Evaluating and Improving e-Participation in Istanbul

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ABSTRACT
The Metropolitan Municipality of Istanbul- MMI is investing in new information and communication technologies- ICT and in local e-governance. However, e-participation has been the least developed feature of its e-governance model. For this study, I have first revised the UNPAN & ASPA criteria of evaluating e-participation according to new trends, recent literature and characteristics of Istanbul to have a more comprehensive evaluation. The website analysis I have done with the new list of criteria has shown that e-participation still remains weak in Istanbul. Therefore, in order to make this study meaningful and useful, in my conclusion, I present innovative recommendations that would improve e-participation in Istanbul and in other cities in the world.

Categories and Subject Descriptors
J4 [Social and Behavioral Sciences] - Economics, Psychology, Sociology

General Terms
Management, Performance, Design,

Keywords
e-participation, evaluation, recommendations, Istanbul

1. INTRODUCTION
This paper is part of my broader PhD research on political impacts of Information and Communication Technologies – ICT. More specifically, I am studying the "multiple way globalisation" of e-citizens in local e-governance. My case is the city and citizens/residents of Istanbul in Turkey. Participation of citizens in decision-making and in political scene in general is what improves governance and democracy. Therefore, while studying e-citizens, it is crucial to study e-participation opportunities offered by local authorities to engage and include e-citizens in local e-governance. In this paper, I analyze the website of the Metropolitan Municipality of Istanbul - MMI to evaluate its e-participation feature.

I will start by presenting background of academic discussions on e-government and e-participation as well as the use of new technologies and the web in increasing civic engagement and citizen participation. In order not to reinvent the wheel, I will introduce e-participation evaluation criteria of UNPAN 1 and ASPA2 that I will base my evaluation on. However, taking into consideration the new trends, recent literature and characteristics of Istanbul, I have decided that it would be wise to revise these criteria and present a new list before evaluating the website of MMI. The paper will continue with the results of the evaluation I have made according to new and more complete criteria. Finally in conclusion, I am presenting recommendations to improve e-participation and democracy in Istanbul. These recommendations may also apply in other cities with similar characteristics.

2. BACKGROUND
Sherry Turkle has stated 7 years before SecondLife3: "Some are tempted to think of life in cyberspace as insignificant, as escape or meaningless diversion. It is not. Our experiences there are serious play" (Turkle: 1996:269)

1 United Nations Public Administration Network
2 American Society of Public Administration
3 Second Life “is a 3-D virtual world created by its Residents. Since opening to the public in 2003, it has grown explosively and today is inhabited by millions of Residents from around the globe." (secondlife.com)
I have chosen to start this part with the above statement because it warns that Internet is not just a toy of youngsters. New ICT have not only dramatically changed our private and professional lives but they have also transformed civic and political lives.

Already 10 years ago, when the use of Internet was not as spread as today, Bimber was able to conclude that it was changing civic activities:

"The implication is that the mix of voices reaching government offices from citizens may change in measurable and noticeable ways as Internet use grows from half of the population toward three quarters or more. Citizens who are outside of traditional political networks and less engaged in other arenas of public life are likely to be more expressive online, at least by a little. Information technology may entice somewhat less politically connected citizens across the threshold of communication and may also induce those over to express themselves more often" (Bimber 1999:425)

Research has proved that Internet use and engagement have a positive relation and that time spent online increase civic volunteerism (Shah et al 2002:978). Shah et al have suggested that online information sources would help activate citizens and help them create stronger ties in their community / to organizations (Shah et al 2002) in contradiction with what Putnam has argued earlier in “Bowling Alone” (Putnam 2001). While Putnam was “Bowling Alone”, some were “Bowling Together” thanks to ability of new technologies to bring people together and engage citizens (Coleman & Gotze:2001) and some took it "Beyond Bowling Together" and introduced new theories like “Sociotechnical Capital” referring to the joint influence of social and technical in people's acting together (Resnick:2001). Shah et al later on have argued that " online information seeking and interactive civic messaging - uses of the web as a resource and a forum- both strongly influence civic engagement, often more so than do traditional print and broadcast media and face-to-face communication. ...Changes over time in patterns of information gathering, political expression and civic participation are interconnected" (Shah et al 2005:551). Polat, who also believes that Internet may help increase participation by overcoming time and proximity matters, suggests on the other hand that Internet’s significance would be less if insufficient motivation and resources are the obstacles in participation (Polat 2005). Coleman, however, argues that new technologies are increasing participation because they offer opportunities for citizens to engage with authorities on a more equal basis, to better communicate with other citizens and communities and because they change the way representatives work (Coleman 2001).

