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E-Participation: Bridging the Gap for Better Governance

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Abstract: The Philippine government is constantly considering innovative means to provide enhanced services to their constituents with the increasing demand for better governance. This entails all stakeholders to engage in active participation. Developments in Information and Communications Technology (ICT) enabled utilization of various tools by the government to easily connect with the Filipino community. However these tools are not sufficient enough to attain the goal of increasing citizen participation for better governance and improving the relationship between the Philippine administration and its constituents. Various initiatives done on the use of ICT for better governance over the years paved the way for e-Participation. The objective of the study is to explore the concept of e-Participation suitable to the legislative process of local government units in the Philippines. The researchers used San Juan City as the domain of the study to gather information on the legislation process, public participation efforts, problems being experienced and future plans for increasing citizen participation. The proponents were able to identify problem areas on information dissemination, information aggregation, transparency and accountability, and scope. With the use of the E-Participation concept, Ann Macintosh's E-Participation Model, the Local Government Unit (San Juan City)'s Legislative Process, the following results were achieved: the "Your Say, Juan!" E-Participation System was initiated; Ann Macintosh's E-Participation Model was used as the guiding theoretical framework in the designing of the system, and its levels (e-Enabling, e-Engaging, e-Empowering) were translated into the three modules of the system: Information Repository, Policy Management and Virtual Community. These modules each included various e-Participatory tools to enhance participation from the stakeholders. Democracy is traditionally a top-down initiative by the government but with e-Participation, the citizens are given the power to start their own initiatives with its bottom-up approach.

Key Words: participation; information and communications technology; legislation; governance; local government units



1. INTRODUCTION

Governance is the decision-making process of resolutions to be implemented as defined by United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (UNESCAP) (“What is good governance”, n. d.). The Philippines is a democratic country thus active participation from its stakeholders is important. At present, promoting effective governance must involve the government unit, non-government organizations (NGO’s), citizens, and private sectors to engage in collaborative activities and increase participation.

New kinds of governance have been experimented over the years because of Information and Communications Technology (ICT) developments. ICT are products in digital form that can store, retrieve, manipulate, transmit, or receive information electronically (Riley, 2012). The Philippine government at present is utilizing diverse trending technologies such as social media, websites, and mobile applications to enhance governance and to connect with Filipino citizens. The Government Information Systems Plan (GISP) was accepted as the framework of Philippines’ automation efforts (Lallana, Pascual, Soriano, Nakpil, & Recio, 2002). However, these trending technologies are not enough to produce better participation, accountability, and transparency. Most websites of the Philippines’ national and local government units are static. Because of this, further improvements must be done. Social media is helpful in public participation but it lacks formality to create an impact in the legislative processes of a government.

There are initiatives to enhance governance with the use of ICT. Open Government Partnership was launched in 2011 with the goal of creating an international platform for promoting more open, accountable, and responsive governments (“Open Government Partnership”, n. d.). E-government is also emerging to develop better relationships between the government and their stakeholders. Through continuous ICT developments, citizens are finding new ways to participate in issues concerning them. ICT, e-government, and open government initiative paved way for e-Participation. E-participation is the collective efforts of stakeholders that make their relationship among one another more effective and efficient in political terms. With the help of ICTs,

citizens have the ability to connect with one another by means of shared interests and through elected officials who can represent their issues and concerns (Tambouris et al., 2007). According to the e-Participation Model by Macintosh, citizens must be enabled, engaged, and empowered to encourage participation (Macintosh, 2004).

The main objective of the study is to explore the concept of e-Participation in local government units that will aid future researches and implementation of public participation systems in the Philippines. It focuses on gaining knowledge on the concept of e-Participation and the use of e-participatory tools, identifying viable relevant models of e-Participation, and applying e-Participation to the legislative process of a chosen local government unit.

The study intends to integrate e-Participation with a Local Government Unit (LGU), which is San Juan City. The implementation of an e-Participation to the legislative process of the city, may increase the responsiveness of San Juan City to the needs of its citizens thus bridging the gap in citizen – government relationship. Better relationship between the two parties will result to better governance as they are collaborating to meet the needs and the desires of the majority. The trends of ICT in the governments around the globe are promising. E-Participation can help the City of San Juan create and establish good relationships with their constituents. The city’s Public Information, Media and Barangay Relations Office (PIMBRO) has invested in the use of social media sites such as Facebook and Twitter to gather feedback from the residents of San Juan (A. Dionisio, personal communication, November 6, 2012).

2. METHODOLOGY

The study focused on integrating e-Participation in the legislative process of San Juan City, Philippines. E-Participation aims to alleviate the disconnection or the gap between government officials and concerned citizens in the policy-making process of a municipality through the aid of ICTs (Tambouris et al., 2007). To grasp the concepts involved in the study, an intensive library research and consultation with experts were done by the proponents. As a result, the group arrived at



the decision of using Ann Macintosh e-Participation Model as the theoretical basis of the study. The proponents conducted a series of direct and indirect interviews with representatives of San Juan City. The result of the interviews allowed the proponents to understand the current state of public participation in the legislative process in San Juan City; and to identify existing problems in it.

