

Designing e-Participation with Balkan Journalists

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This paper describes the use of scenarios as a central part of the design methodology, in a project to create an e-participation initiative, working with the national news agencies in 3 Western Balkans countries. The stakeholders in the project came from a variety of backgrounds, with different skills, experiences of technology and ideas about participatory democracy. For design purposes, the most important stakeholders involved are journalists from the Balkan news agencies, as these will be major users of the tool, creating content and managing e-participation processes. Scenarios were used to put these journalists at the centre of the design and specification process. This method also provided the diverse stakeholders with a focus for discussion and shared understanding. The use of scenarios influenced the design of all aspects of the e-participation initiative, including the format of the online tools, the rules and methods for managing online discussions and the offline path of influence with those in power.

1. Introduction

Albania, Serbia and the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia are emerging from a series of social and constitutional changes, reflecting the gradual transformation from authoritarian and communist territories to democratic republics. These countries face a series of challenges to their growth into modern participatory democracies, including experiences of conflict and division, rigid bureaucracy and lack of transparency in government, unstable economies and high unemployment (European Commission, 2007).

However, their leaders have stated their ideals: sharing with the member states of the European Union “the values of democracy, the rule of law, respect for human and minority rights, solidarity and a market economy, fully aware that they constitute the very foundations of the European Union. Respect of international law, inviolability of international borders, peaceful resolution of conflicts and regional co-operation.” (Thessaloniki Declaration, 2005). Thus the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia is a candidate country to join the EU. Albania and Serbia are potential candidate countries, currently engaged in the stabilisation and association process (European Commission, 2007).

In turn, the European Commission is committed to “promoting stability, security and prosperity in the Western Balkans” and integrating “their economies and societies into the European mainstream” (European Commission, 2006). This commitment is focused on practical measures, including those aimed at increasing civil society dialogue and regional cooperation in the countries. The countries’ media are being

modernised, opening up previous state-controlled monopolies, guaranteeing freedom of expression within the constitution and aiming to protect journalists' independence from intimidation (European Commission, 2007).

The Western Balkans Democratic Participation (WEB.DEF) project¹ is a specific support action, funded under the European Commission's Sixth Framework Programme² with a view to using the Internet to further progress towards the Commission's aims, as outlined above. The project is a partnership of 7 organisations, including the national news-media agencies from Albania, Serbia and the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, as well as organisations from 2 Member States (Greece and the United Kingdom). The project aims to establish an online initiative, consisting of national thematic portals to enable sharing of news and public information. These portals contain community forums, integrated with the news system and designed to support e-participation. The portals are hosted and managed by the news agencies – Albanian Telegraphic Agency (ATA), Macedonian Information Agency (MIA) and National News Agency of the Republic of Serbia (Tanjug). There is also a central forum, in English, to facilitate regional interaction. News agency employees and other local journalists will create the content for these portals and facilitate the forums according to a shared code of ethics (in practice a family of governance codes) developed and agreed by the partners. As the media play a fundamental role in democracy (European Commission, 2006) they are well placed at the centre of an e-participation initiative.

Coleman and Kaposi (2006) identify 7 challenges, which need to be tackled to create sustainable e-democracy initiatives in countries they refer to as “New Democracies”.

1. Need for distinctive civil spaces
2. Overcoming the burden of bureaucratic resistance
3. Substituting weak media structures
4. Low Internet connectivity
5. Establishing representative legitimacy
6. Need for effective moderation and facilitation
7. Evidence of political impact.

Of these, 6 are specifically tackled by the WEB.DEF project, with the emphasis on creating civil spaces and strengthening media structures. WEB.DEF hopes to strengthen Balkan media, by providing online resources to manage news and public documents and encouraging information flow between the countries. At the same time, the news agencies are perfectly placed to host civil spaces for informed deliberation (the e-participation community forums). One challenge is beyond our remit to resolve - the problem of low Internet connectivity. This, particularly a lack of broadband availability, is noted as an important context throughout the design process.

The initial challenge of the WEB.DEF project has been to specify appropriate e-participation tools and management processes for the specific context, by making best use of the knowledge and experience of the diverse partners. To do this, scenarios were used as a central part of the design methodology.