New technologies have a transformative effect on governments in making their operation and communication with citizens more efficient and more democratic (Yang & Rho 2007). However, it is argued that e-government needs people to realize these promises (Yang & Rho 2007). This is supported by scholars who are critical to e-government’s incorporation of participation. e-government, even if it offers better access to information and services, it doesn’t necessarily incorporate e-participation. Chadwick and May think that this is not due to digital divide but due to elitism in liberal democracies (Chadwick & May 2003). They argue that even if new technologies could potentially increase participation, participatory models of interaction between citizens and authorities would take a “radical reconfiguration of existing policy” (Chadwick & May 2003:295). Supporting this statement is a research done by Musso et al that has shown that the use of technology by municipalities has been mostly oriented to reform and improve the management rather than democracy (Musso et al 2000). Besides, Bekkers and Homburg have argued that in many of the e-government cases the emphasis is on electronic service delivery and they said that back office agencies need to be redesigned for better redesign of front office for electronic communication and services (Bekkers & Homburg 2007). Providing a website with access to information, services and participation is not enough. Municipalities should also make access easier outside of the website. So, another redesign suggestion comes from Hampton & Gupta in terms of redesigning public space by municipalities to make them easier to use and access new technologies by citizens with “provision of power outlets, flat surfaces for laptops and shade to view digital displays” (Hampton & Gupta 2008:846).

Citizen engagement, apart from providing public information, helps citizens to actively play a role in discussions, deliberation and problem solving (Coleman et al 2008). It has been argued that citizens are ready to participate in online consultations if they see that what they say is taken into consideration and if they can really contribute to decision-making (Coleman 2004). Citizen engagement and participation in politics is apparently becoming an important issue among Internet users. The homepage of UNPAN on May 11th 2009 was hosting a quickpoll asking: “What are the most concerned area(s) in today's Public Administration?”, “Citizen engagement in public affairs” was on top with 36% of the votes by the visitors of the page (UNPAN 11.5.2009).

Surfing on the web could mean entertainment for many but those who connect to political sites are likely to have goal-oriented purposes (Kaye & Johnson 2002). Therefore it is very important to have quality content (Van der Merr & Van Winden 2003) and user friendly/usable designed websites for local authorities because as Coleman et al also suggest, those websites would be actively used by citizens and actively used/visited websites may increase citizen engagement (Coleman et al 2008). In line with this argument, (but on a different online environment than local authorities’ websites) is the importance of design on online discussion forums. Wright and Street note that format and design on online discussion forums effect political choices and deliberation (Wright & Street 2007).

The use of ICT and web in local governance has the potential to improve democracy with increased participation. And the largest group who use these tools is youth. They are the early adapters and drivers of mobile technology as well as inventors of new kinds of uses (Castells et al 2007). Their identity, lifestyle and social relations management are done through creating and networking online content (Livingstone 2008). Social network sites such as MySpace, Facebook and others are commented to be the "civil society of teenage culture" (Boyd: 2007:3). Some have seen this wide use of Internet by young people as a “promise for civic renewal efforts targeting youth, adolescent, and young adults” (Shah et al 2002:979-980) while others have argued that youth is less engaged and more into entertainment than politics (Coleman et al 2008:181). A recent example of how social media can mobilize youth in politics would be the Facebook campaign of Barak Obama in US presidential elections in Autumn 2008. I’ll
come back to the importance of youth involvement in improving both e-governance and e-democracy.

To sum up, research has suggested that e-governance is improving access to information and public services and it potentially can increase citizen participation. However this may not necessarily be the case in every e-governance application because technology itself is not as powerful as people who use it. And not everyone is ready to give citizens the opportunity to be actively and meaningfully involved in decision-making.

