with sufficient time committed to explain them the platform, and the possible benefits of involvement. Invited immigrant groups often prefer an introductory session to build trust first; only at a second occasion is it timely to offer any technical guidance.

Another key to success appears to be the involvement of organisations active in the policy topic. The Spanish pilot was followed by the Greek and Italian partner to build close collaboration with NGOs and then also government actors like the Spanish regional immigration project "JELMD", two municipalities on Tenerife, the Parliament of Canary Islands, the Local Council for Immigrants' Integration within the municipality of Athens (the Italian pilot partner is a local government itself). At the Hungarian site the involvement of NGOs was moderate. There are fewer relevant organisations here, with much fewer immigrants to advocate, thus seeing less benefit in migrating their networking efforts onto a participation oriented platform. On the other hand, dissemination of the PbP platform via banners or widgets on NGOs' websites proved to be effective universally. (PbP, 2012c)

An equally important factor of gaining momentum is to focus efforts on a few hot issues, essentially pursuing a “policy window”. In PbP’s case this is, again, depending on the “hotness” of immigration issues and, eventually, on the size of immigrant populations. Lacking these features, the Hungarian pilot has tried to look broader for topics (like emigration, or more general integration issues) but the farther it ventures, the weaker the linkage and synergy with the (project-wise) persistent content in the Policy Profiler becomes.

Also in Hungary, some contacted organisations voiced the need for a critical mass of users before engaging the platform. This is a “hen and egg” dilemma affecting all stakeholders, citizens, interest groups, decision makers alike, making them wait for other parties to participate first. PbP chiefly addresses this challenge by embracing social media (Lacigova, 2012). The idea is not to create but rather follow a critical mass, already organised on social media, effectively placing the entry point to PbP’s services onto these popular sites. This is done by users sharing their quiz results, by facilitators trying to actively reach relevant online communities, and also by anyone who posts to the debates and shares their contribution.

From Month 9 of the live platform, the project has started collecting and publishing the first official feedbacks from decision makers (PbP, 2012e).

4 Conclusion: notes on sustainability

The background as well as ideas and toolset of the PbP project have been presented. Results to date suggest that the primary goals set forth will be accomplished. However, it may be interesting to consider how promising the approach can be in the long run, or how it could be boosted to adapt to prospective demands.

The current business plan (PbP, 2012d) considers several ways of providing PbP as a product after project end, ranging from the current immigration policy focus to other policy areas to a general participation tool. On one hand, accumulated expertise should be exploited; on the other hand, new opportunities should be grasped. However, can we safely extrapolate the current setting to a later time? The entry level commitment in the Inform-Consult-Empower model, i.e. “Inform”, is mostly enabled by the Profiler tool. This, however, currently builds upon a significant amount of work done by unbiased, credible experts, co-funded by the EU. But will there be later similarly reliable entities with sufficient resources or commitment, to do such tasks? If not, wouldn’t the U-debate tool fit small voluntary expert workgroups preparing content for the Profiler? Well, maybe even more than for the general public, still looking puzzled by the forum structure.

Whoever is using U-debate, its current policy constraining the entry of new topics might appear anachronistic. According to an assessment “the decision to pre-establish the discussion topics –taken by most of the eParticipation Preparatory Action projects– clearly contradicts the most basic Web 2.0 notions” (Prieto-Martín et al., 2012). The same assessment quotes that research designs “tend to focus upon government initiatives and undervalue the importance of spontaneous participation driven by citizens, voluntary organisations and pressure groups.” (Macintosh et al., 2009).

Should the future lie in an open community using U-debate for preparing the “fun stuff” (i.e. a quiz), ready to be taken up by the masses, how should it operate? Probably U-debate should be easier to learn, yet more capable of enforcing its structure. The latter is needed in order to efficiently inform even after a significant number of inputs have been received. Thus, a new visitor (maybe an innovative decision maker) wants to get a quick overlook of what has already been told. A facilitator disprefers redundancy when writing a report for the less innovative decision maker. A new would-be contributor needs to see good examples of using posting categories in order to learn the same practice. Finally, a remote system would prefer structured data to mine into the discussions. Multilingualism is a related question; addressed, but not to its full potential: the forum module had no stub for supporting automatic or semi automatic linking of posts created in different places (Threads) but with similar meaning. As content is accumulating, it will get more and more difficult to learn what others said, perhaps from another country.

