Not too bad, not good: the mixed picture of transparency and responsiveness of E-participation instruments implemented by English local councils. (Michele Zadra, University of Southampton)

The continuous decline of citizens' political participation of the last 30 years - low election turnouts, low party membership, fallen trust in politicians, drop in media coverage – indicates that representative democracy is probably not in a good shape. According to democratic theory, to be legitimate binding decisions must be appraised by those who are bound to respect them. The lack of participation of a consistent part of the population thus undermines the democratic legitimacy of important policy choices. In the 90s, following the explosion of the Web, many western governments looked at the 'Internet revolution' as the panacea that would solve their legitimacy crisis. The consequent wave of democratic digitalisation generated a plethora of government-led (top-down) and citizens-led (bottom-up) electronic platforms, intended to promote civic engagement and political participation, and prompted a rich literature about the effects of e-participation instruments on making democratic processes more or less accessible and inclusive. However, not much is yet known about the level of transparency and accountability of these web-based participatory instruments.

In an attempt to fill this gap, this paper investigates to what extent e-participation tools – such as e-panels, e-consultations and e-petitions – are transparent, responsive and accountable, through the web content analysis (WCA) of the 340 English councils' websites. The qualitative data resulting from the WCA have been then summarised in 14 numeric variables, which together compose a single score, the 'Citizen Engagement Index'.

Preliminary results of the analysis conducted over 107 websites show that 12 Councils (11%) fare as 'poor', 85 (79%) as 'average' and 10 (9%) as 'good' in the Citizen Engagement Index. A lukewarm scenario when considering that the limited number of highly opaque and unresponsive websites is countered by the even smaller number of websites that fully implement participatory principles. This trend is worrying, as a merely perfunctory execution of democratic innovations risk to disappoint citizens and disengage them even more from politics. The conclusions of the paper provide few recommendations to local governments for reducing this cost of electronic democratisation.