3. EVALUATING E-PARTICIPATION
UNPAN and ASPA are evaluating local e-governance models all over the world in their “Digital Governance in Municipalities Worldwide Reports”. The latest of these reports evaluating selected 100 municipalities has been published in 2008. In line with above listed critical academic discussions, on table entitled “Top 20 Cities in Digital Governance” of the report, it is clear that e-participation is the least developed feature of e-governance around the world - also in western democracies. (UNPAN & ASPA 2008: 8)

Five categories are used in this evaluation: “privacy and security” (Privacy policies, authentication, encryption, data management, cookies), “usability” (User-friendly design, branding, length of homepage, targeted audience links or channels, and site search capabilities), “content” (Access to current accurate information, public documents, reports, publications, and multimedia materials), “services” (Transactional services - purchase or register, interaction between citizens, businesses and government) and “citizen participation” (Online civic engagement/ policy, deliberation, citizen based performance, measurement) (UNPAN & ASPA 2008:19)

In order to evaluate citizen participation, the surveyors have assessed the Internet use of municipalities in involving citizens in decision-making. They have assessed the following tools on websites: "Comments or feedback, newsletter, online bulletin board or chat capabilities, online discussion forum on policy issues, scheduled e-meetings for discussion, online survey/polls, synchronous video, citizen satisfaction survey, online decision-making, performance measures, standards, or benchmarks" (UNPAN & ASPA 2008:98)

4. HOW TO COMPLETE THIS LIST? - IN GENERAL AND FOR ISTANBUL IN PARTICULAR?
UNPAN & ASPA’s Digital Governance in Municipalities Worldwide Report is of big value in terms of mapping and evaluating local e-governance in different parts of the world. Moreover, it is a useful document with its comparative results with previous outcomes that help to see the evolution of e-governance in regional and global level. However its criteria need to be updated. They need to be completed according to new trends in information and communication technologies, their uses as well as related literature. Moreover, I believe that characteristics of a given city whose e-governance is to be evaluated would help to complete such list and make the results more comprehensive and more ready to recommend policies to improve the actual situation.

I will thus add more to UNPAN & ASPA’s criteria for the evaluation of e-participation in Istanbul:

4.1. Involvement of All Stakeholders
Meaningful and informed e-participation of citizens is crucial for e-democracy however e-participation should not be limited to unorganized citizens. The very basic definition of governance is the partnership of all stakeholders in policy making and implementing. All stakeholders (private sector, non profit organizations, non-governmental organizations, international organizations, media, and academia) of the city should be able to find user friendly tools to be involved in decision-making. Therefore it is important to find on the website tools of participation for all stakeholders for a complete e-governance.

4.2. Use of English
Istanbul is the most populated city of Turkey and it hosts most of the foreigners living in the country. Moreover, among the visions list of the MMI is becoming a world/global city. In this case, pages in English should not be limited to tourists. It is understandable to have touristic content in cities where tourism is a crucial income. However, these cities, shouldn’t forget residents who don’t speak local/national language(s). Content on all pages should be translated into English. All online information and all online (and mobile) public services should be available also in English. Finally all e-participation tools should also be provided in English in order to include city’s international community in local politics. Depending on the profile of the international community, this involvement may be very beneficial for the city in terms of enriching experiences, perspectives and knowledge. This would include actual and emotionally attached former global residents in local politics and it may also help the city to attract more of the global mobile community members in future.

4.3. Youth: Youthful Access, Design, and Content
As mentioned earlier, youth is the biggest group to use new ICT and especially mobile technology in the (developing) world. It is relatively easier to engage them politically and make them participate with attractive online and /or mobile applications.

Half of the population of Turkey is under 28.5 years old and 17.8% of the population, about 13 million people, live in Istanbul. (Turkish Statistics Institute - TUIK 2008) According to comScore Inc’s 4 report on online behaviour of Internet users in Turkey, in April 2009, the number of people older than 15 years old who connect to Internet from home or work was 17.762.000. The report estimates that the number would augment up to 26.751.449 if people who connect to Net from public Internet cafés and from mobile gadgets are included (comScore Inc 2009). We see on the report that Turkey has the 7th largest online audience in Europe (comScore Inc 2009). Still on the same report, the world leading

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4 Global company that is measuring the digital world www.comscore.com
social network site Facebook appears as the 3rd most visited Internet property with 12,770,000 unique visitors.

Remembering the importance of design and content mentioned earlier and seeing these demographic and digital figures for Istanbul/Turkey, it is crucial to see on municipality websites, youthful design, youthful content and youthful access to include young citizens in local e-governance.

The knowledge youth have of new ICT, their innovative use of these new technologies - that also make them connect globally to youth all around the world, their dynamism, fresh ideas and perspectives are of immeasurable value in policy making.