¹ <http://www.web-dep.eu/>

² FP6-045003-WEB.DEF

2. The e-Participation Design Problem

E-Participation is a research field which is attempting to establish ground rules and concepts, at the same time as its two major subjects, technology and democracy, are undergoing constant growth and change. Experiences of democracy and technology are changeable and subjective: citizens have a variety of technical skills combined with a variety of social/political interests (Macintosh, 2006). Further fluidity stems from e-participation research's various academic and practical backgrounds. Rose and Sanford (2007) analyse e-participation research papers and identify "a rather eclectic collection of theories and methods that are borrowed from several different disciplines". The e-participation design problem is to create sustainable initiatives from these shifting concepts and practices.

In order to use technology to increase participation in democracy, the stakeholders need to reveal the relevant current democratic processes in their country and describe ways these could realistically be improved. The descriptions need to be based on technology that the stakeholders have access to and are comfortable with.

The first factor here is democracy. Beyond their relationship with the EU, it's not clear what direction the development of new democracies, like the Western Balkans countries, will take. Democracy is a fluid term rather than a fixed part of a shared objective: "Democracy as an idea and as a political reality is fundamentally contested", according to Held (2006). One aspect of this complexity is the relationship between national and international law and the importance of cross-border issues like the environment (Held). Anttiroiko (2003) suggests that established democracies are also straining under the complexities of the modern world. He notes, for example, that different democratic mechanisms are used for different types of issue and wonders about a 3rd way between representative and direct democracy. He suggests that ICTs would be needed "to integrate different forms and mechanisms of democracy" (p127).

The second factor is technology. The WEB.DEF portals require access to the Internet for participation. The project also aims to engage a wide variety of people. Between each of the 3 WEB.DEF countries, 14 -19% of the population is defined as an Internet user (Internet World Stats, 2007). However, access to broadband is concentrated in the cities and the figures are liable to change rapidly as the telecommunications sector is opened up (European Commission, 2006). Technology skills and preferences vary widely between users and over time. Changes in these are especially allied to use of broadband (Horrihan and Rainer, 2002). Thus developers need to acknowledge people's various access to and experience of technology, particularly the contexts in which they are likely to use the Internet.

Macintosh (2006) advocates tackling these areas of uncertainty and change by "placing the stakeholders at the centre of the design process". However, she notes that the diversity of e-participation stakeholders is a further challenge here, noting for example "the differences in roles and terminology used by all stakeholders involved in the process". In the WEB.DEF project, the Western Balkans news agency employees and journalists are primary stakeholders, as they will manage, use and promote the portals. They understand the news agencies' workflow and local situation, including the best way to involve citizens, topic experts and government representatives. The Greek and UK partners, who are specifying and developing the

tools, are stakeholders with technical and theoretical knowledge about e-participation and developing appropriate tools.

The combination of changeable factors and unknowns described above is typical of Social Informatics research (Sawyer and Rosenbaum, 2000). It is also nicely summarised by John Carroll's 6 characteristics and difficult properties of design (2000):

- Incomplete description of the *problem* to be addressed
- Lack of guidance on possible design *moves*
- The design *goal* or solution state cannot be known in advance
- *Trade-offs* among many interdependent elements
- Reliance on a *diversity* of knowledge and skills
- Wide-ranging and ongoing impacts on human *activity*

3. Using Scenarios to Involve Stakeholders

In order to create the specifications for the e-participation tool, harnessing the experiences of the Western Balkans stakeholders to deal with fluid objectives and diverse possible contexts, scenarios were placed at the centre of our design methodology. Within this methodology, scenarios were structured stories about people using the WEB.DEP community forum to perform tasks and achieve objectives. Scenarios enabled stakeholders to define and discuss their expectations of what people will be able to do in the forum and how they will do it, without needing technical knowledge or being restricted by a prototype. "All stakeholders speak the language of scenarios." (Carroll, 2000, p58). In this case, the stakeholders who wrote the initial scenarios were journalists who work for the national news agencies in the 3 Western Balkans countries: i.e. those closest to the context. The scenarios then served as a way to create a shared vision with all partners, including the Greek and UK partners responsible for specification and development. By discussing possible scenarios, stakeholders came to understand how they saw the forum working and amend their ideas until there was agreement in the group (Lewis and Rieman, 1994). Bardram (2000) gives a more detailed account of the use of scenarios as "vehicles for supporting the creative meeting between designers and users" than we have space for here. His account is particularly relevant to the use of scenarios to describe and design group work processes. This is helpful for e-participation, where the efficacy of the system depends on a number of stakeholders (in our case journalists, citizens and government representatives) rather than isolated interactions.

