

# Are Online Communities Good for the Civic Audit of Public Spaces, Services, and Officers?

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**Abstract.** While, the need of assessing public spaces, services and officers becomes, always more urgent and mandatory, a wide literature and extensive field experience show that *internal audit* by the public sector itself is not sufficient. There is the need to foster the *civic accountability* by integrating an independent external evaluation in the audit process. The paper investigates the possibility that online communities provide a suitable framework for carrying on this *external audit* by supporting the so-called *voice strategy* in the contexts (such as the public sector) where the *exit strategy* does not hold. After envisaging the potential advantages coming from involving online communities of users in the assessment of a public space, service or officer, two early pilot experiments carried on to validate this assumption are presented and discussed. They are neither sufficient to validate the assumption nor sufficient to invalidate it, but provides hints helpful to pursue the investigation.

**Keywords:** Online Communities, Civic Accountability, Civic Audit, e-participation.

## 1 Introduction

Year after year, the need of assessing public services and spaces becomes more urgent and mandatory. The recent crisis of the world financial markets, and its repercussions over the western countries economy, will reduce even more the resources available for managing public services and for ameliorating public spaces, while the need for them will increase precisely because of the economic crisis. It is therefore more and more important to assess the effectiveness in using the few available resources.

Experience and a wide literature show that *internal audit* by the public sector itself is not sufficient. There is the need to foster the *civic accountability* by integrating an independent external evaluation in the audit process. Objective of this *external audit* is to improve public services, ameliorate public spaces, monitoring public officers' activities and, in general, make public administrations more efficient and effective. In the North Europe countries this role is played by an *audit commission* in which the various stakeholders are represented.

However this solution does not exploit the “hidden treasure” given by direct experience of those who live the public spaces, use the public services and interact with the public officers: the citizens. In order to disclose this treasure and make the hidden

citizens' experience effective, it is necessary to involve them in the audit process. There is the need of a *civic audit* where citizens are the active and expert actors.

In the market, users, customers and consumers continuously evaluate the products they consume, the services they use and the spaces they live. As pointed out by Hirschman [1], if they are not pleased with the quality of a firm's products they are able to put into effect the result of their assessment in two different ways: they can stop buying the firm's products (*exit* option) or they can express their dissatisfaction directly to the firm (*voice* option). Since firms are interested in avoiding the possibility to lose customers in favor of a competitor, they are more and more open to listen the customers' voice. This option allow companies to identify problems and gather suggestions, and, at the same time, to build and reinforce customers' loyalty.

Differently, in the public sector citizens don't have these opportunities. In fact, public administrations provide public goods, i.e. goods that can be consumed by every citizen and in most cases do not allow "escape from consuming them, unless one were to leave the community by which they are provided" [1]. Public administrations have no competitors in providing that goods and then citizens can't *physically exit* from them. The absence of the exit risk has historically led public administrations to not open themselves to the citizens' voice. Therefore, citizens can't exit from the public goods and even don't have the opportunity to express their discomfort directly to the public administrations.

Moreover, as argued in [2], modern representative democracies are characterized by what Postman [3] calls 'one-way conversation' and are not able to create significant connections between citizens and their representatives. This situation is the main reason of the growing disaffection of people with institutions and representatives: the outcomes of [2], [4], and [5], which present the results of three different surveys on the extent to which UK, US and Italian citizens feel themselves connected to public institutions, say that citizens consider governments as remote, do not trust representatives and are not as willing as they were used to participating in institutionally connected activities [6] [7] [8].

In this scenario, where citizens lack the opportunity to play an active role, they can only *emotionally exit* from the public life becoming passive users not willing to participate in the improvement of public services and spaces. To overcome this situation, as promoted by several democratic theorists ([1], [9], [10], [11], [12], [13], [14] and [15] among the others), there is the need to create deliberative and discussion public arenas where citizens can make their voice heard and representatives can access the vast repertoire of citizens' experiences and expertise. As Ichino states [16], in an increasingly complex world giving voice to citizens allow public administrations to quickly identify problems and malfunctions, and efficiently find solutions.

While the potential of complementing the internal audit with the civic audit has been recognized, there is still a lack of proposals for collecting the "hidden treasure" given by the direct people's experience in using public spaces and services. In this paper we investigate the possible use of online communities to provide rooms for involving citizens in the audit of public services and spaces.

