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# To Pseudo-Participate or Not to Participate?

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## Abstract

The concept of citizenship is being redefined through the use of online tools. These digital tools and services embedded developers' biases and technological clientelist approaches, where participation is conceived as a use-case rather than a democratic human right. The lack of agency in decision making and agenda-setting is a growing phenomena in the design of digital public services. This position statement introduces the concept of pseudo-participation and opens up a conversation regarding how pseudo-participation is embedded in democratic socio-technical systems in current use.

## Author Keywords

digital services; technocratic clientelism; pseudo-participation by design; pseudo-participation in design

## CCS Concepts

•Applied computing → E-government; •Human-centered computing → Interaction design process and methods; Please use the 2012 Classifiers and see this link to embed them in the text: [https://dl.acm.org/ccs/ccs\\_flat.cfm](https://dl.acm.org/ccs/ccs_flat.cfm)

## Digital Democracy

Active, substantive and meaningful participation is highlighted as a critical element to implement the 2030 sustainable agenda by the United Nations [12]. This has been

the result of a significant evolution in the relationship between governments and the people in the past 60 years, from consciousness-raising in the 1960s to the incorporation of local perspectives in the 1970s, the recognition of local knowledge in the 1980s, the participation as a norm in the sustainable development agenda of the 1990s, and the e-participation concept in the 2000s [16]. Yet, despite the international commitment to advance the sustainable development goals (SDGs), "*public participation remains an overlooked key element of the SDGs*", with no coordinated actions to build resilient participatory infrastructures [2, pg.1].

In the current era of participatory cultures [8], digital tools have been proposed as a way to mediate participation, in the design, development of solutions to common issues, with examples ranging from workplace information systems and city planning to environment and social policy issues [13, 18]. As a result, online participation has spiked in popularity across the world [5] as democratic societies continue to strive to embed participation in the direction and operation of political systems in different ways. But, participation has always been a complex concept in practice. Famous examples like the Ladder of Citizen Participation [1], the separation of informative, consultative and discursive interaction [3], different knowledge levels (e.g., [9]), and other typologies of participation and democracy (for example: [6, 14, 17, 11]), show the versatility of participation. Digital democracies are being implemented differently in a variety of contexts (for example municipal vs. national or international). A participatory initiative may have several aims, not all of which focus on engaging with people. Rather, sometimes the aim is to start a process to only give an impression of real engagement. This is known as technocratic clientelism ("*state-led regime with clientelistic mediation between the state and society*" [7, p.17]) and it is character-

ized by an appearance of political effectiveness by the creation of participatory processes, where both popular control and people's agency are virtually non-existent [7].

### **Pseudo-Participation**

Online platforms aimed at public participation often embed a lack of agency and infuse pre-set agendas into features that resemble non-participatory degrees of participation such as manipulation, one-way information, placation [1]. My colleagues and I have conceptualized this contemporary phenomena as digital pseudo-participation by and in design - the configuration of digital artifacts and/or processes that can provide an illusion of participation but lacks supportive processes and affordances to allow meaningful participation to happen [15].

#### *Pseudo-Participation by Design*

*"Pseudo-participation by design emerges through the interaction with a configured artifact (i.e. digital service) that creates an impression of affecting change through digital interaction. In reality, these artifact's affordances have been pre-set by an agenda and do not offer any meaningful power to the people. They configure the role of the user (e.g. information consumer) and limit the ways they can interact with the tools. This is enabling digital participation without giving any real agency. This augments an existing lack of transparency in institutionalized participatory processes. In them the main focus is to collect as many opinions as possible as opposed to opening-up the mechanisms in play during all decision making stages. Pseudo-participation by design hurts the willingness to participate, reduces trust in government, and diminishes the ability to create social capital. Through the design and implementation of an artifact (e.g. a website), city officials can embed assumptions about what are the expected roles of the inhabitants of the city [10]" [15, pg.41].*

### *Pseudo-Participation in Design*

*"Participatory processes can result in limited involvement by those who will be affected by design decisions. Most typically, this manifests as introducing people's participation purely as an instrument - for example, incentivizing residents to report potholes in the city through a city website - and constraining other forms of participation. This phenomenon is what we call pseudo-participation in design. The power of making decisions about technologies for public use manifests also in the processes of design. Although many claim to be using participatory approaches such as participatory design or co-creation when designing digital services, but in reality, often those affected by the design decisions are marginalized and not involved in the design decisions loop [7]. The quality of popular control in pseudo participatory processes is very low [7]." [15, pg.41].*

### **What means to be a person in a digital democracy?**

It is important to highlight that given the limitations of pseudo-participatory digital services to address common issues, people have developed crucial abilities to create, use and share digital resources that allow them to create their own livable cities (see, for example, the Environmental Data Governance Initiative). These practices of digital curation "in-the-wild" [4], are pervasive and evolve rapidly, especially in emergency situations such as the Chile protests in 2019 and the COVID-19 emergency. In these environments, a diverse set of actors have turned into curators of digital artifacts, data representations and interactions.

Through the concept of pseudo-participation, we want to highlight how important exploring participation not only through tools but in a wider context is. Scholars have different views on how the introduction of an online platform for participation will affect the citizens, politically [3, 14].

However, more work is needed to educate technologists regarding the power they hold to reconfigure people's roles in digital services. A first step towards that, is perhaps, to document how and where pseudo-participation takes place and the political affordances of socio-technical components and systems. Public technologies should not only enable people's participation but should benefit society and government in an equitable way.

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