While devising our methodology we used 2 other projects as specific examples. The eRepresentative project³ (Whyte, 2007) is a research and development project investigating "a virtual desktop" to support the mobile elected Representative. Scenarios were used at a later stage in eRepresentative project: to introduce the alpha pilot tools to users, in order to obtain feedback on the acceptability of the services. However, eRepresentative shared 3 important factors with WEB.DEP that encouraged us to use it as an example: the scenarios were written directly by stakeholders (civil servants and representatives) rather than technology experts; the scenarios were designed to describe the use of tools within e-democracy contexts and the agreed level detail to be included was about the same. The JISC e-Learning project (JISC, 2005)

³ <http://www.erepresentative.org/>

was used as the second example, because, again, the scenarios were to be written directly by stakeholders and because it included a wealth of information and advice to support this task.

4. Methodology

4.1. Generating the scenarios

While the Greek and UK partners had used scenarios before, the news agency partners, who were to write the scenarios, were not familiar with the concept. The partners were introduced to the idea of scenarios and their place in the work plan at an early project meeting, though, due to visa problems, only one of the 3 news agencies was able to be present. A guidance document was produced: “*Using Scenarios to design the WEB.DEP forum*”, loosely inspired by JISC’s “Requirements Resource Pack” (Rees Jones, 2005). The guidance document included an explanation of scenarios and their place in the design process; how the scenarios would be used within the WEB.DEP project; a list of the partners’ responsibilities in the creation and use of the scenarios; links to more information and examples from other projects; a template for the scenarios (Table 1: Scenario Template) and an example scenario. The template was designed based on the template used in the eRepresentative project and Scenarios from the JISC e-Learning project. This was distributed to the partners. However, as the news agencies had not used scenarios before, the guidance document alone was not adequate to support their creation remotely.

Table 1: Scenario Template

Scenario Title	<i>Give the scenario a descriptive title. This should include the actor's name and an indication of the task</i>
Scenario author	<i>Author name and organisation name</i>
Date	<i>Date scenario was written</i>
Name of actor (one actor per scenario)	<i>Give the fictional actor a name</i>
Brief description of actor	<i>e.g. occupation, age, gender, where the actor lives</i>
Actor's location	<i>Where the actor is during the scenario. This should include the type of Internet connection used.</i>
Actor's objective/task	<i>Why the actor is visiting the forum/the actor's "task"</i>
What happens	<i>Describe how the actor interacts with the forum to achieve his/her objective. You will need to imagine the system and make this up. This may be up to a page long.</i>
Outcomes	<i>Benefits of using the forum for this task (to the actor or someone else)</i>

Thus the first scenario was produced in a face to face group setting at the next project meeting. The partners were joined by 2 Tanjug journalists and together, this group completed the scenario: “*Milan replies to a citizen's comment in the forum*”. This confirmed the partners’ understanding of scenarios, within the project context. A list of 15 tasks that needed to be covered by scenarios was then agreed by the group. This number was chosen to cover the major functions of the forum, without overwhelming scenario-writers. The tasks were organised into 3 groups, according to the role of the main actor: journalist, citizen and government representative. These 3 roles had been

defined in the initial stages of the project, which aimed to provide baseline definitions of the context, users and technology. (Loosely-structured scenarios had also been used in these tasks, though the news agencies had not been involved in their generation).

Table 2: List of tasks for scenarios

Actor's role	Tasks
Journalist	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • To initiate a discussion. • To reply to a comment. • To add a poll to a discussion (to write the question for a yes/no quick poll). • To write an article based on a discussion. • To ask a government representative (e.g. a ministry spokesperson) for input or feedback. • To moderate a comment/some comments. • To choose a discussion to summarise in order for it to be translated and placed in the English-language shared-forum. • Journalist receives an alert about activity in the forum.
Citizen	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Make a comment in the forum. (The citizen may be an expert in the topic or not) • Propose a topic for discussion to a journalist. • Citizen reads the forum. • Citizen votes in a poll. • Citizen registers to take part in the forum. • Citizen receives an alert about activity in the forum.
Government representative (e.g. of a ministry)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Reply to a comment.