## 2 The Potential Role of Online Communities

Online communities and in particular Community Networks already proved to be excellent environments for collecting civic intelligence [17], for supporting the development of people's projects [18], for designing (online) public services [19], [20], and for promoting public dialogue among citizens and between citizens and local institutions [21], [22]. We believe that they can also provide a suitable framework for fostering a participatory civic audit of public spaces, services and officers. Three are the main advantages one can get by involving communities of users in the auditing process:

1. online communities gather knowledge otherwise dispersed: people use services and spaces in different moments, and it may be difficult to collect their opinion in the precise moment of use; but it is also difficult to collect opinions afterwards;
2. online communities make public and available in-the-large users' points of view and suggestions, while using methods such as focus groups and paper-based surveys they remain available to a small audience;
3. online communities allow each one personal/private experience to be compared and contrasted with other people's experience: while a single person can be biased or simply unlucky, a repeated negative comment is something which calls attention.

About ten years after the early experiments performed by civic and community networks (see for instance [23] and [24]), more recently experiments in this direction come from some social rating web sites which have risen in the web 2.0 for the purpose of assessing public spaces ([www.fixmystreet.com](http://www.fixmystreet.com)), public services (see. e.g., [www.patientopinion.org.uk](http://www.patientopinion.org.uk)), or public officers (such as, for instance: [www.ratemycop.com](http://www.ratemycop.com) or [www.ratemyteachers.com](http://www.ratemyteachers.com), imitated in Italy by [www.votailprof.it](http://www.votailprof.it)). However, in most of them posts are anonymous (in some cases, people is 'suggested' to register by using their first and last name, but the large majority use a nickname) and represent isolated opinions with no comment (in some cases comments are not even allowed). So it happens that teachers are listed by name in these sites, but students who evaluate them disappear behind nicknames. In other cases it may happen that a cop receives several negative votes without any justification, opinion or suggestion. Anonymity can be acceptable when rating a movie (as in [www.imdb.com](http://www.imdb.com)); nicknames are also used in [www.ebay.com](http://www.ebay.com) for identifying buyers and sellers, but here a strong reputation policy prevent the risks associated with anonymity.

We believe that to make civic accountability effective, citizens must assume their responsibility by participating as far as possible through their actual identity in a public dialogue among them. Online communities – where participants develop a sense of belonging, mutual trust, and are used to a fair exchange of ideas and to sharing experiences and knowledge – provide a suitable environment for a civic public audit fostering citizens to notify problems as well as to suggest possible solutions. In the next section we present two pilot experiments we have done in order to test this hypothesis.

### 3 Two Pilot Experiments

The case studies presented here below have been carried on in the framework of the initiatives and research projects about civic participation which constitute the research field of the Civic Informatics Laboratory at the University of Milan. We have used the tools provided by openDCN (where DCN stands for Deliberative Community Networks), an open source software we are developing for supporting e-participation which includes an online community space and an online deliberative space [25].

In particular, the first experiment (which is somehow analogous to fix-mystreet.com) takes place within *partecipaMi*, an online initiative run by the RCM (Rete Civica di Milano – the Milan Community Network) Participatory Foundation. *partecipaMi* ([www.partecipaMi.it](http://www.partecipaMi.it)), the continuation of the Milan Community Network experience running since 1994 in the Milan City metropolitan area [18], is an online public space where Milan citizens discuss civic issues among themselves, with elected members of the City Council and with a couple of members of the City Government. In spring 2008 Ciclobby, a non profit association which promotes the use of the bicycle for moving in the city, obtained by the City government to set up a “permanent forum to discuss and make proposals on the problems which bikers have to face with, in particular to discuss the problems of road safety”. Ciclobby and the RCM Foundation decided to open within *partecipaMi* a special section (named *Sicurezza Stradale* – Road Safety) where bikers can signal places of danger by adding a balloon on a Google map with an associated message for describing the situation. Other bikers and citizens can add comments: in most cases, the comments reinforce the original post, but in some case a different opinion is presented. This “City Map” of road safety (see Fig. 1) is complemented by a discussion area where more general issues are discussed (e.g., the difficult relationships among bikers, motorcyclists and pedestrians) called “Road Safety Forum” to make explicit reference to the offline permanent forum. This area is run thanks to the Informed Discussion tool of the openDCN software. It is basically an enriched forum with facilities for sharing information resources in order to support the discussion and finalize it by producing, asynchronously and collaboratively, a summary document. When participants attach to their posts documents and other materials (e.g., photos and videos) to support their arguments, these are collected in the information area which represents a knowledge repository of the specific discussion. To post in the City Map as well as in the Road Safety Forum, participants have to register to the *partecipaMi* site (which has more than 2000 registered and active members), while comments in the City Map can be added by unregistered users which have to give their first and family name, and are then solicited by the community manager to register for improving the trustworthiness of what they say.