Another question is how to best support bottom-up participatory initiatives. Such deliberation should start with naming a new problem (representing a problem stream). “Issue” is a perfect posting category, but how obvious is it to pick or create the right Thread and Topic in the hierarchy above? A real-life problem may well not be constrained to only one policy area; one cannot name in advance the piece of legislation to be created or to incorporate the necessary amendment, either. For bottom-up initiatives, a multiple-choice tagging facility could seem better suited.

As it appears, one might expect that a highly flexible, cure-all eParticipation forum should employ intricate semantic technologies. But should someone, participating in a current eParticipation project, happen to be using such a tool? As Prieto Martín et al. (2012) observe, “traditional funding mechanisms [...] seem to lay more importance on receiving and filing all agreed project deliverables and outputs rather than on obtaining rigorous evaluations and significant impacts.” Thus, competing project proposals will naturally optimize their resources to achieve the main objectives – for PbP, the main indicator of success is a certain number of users. In fact, three or more years passing between conceptualizing and concluding an ICT-related project is a threat by itself. In this time, novelties may well become a commonplace; established technologies may become obsolete or unsupported. For instance, the PbP widget used to interoperate with Facebook through the Facebook Markup Language (Kunt, 2010), but this was discontinued from 1st June 2012. (Wikipedia, 2012b), requiring widget developers to adapt. Thus, sustainability is not a settled issue, yet, for PbP; rather, the concept needs to find some narrow paths to live on after the project ends.

A recent entry (Zsolt, 2012) in a blog sharing reports of new expatriates from Hungary with those considering emigration has sparked angry reactions. While typical bloggers cheerfully recount their own experiences, this daring person wrote about how the motto of the blog (“The country crossed a border, so we did the same”) suggested a controversial, individualistic attitude, excluding oneself from the option of bettering the country one belongs to (a stance coinciding with recent government efforts to retain young, active people for the benefit of a stagnating domestic economy). Not only did the majority of the respondents disagree, but many also felt offended or enraged. Some also wrote they disagreed with the “tendency” of the moderator to allow such entries to appear, and implied they would leave the forum. This could be just another example of how divided the Hungarian society is, but then PBP’s Spanish pilot site has reported how some immigrant users felt certain statements in the quiz offensive (“Irregular immigrants should be returned to their country of origin immediately.” and “Irregular immigrants who have lived and worked in the country for many years without committing a crime should be offered legal residence”). It seems to be common that the recognition of being in minority is elevating an already existing discomfort over the prospect of having one’s opportunities curbed. Then, can we expect citizens with existential fears and conflicting interests to discuss policy about them, at the same virtual table? Perhaps, a policy entrepreneur or a good eParticipation tool not only needs to bring people together but also to either (temporarily) separate certain groups, or rephrase their positions in order to stimulate all.

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Short biography

Gyula Takács is an e-government advisor at the National Infocommunication Services Co. Ltd. Since 2010 he is involved in "Puzzled by Policy", an EU funded eParticipation project, contributing to trial site duties like usability testing and localization of IT components, promoting usage through networking and policy assessments. He was involved in the high-level design and development of a web2.0 G2G knowledge portal on e-governance from 2008 to 2010. He was in charge of trial site level research for the OneStopGov FP6 project from 2006 to early 2009. Then his tasks focussed on modelling relevant administrative workflows but also included project-wide contribution regarding research of digital divide; planning and carrying out evaluation and dissemination activities. With academic background of economy and marketing, his current tasks involve team-based planning and decision support for ICT related state development projects from socio-economic and end-user perspectives. He has desk and field research experience ranging from economic trends to e-government project feasibility to market and attitude research. Thus, he co-authored studies on themes like public internet access or e-government performance monitoring. He is interested in environment and globalisation issues.