The news agencies organised journalists to write scenarios, using the template and based on the list of tasks. These journalists had not been present at the meeting where the scenario about Milan was written. However, they soon generated 17 scenarios. These scenarios were then merged in order to create one scenario for each task, while covering relevant contextual information from the 3 countries. This re-write also brought the scenarios in line with the project's Description of Work and decisions made in agreeing the baseline definitions. The merged scenarios were then distributed to the partners for annotation and updated accordingly to produce a final set of 15 scenarios –one for each task.

Using the scenarios in the design process

The final scenarios were then analysed in terms of roles and functions. Four functional roles were revealed and these were converted to use cases: forum administrator, journalist, moderator and user. These roles were those needed to guide the development of the online tools. While journalists would initially moderate the forum, this role may later be taken by other users. Equally, the distinction between citizens, experts and government representatives would not be reflected by differences in functionality within the system, though it is important in the e-participation processes overall. See Figure 1: Methodology for designing forum roles.

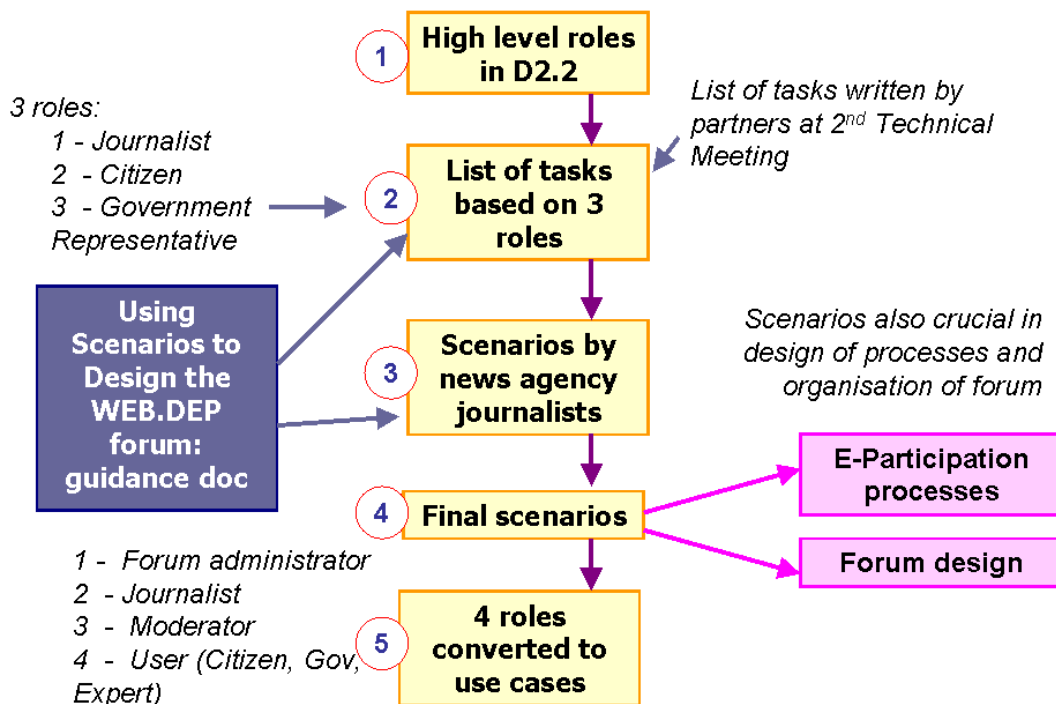


Figure 1: Methodology for designing forum roles

The scenarios were also used to support decisions about the e-participation procedures (both on and offline). This process was conceived as an iterative series of models, which we called *Influence Models*. Each model consisted simply of a diagram and accompanying notes, depicting the relationships between journalists, government representatives and citizens, based on the lifecycle of a discussion topic on the WEB.DEF portal. The Influence Models served as a basis for discussion between the partners and were updated in line with their comments. The models were increasingly influenced by the scenarios, as a more detailed picture of WEB.DEF's projected use appeared.

The scenarios fed into designing the forum structure. A major consideration here was that many people, including topic experts, would access the forum using slower Internet connections. This was illustrated within the scenarios and acknowledged as an important context, especially for rural users.