San Juan City encouraged public participation in the legislative process of the city through citizens filing draft resolutions/ordinances; lobbying or having a representative to sponsor their draft proposal; and participating in public hearings, consultations, and/or discussions. As an act of public participation, the Citizen's Charter of the city states that constituents may file draft resolutions/ordinances (San Juan City Government, 2009). A citizen or a representative of an interested group may initiate this move. Through lobbying, the citizen or representative may convince a certain politician or councilor to sponsor their proposal. Typically, all decisions made are based from citizen feedback. Besides public discussions and consultations, citizens' concerns or complaints were present in social networking sites and other similar pages. Through this manner, concerned officials were made aware of the issues that transpire in other parts of the city (A. Dionisio, personal communication, November 6, 2012).

With the aid of the inputs gathered from the representatives of the city, the proponents were able to identify four problem areas in San Juan City's legislative process: information dissemination, information aggregation, transparency and accountability, and scope. For *information dissemination*, not all citizens were properly informed on important issues and events. Only minimal citizen awareness was discovered to be present since not everyone has the time or is geographically near the local government offices to gain information that one must or could know. With *information aggregation*, not all citizen concerns were successfully relayed by their local officials to the executives. Also, citizens' feedbacks were not organized due to the numerous concerns

being brought up. *Transparency and accountability* problems arose as the city government gathered citizen feedback because these concerns were usually left untracked. This caused improper tracking / monitoring. Hearing and reading outputs on issues being resolved were kept from the public. Moreover, the local government did not evaluate citizen satisfaction on their previous efforts such as an ordinance implemented to resolve an issue. With regards to the city's *scope*, officials were not able to communicate useful information to all constituents due to the representative-citizen ratio. Also, successful aggregation of all citizen feedback was not fulfilled by these officials due to numerous concerns.

The proponents' desired output is an e-Participation system that will address the problems being experienced in San Juan City. The study was supported by the Systems Development Life Cycle where it described the process for planning, creating, testing, and deploying an information system. The proponents decided to use Rapid Application Development (RAD) – based methodology to address the drawbacks of structured design methodology. Dennis et al. described RAD as the combination of the modified SDLC phases that uses various tools and techniques to improve the speed and quality of the development process. RAD modified the traditional Waterfall Methodology by emphasizing the speed of development through extensive user involvement in the rapid, iterative and incremental construction of series of functioning prototypes of a system that eventually evolves into the final system (Dennis, Roth & Wixom, 2010).

Brainstorming was done by the proponents and this included coming up with a suitable architectural framework and storyboard for the system. The guiding principle used in designing the system was Ann Macintosh's e-Participation Model as mentioned in the previous section of the paper. Using the model, three levels of participation were identified: e-Enabling, e-Engaging, and e-Empowering. These levels were used to work out the identified problem areas. *E-Enabling* supported



the use of technology in disseminating information to citizens by ensuring that it is available and understandable. *E-Engaging* included consultation with citizens enabling them to contribute by giving feedback to the government. *E-Empowering* included active citizen participation where they can provide ideas to influence the government in policy-making. With these principles and best practices, the proponents conceptualized the design for the system.

User involvement in the construction of the prototype was evident during the designing of the module functions. Feedback gathered from the stakeholders were assessed, considered, and integrated in the prototype output. The users tried the system prototypes and were able to gather a constructive feedback during the development. An operational prototype was produced in weeks. As the solution emerged, the users became more positive about the process and results. Also, the methodology was able to allow early detection of errors (Stair & Reynolds, 2008).

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Guided by the principles of the e-Participation Model of Ann Macintosh, three major system modules were identified for the “*Your Say, Juan!*” (YSJ) e-Participation System: Information Repository, Policy Management, and Virtual Community. The *Information Repository Module* handled basic information that citizens should have access to. The contents of the Information Repository Module were designed to be beneficial to all users and the remaining modules. The *Policy Management Module* handled the existing and proposed legislations in San Juan City. Similar to the Information Repository Module, the contents of the Policy Management module were designed to be beneficial to the other modules. The *Virtual Community Module* was designed to be a platform for active citizen participation through virtual communities, drafting proposals, and milestone tracking.