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The Metropolitan Municipality of Istanbul is delegating its services to its companies. The pages for relevant services are linked to companies own pages from the homepage. Therefore, even though I have primarily analyzed the home page of the Metropolitan Municipality of Istanbul, I also had to let the homepage lead me to those companies’ pages in order to see how they use ICT in e-participation.

4.4. Social Media

Web 2.0 sharing should be possible on municipalities’ websites in an era where sharing information on social media e.g. blogs, vlogs, miniblogs, social network sites and so on is the way (young) people interact.

Moreover, this should also be completed by presence on social media and synchronizing the website (information, services, communication and participation) with those pages. Therefore use of social media should be included in the evaluation.

4.5. Mobile Participation

Following new trends, use of mobile communication technologies is crucial for local e-governance. Access to information, and services tools should also be available by/with mobile communication technologies. Moreover, municipalities should provide mobile participation tools for today’s mobile people. Use of mobile technologies to include citizens and other stakeholders in decision-making should be added at evaluation criteria of e-participation.

4.6. Customization

Customization is saving us from information overload and it is helping us to receive/access information in a meaningful way. This is what we are used to have in our online consumption of services mainly from private sector and media. Therefore it is also important to have customized pages from the city website in order for citizens and other stakeholders to reach information they need/want in a more user-friendly way. As it is presented earlier, user friendliness/usability is what attract and hook people online. And once hooked, it is easier to engage and involve citizens in politics.

4.7. Evaluating and Measuring Citizens Use of e-Participation Tools

It shouldn’t be enough to only provide tools for e-participation. Municipalities should also regularly measure, assess and evaluate the use of these tools by different stakeholders and different demographic profiles amongst citizens. They should also share the results online with everyone.

This is how I humbly tried to have a more comprehensive and updated evaluation criteria for e-participation. Now I’ll have a look on the website of MMI to see how they benefit from ICT to include citizens in local e-governance.

5. METHODOLOGY

For this study I have analysed the website of the Metropolitan Municipality of Istanbul on May 15th 2009. I have first revised and completed UNPAN and ASPA’s criteria and analyzed and evaluated the website accordingly.

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6. RESULTS

On UNPAN & ASPA’s Digital Governance in Municipalities Worldwide Report of 2008, Istanbul ranked 31st in overall results of 100 cities, 20th among OECD countries (29 cities), and 16th among European cities (36 cities) (UNPAN & ASPA2008: 30, 36, 34). Istanbul is one of the many cities, on the report, whose score in participation is the lowest among the 5 categories.

Two years after this report, I have evaluated the website of the MMI website, according to UNPAN & ASPA criteria that I have revised above.

6.1. According to UNPAN & ASPA criteria

Citizens can post “Comments and Feed-back” and recommendations. However it is quite user-unfriendly, hidden under Public Relations Directorate page without a quicklink from the homepage.

There is no "Newsletter" as such but news and press releases, published also in English. However it is not possible to comment nor share on Web 2.0. The municipal police department has an "Online Bulletin" available upon online request but there are no "Chat Capabilities".

Neither "Online Discussion Forum on Policy Issues” nor "Scheduled e-meetings for Discussion” are available.

"Online Survey /Polls” are used. However they are not on the homepage but on other pages e.g. on May 15th, on pages of Public Transportation: "which one do you take the most?"

As for “Synchronous video”, the technology is used but not for political/participation related purposes. It is used to broadcast live from construction sites for information purposes or live from main roads to inform on the city traffic jam.

5 Which is amongst the biggest issues in Istanbul
There is no “Citizen Satisfaction Survey” but there interestingly is “consumer complaints” on the homepage.

As I mentioned earlier, services are delegated to municipality’s companies. The company charged for energy matters has its own page linked to the municipality’s homepage. On that one there is a question asked to citizens on energy. That is more than a survey and maybe a little on the way to "Online Decision-Making": “which energy sources should be given priority to supply Turkey’s log term energy need?” There also has been a grant for proposals to make Istanbul a better place. “I have a project” was the grant allocated for participative local government. Application submissions have been possible on the website.

Performance Program of 2009 document is published online that could be taken as a teaser for future features on “Performance Measures, Standards, or Benchmarks”

6.2. According to Additional Criteria That I Have Added To Make the Evaluation More Comprehensive

The website is not welcoming in terms of meaningful and/systemic “Involvement of All Stakeholders” in decision-making. There is investment related information but there are no tools to participate for investors. Other stakeholders can not find participation tools either.