A less technical outcome was the scenarios' influence on the governance codes, designed to guide editorial and moderation policies. These codes consist of the registration policy, Mission Statement, Terms and Conditions, Legal Statement and Privacy Policy. Agreeing these shared codes is an important part of project, as it makes explicit the adoption of shared values, many of which are closely related to those advocated in the Stability Pact, the Thessaloniki Declaration and, in practice in the stabilisation and association process. The scenarios helped to resolve queries in drafting these codes, grounding theoretical discussions by depicting the way the policies would be applied in practice.

5. Methodological Issues: Remote Scenario Generation

The initial work plan for specifying the e-participation tools suggested ways in which diverse stakeholders could be involved in scenario writing. These plans were based on

partners beginning scenario generation remotely, then discussing and finalising, at project meetings. In practice, partners needed to begin generating scenarios in a face to face setting. While writing scenarios is relatively simple, once begun, the concept can be daunting. Stakeholders are asked to write about technology that does not exist, for technology experts, when their own expertise lies elsewhere. Further, resources were not allocated for either translating the guidance material into local languages or translating scenarios into English, the working language of the project. Due to constraints on travel and meetings, this meant that merging and finalising the scenarios needed to be undertaken between meetings, using annotated scenarios distributed by email.

Many international e-participation projects rely on stakeholders and developers working in various locations, with limited opportunities to meet together. Any increase in user involvement in design should allow for this factor. To this end, it is useful to know the extent to which face to face meetings are necessary in the scenario-generation process, at what stages of the process these meetings are vital and what kind of support is helpful between meetings. We have been unable to find examples in which scenario-writing has begun remotely, without initial face to face support, though this could significantly increase the convenience of scenario generation and extend its use. Peter Rees Jones' *'Scenarios Resource Pack'* (2005) may help to extend the connections between the technology experts who require scenarios and the domain experts or users who write them. However, the extent to which the pack has been able to support remote scenario generation, without additional meetings, is not clear. It may be that appropriate use of groupware could support this task.

Various ways to improve the quality of scenarios have been posited. Carroll (2000) describes including ethnographic and participatory design methods. Here, Carroll describes the technology expert writing the scenario, rather than the end user. However, some aspects of these design methods might be adapted to improve our method, for example at the later stages where the scenarios are merged by task and with the Description of Work. In terms of quality and resources, though, it is not clear that this would be an improvement on the method used: emailing merged scenarios back to the journalists for annotation. Dearden et al (2006) describe their use of "pastiche scenarios" to involve service-users in the design of e-government services. In this technique the organisers suggest fictional characters as the actors in scenarios. This helps to engage people in scenario-writing, helping to overcome initial doubts and increasing the level of detail in the scenarios. It may be useful to investigate whether an initial focus on characters could facilitate the start of remote scenario generation.

6. Conclusions

The 3 Western Balkans news agencies are central to the WEB.DEF project as primary stakeholders: hosts and content providers of the e-participation portals. Further, they are the project's experts within each WEB.DEF country. This expertise covers local social and technical contexts, especially potential interactions between citizens, journalists and public or government representatives. This extensive, and often tacit, domain of knowledge, needed to be accessed by the project partners in order to specify suitable e-participation tools and processes. Technical partners needed to keep specification options open and be careful not to make suggestions based on their own preferences. Resources were also limited, making it difficult for the partners to meet

together to develop iterative prototypes. Scenarios served as a lightweight way to capture the journalists' vision and likely contexts of use. The use of scenarios enabled the partners to form a shared vision of the portals and their use in practice. Some potential problems were identified early and consensus solutions reached. The scenarios were central to the development of a detailed definition of the forum, including associated e-participation procedures and governance codes.

Attempts to instigate the generation of scenarios remotely were not successful, though guidance and examples were provided. It seems that a face to face situation, such as a workshop or focus group, is needed to support new scenario-writers. However, the journalists who wrote most of the scenarios were not present at the meeting where the initial scenario was written. They were introduced to generating the scenarios by their colleagues. This implies that scenario-writers, ideally the stakeholders closest to the context, do not have to meet the technology experts who are responsible for specification or design directly. This pyramid method could be used to gather scenarios from a larger and more diverse range of stakeholders, for example potential citizen or government users, provided adequate support was available. The WEB.DEP project so far stands as a step towards understanding how scenarios can contribute towards achieving user-centred design of e-participation. Investigation into ways to effectively involve more stakeholders in this process, with minimal increase in cost, would be a valuable movement towards creating sustainable e-participation initiatives.

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