From its opening on April 23, 2008 to the end of September 2008, the City Map collected about one hundred of dangers flags enriched by about the same number of comments; moreover, the discussion area collected 22 threads of discussion which involve two councilors and the alderman liable for mobility and public transportation in Milan. It worth noting that the Informed Discussion tool used for run the Road Safety Forum has allowed to collect 47 uploaded and attached information resources shared among participants. They represented a solid and shared informative basis for the discussions. At the end of September, Ciclobby and the RCM Foundation have



**partecipaMi.it**  
sicurezza stradale

Home L'iniziativa Galateo Registrati Tavolo Sicurezza Stradale Contatti

Entra

**Eventi / iniziative per la Sicurezza Stradale**  
Iniziata da  Oliverio Gentile il 25-04-2008 alle 11:07  
Piazza della Scala, 2  6 commenti ultimo di Stefano Sberna il 01-02-2009 alle 12:30

**Via Dei Missaglia, altre due morti annunciate nell'incrocio killer**  
Iniziata da  Oliverio Gentile il 24-09-2008 alle 15:43  
Via dei Missaglia  2 commenti ultimo di Stefano Sberna il 01-02-2009 alle 12:07

**Incrocio via Comelico/viale Umbria: un incidente al mese!**  
Iniziata da  Oliverio Gentile il 22-04-2008 alle 21:07

Fig. 1. The Sicurezza Stradale home page

summarized the materials collected through this initiative in a final document which assesses the city roads safety from the bikers' perspective. They brought this document at the attention of the permanent forum which is still considering possible actions. We want to underline that *Sicurezza Stradale* has enabled stakeholders (e.g. the 'Anti-smog parents' and the 'Milan Motorcyclists' associations) and citizenry excluded from the institutional permanent forum set up by the administration to participate in the online site and bring their voice and knowledge to the institutional forum. This first experiment unveils the value of an online community network for initiatives of civic accountability.

*Sicurezza Stradale* occurs in the framework of a well consolidated community of civic dialogue such as *partecipaMi.it*, which in turns comes from the civic participation background established by the Milan Community Network. Both these socio-technical environments are characterized by a strong identity and mutual trust among participants which have influenced the *Sicurezza Stradale* initiative. Thanks to them any participant of *Sicurezza Stradale* never questioned about the explicit use of their actual identity and nobody felt uncomfortable in making a negative although fair remark. Moreover, the community context, combined with software (*openDCN*) expressly conceived and designed for supporting participation, fosters citizens' participation in the civic audit not only in terms of notifying problems but also in providing documents, arguments and suggestions useful for promoting rational discussions about the problems emerged.

Adopting the above mentioned identification policy was also important to remove an obstacle to public official participation to the discussions: several times members of the administration explicitly claimed that they are well disposed to participate to the online public dialogue, and to consider people observations, just because citizens

write with their actual identity – somehow certified by the registration policy reinforced by the community – so taking the responsibility of what they write. We got the same advice from members of several other Municipalities in the Milan region involved in similar, although less successful, e-participation projects.

Finally, the need for the presence of a third party in charge of promoting, managing and guaranteeing such kind of participation initiatives emerges from this experience. The RCM Foundation plays the role of the third party between the citizenry and the city administration. Thanks to that, even though the Milan Community Network Foundation which promoted together with Ciclobby the *Sicurezza Stradale* initiative is an autonomous body (to be precise, a participatory Foundation) and there is no official and tight relationship with the Municipality, people perceive partecipaMi as an institutional site where they can dialogue with members of the City Council and of the City Government who occasionally take part to the discussions. Therefore citizens contribute to the initiative in the hope of being listened by the city administration. Similarly to what proposed in [11], we believe that the presence of a third party is a crucial factor for the creation of a space for public communication able to foster new forms of public involvement in civic affairs (such as the civic audit of public spaces).