Content in “English” is mostly uploaded for tourists. Limited services and (investment) information are available in English.

The homepage doesn’t seem “Youthful”. However, again, a company of the municipality, on environment matters, linked from the municipality homepage, has a youthful design with colours, animations, streaming videos, and mobile communication: e.g. “Recommendations from your mobile: recommendation, complaints, requests, send a text message to 5766, we’ll get back to you within the same day”.

“Customization” of the homepage is not possible.

“Social Media” is not used and Web 2.0 sharing is not available.

There are more than 40 services available from mobile gadgets, via GSM 24/7 but there is no “Mobile Participation”.

Finally, “Assessing/evaluating Citizens Use of e-participation” is not available on the website.

7. CONCLUSION: RECOMMENDATIONS TO IMPROVE e-PARTICIPATION IN ISTANBUL

Metropolitan Municipality of Istanbul is obviously aware of the importance of the use of new ICT in governance. It has created the website in 1997 on early days of Internet in the country (Erdal 2002) it has invested in e-governance in the last decade and it has developed the website. Access to information and online and mobile public services are in constant development. However, even though participation is amongst the mission & vision document published on the website, practically, e-participation feature of e-governance still remains very weak.

7.1. Recommendations for Improvement of e-Participation in Istanbul

In order to make this evaluation meaningful, I am listing below recommendations for MMI (also applicable for other cities) according to new features I have recommended earlier to be added in the evaluation criteria for e-participation.

It would help Metropolitan Municipality of Istanbul to have better e-participation thus better e-governance and democracy in the city if:

All stakeholders: MMI could work on including all stakeholders in decision-making processes. This may be done by designing separate but networked and shared online tools according to separate profiles of different stakeholders. This would help each stakeholder to find a userfriendly and welcoming environment and also see other stakeholders’ participation. Ultimately it would help all stakeholders to express themselves in a best way and to network in the same time. That synergy wouldn’t only be beneficial for the MMI but it would also enforce local e-governance and democracy.

English: MMI could publish all content and provide all services also in English. This is a must to include international residents in local politics. This may also, in the future, bring the right for non-citizens residents to vote for local elections. And that would be another way to enforce local e-governance and democracy. Participation of international community in local politics would also be beneficial for the MMI with new perspectives, diverse knowledge and global experiences.

Youth: MMI could attract young citizens/residents if it provides youthful design (colourful, animated, multimedia), access (userfriendly, mobile) and content (creative, surprising, interesting, easy to understand, easy to contribute, easy to share). This way, young people may start to spend some time on the website and learn about what is going on in the city they live in. Attractive design and easy tools to use can become a fun way for them to express their ideas, knowledge and demands. Youth inclusion in policy-making would again be beneficial for MMI and all stakeholders in planning the future of the city.

Social media: MMI could use social media efficiently in order to catch people who are not necessarily interested in politics but who would participate if it is possible on new/social media they use for other purposes. Nothing but having a youtube channel or a Facebook page would help MMI touch millions more people.

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6 It is very important here to notice that citizens are asked to participate to a future decision-making on a national policy and not on a local one.

7 The deadline was over and proposals were being considered when I did the analysis.

8 Istanbul scores are above international average in privacy/security, usability and services categories of the 2008 Digital Governance of Municipalities Worldwide Report of UNPAN and ASPA

9 MMI should also work on the original criteria of UNPAN & ASPA and improve those points.
Participation from those online people, if categorized and organized meaningfully, would mean more ideas, experiences, criticism and proposals that would all help MMI to improve local e-governance.

**Customization:** MMI could provide customized homepage to attract people who are used to that service. This would help especially for different stakeholders. An investment company, an academic and an environmentalist would have different interests on the website. It would facilitate participation of these different stakeholders if the first thing they see on the homepage is what interest them the most.

**Mobile participation:** MMI could provide mobile participation tools. It uses mobile technologies in public services and information. MMI mobile is amongst the most popular services especially for those who have to drive in rush hours. This easy and fast communication way could easily be used to encourage people to participate in local politics.

**Evaluating Citizens Use of e-participation:** MMI could evaluate how citizens (and other stakeholders) use e-participation tools of the website and if it could share this information with everyone online. This could be monthly polls online as well as other offline research to be shared online. It would a way to see how Istanbulites are benefiting from the e-participation tools offered to them and the evolution of this use. It would also be way to encourage people to participate to local e-governance.

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