Table 1. Macintosh Model Integration to the “Your Say, Juan!” e-Participation System

Level	Modules	Specific Sub-functions
ENABLING		
Information Level	Information Repository	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • City Information • Schedules • News articles • Blog articles • SMS • Policies
	Policy Management	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • SMS
ENGAGING		
Feedback Level	Policy Management	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Comment • Support/Hinder • Survey
	Virtual Community	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Post Concern • Comment • e-Poll • Support/Hinder • Forum
EMPOWERING		
Decision Making Level	Virtual Community	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • e-Poll • e-Petition • Lobby Proposal • Discussion Forum
Collaborative Level	Policy Management	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Comment • Support/Hinder
	Virtual Community	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Connect *all • Submit Draft • Milestone Tracking (Support/Hinder only)

Moreover, the *Information Repository Module*, supported by the e-Enabling principle of Ann Macintosh’s e-Participation Model, catered to the problem area concerning information dissemination. The module aimed to increase public awareness on important news and issues; to enable the citizens to participate in the policy creation process with information presented to them; and to assist citizens in providing



fruitful insights on the issues that affect them. It included functions that allowed the users to search through the knowledge existing in the central storage of the system with the Browse Legislations function; to be acquainted with the elected local government officials through Councilor Profiling; and to be aware on the trending issues in the city with the Active Trending Tags function. The Browse Legislations function allowed the users to search and filter proposed and existing legislations in the city. This helped the users in trimming down the results when browsing through the central repository of YSJ. Expounded councilor background was made possible with Councilor Profiling. This includes the Voting Records feature that allowed the users to review the past decisions made by a representative on a proposed legislation of the city. This feature was added to address the transparency and accountability problem area in the legislative process of the city.

With regards to the existing and proposed policies in the city of San Juan, the *Policy Management* was created in adherence to the e-Enabling and e-Engaging principle of Macintosh's e-Participation model. It addressed the problem areas concerning information dissemination and aggregation, transparency and accountability, and scope. The Policy Management module became a tool for increased public awareness on existing and proposed policies with the Browse Legislations function and the Latest Legislations section; on evaluating existing policies of the city through the Support/Hinder and Comment function; and on easily tracking policy drafts being processed with the Legislation Milestone Tracking function. The Latest Legislations section is a segment in YSJ that displays the title of the latest legislations that has entered the legislative process of the city. Through the Support/Hinder function, citizen users have an avenue to express their support or disapproval on a proposed or existing legislation. Justifications regarding other citizen user's Support/Hinder were ensured through the Comment function. This allowed them to evaluate the legislation and come up with a decision/opinion of their own on the matter. The Legislation Milestone Tracking function was created to further enhance transparency and accountability in the progress of each legislation. The function included a clickable chevron bar that displays a short description on the side to ensure that users are

aware of what is happening in every stage of the legislative process. A downloads section was included in the function to ensure users have the opportunity to download legislation files.

Other features added to the Policy Management Module were the following: Voting Record, Short Message Service (SMS) Subscription, and Lobby Policy Proposal. The Voting Record feature of the module encouraged transparency and accountability in the decisions created by the elected local government officials in San Juan City. It lists all the representatives who voted for and/or against a proposed legislation. This feature is included in the Legislation Milestone Tracking function. On the other hand, the SMS Subscription feature brought a more efficient way of delivering updates to the users who manifest an interest on a proposal. This feature may be used by typing in the mobile number of a user in the Subscription section of the Legislation Milestone Tracking function. Lastly, the Lobby Policy Proposal feature ensured that proposing a policy is more efficient without being geographically present all the time in the San Juan City Hall. The feature uses a form that ensures submitted details are stored in a database accessible only to the users who are authorized to view it such as the City Council Secretary and Government Representative.

In adherence to the e-Empowering level of Macintosh's participation model, the Virtual Community Module addressed the problem areas concerning information aggregation and dissemination, and scope. It became a central meeting place for members of specific sectors in the city of San Juan. Moreover, it became a virtual platform for active citizen participation through virtual communities, proposal drafting, and legislation milestone tracking. The module allowed the citizen users to have discussions as a community disregarding geographical location through the Virtual Community feature, and to initiate a petition with the e-Petition tool, to name a few. Included in the Virtual Community feature were the recognized sectors and barangays in San Juan City which allowed a bigger gathering of communities through YSJ. The e-Petition tool was designed in a way that users must request for a petition to be made by the Community Representative users. This was done to ensure no garbage petitions are created in YSJ. It was included in the module to give the users a tool for making a request known to their local government.



4. CONCLUSIONS

With the increasing demand for better governance, the government is constantly improving efforts to increase citizen participation. This can be achieved through the use of ICTs making public participation more accessible to constituents. E-participation is the collective efforts of stakeholders that make their relationship better in political terms. With increased participation and use of e-participatory tools, better governance may be achieved. The targeted domain for the study is San Juan City where the proponents conducted interviews and extensive research focusing on the legislative process and public participation efforts. Through these activities, four problem areas were identified: information dissemination, information aggregation, transparency and accountability, and scope. Addressing these problem areas, the "Your Say, Juan!" e-Participation System was produced. The system was guided by the e-Participation Model by Ann Macintosh that consists of three stages: enabling, engaging and empowering. These stages contributed to conceptualizing the main modules of the system: Information Repository, Policy Management and Virtual Community. These modules each comprises of various e-participatory tools that heightens the means for public participation. With the problem areas addressed, the gap in the public's participation in government activities was bridged which subsequently empowered the government representatives to ensure better local governance.

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