Different results emerge from another experiment we carried on in 2008 for assessing the university class of Virtual Communities given by one of the authors at University of Milan, attended by under-graduated and graduated students of different degrees in Informatics.

We designed a participatory evaluation process consisting of two anonymous questionnaires before the exam and of an open discussion after the exam based on the results of the previous steps. This has been done in the framework of the online discussion facilities provided by the learning management system which supports the class teaching. The tool used for the questionnaires is an e-voting software (i.e., software that guarantees the strong properties required for voting) adapted to support citizens consultation [25].

The participation to the anonymous surveys can be considered quite good: the 87,5% (resp., the 62,5%) of the 40 students who were attending the class, in presence or remotely, answered the first (resp., the second) questionnaire. After the summer session of exams, we opened the online discussion on the results of the questionnaire with a message from one of the tutors, formulating three remarks over the questionnaire outcomes: no student commented it. Therefore, after the fall session of exam, we sent a recall message in the student's mailbox, obtaining a comment from the 37,5% of the students who had just passed the exam. In the winter session, at the oral exam, we solicited comments in person, but did not sent a recall email; and again no student left a comment. Besides these numbers, the kind of messages shows an evident difficulty for students to discuss openly about the course. The (few) students who sent a comment, just replied to the three remarks in the opening message, with no added personal opinion, arguments, critics and suggestions.

## 4 An Open-Ended Conclusion

The *Sicurezza Stradale* pilot experiment confirm the assumption that online communities well support the external audit of public spaces (and services); they enable a *voice* strategy (on public goods) through a lively and proactive online dialogue among

citizens and public officers. With respect to other recent experiments, where citizens just notify problems without registering (e.g. the Venice Municipality quite recently has opened in its official web site a so-called web 2.0 section – see, e.g., <http://iris.comune.venezia.it/Iris/>), the sense of belonging to a shared public space, both physical – the city – and ‘virtual’ – the online community –, foster a stronger civic responsibility: the outcome is not only a list of problems to be fixed, but also a more concerned citizenry used to discuss public issues, provide suggestions as well as possible solutions. This is somehow confirmed by the fact that in the above mentioned case of Venice, citizens could comment someone else's remarks, but almost no one used this feature.

The university class experiment can be viewed either as the auditing of a public officer or as the auditing of a public service tightly coupled to the person in charge of it. The difficulties it has shown may lie precisely in this link and can be read as a symptom of the problems that people (in this case students) encounter when they are called to evaluate – openly and in public – either a public officer (the professor) or a service tightly coupled to a person who can read and may comment the remarks. We believe that it is possible to face with these difficulties by encouraging a stronger sense of community among students and making them aware that their participation in the assessment is invaluable and actually used in a continuous process of improving teaching: something that cannot be obtained through rating sites. We also believe that in this case too, a third trusted third party managing the evaluation process could help to increase student's active participation.

These two pilot experiments are of course neither sufficient to validate the assumption that online communities provide a suitable framework for fostering a participatory civic audit of public spaces, services, and officers, nor sufficient to invalidate it. Nevertheless, they provide hints helpful to pursue the investigation; namely, their two main outcomes are the following ones:

- the online community should be an actual one, with a consolidated sense of belonging and mutual trust; it cannot be created on the fly to perform an assessment. If it does not exist, it is worth creating it according to the well-know principles driving online community design [26], [27], [28];
- the assessment of public spaces and of (anonymous) services is much easier than the assessment of public officers or of a service tightly coupled to the person in charge of it. In this case, the design of the assessment process must pay special attention to make the participants' remarks anonymous.

Finally, in both cases, a trusted third party managing the online community as well as the assessment process could help to increase people participation. While this remark directly recalls the super-partes position of the audit commission performing the external audit in the North Europe countries (cf. the Introduction), in more concrete terms this is a guideline which has to be considered for deciding which body manages the servers where the different phases of the assessment process take place, and the requirements for the software to be used: e.g., the students must be sure that there is no way for associating the questionnaire they fill with their identity.

In conclusion, if we are not able to fully sustain that online communities provide a suitable framework for fostering a participatory civic audit, we have shown their ability to provide a suitable room for supporting, fostering and consolidating the voice strategy in the public sector.

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