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Integrating Public Displays with Other Participation Methods (UbiPart Project)

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1 Research Objective

The emerging participative orientation of smart cities [4] has led to the implementation of various participation methods to include citizens in decision-making [6]. They range from traditional such as workshops to innovative approaches supported by technology such as online platforms that allow citizens to submit ideas and vote for them with the expectation that the most popular ones will be implemented by the government. Recently, public displays (i.e. interfaces deployed in the public space to be accessible by any passerby [7]) have been used as participation method [2]. These devices possess qualities that are desirable in the context of citizen participation such as the ability to be interacted with by several citizens at a time, therefore fostering discussion [1], and their deployment in the urban space, thus being able to contextualize content that concerns its location [7]. Furthermore, public displays are exempt from a limitation faced by the other participation methods. With these, citizens have to make a step forward to have the opportunity to participate (e.g. login to an online platform, attend a scheduled meeting), implying that it is challenging to attract citizens who are not already engaged in participation. On the contrary, citizens encounter public displays without explicitly looking for them, and can thus be offered a direct opportunity to participate.

However, while comparing the advantages of participation methods is interesting, the reality is that citizen participation is implemented by several methods that need to be articulated together thoughtfully. While too many concurrent methods might overburden citizens and discourage them from participating altogether, combining methods can prove valuable. Such complementarity could consist in using the results of one method to fuel another (e.g. a civic hackathon fueled by citizens' input from an online platform and social media [5]), or in alleviating the limitations of one method with another (e.g. complete a consultation on social media with a mail consultation to reach citizens who are not on social media). Therefore, when proposing a new participation method, it is essential to study how it can integrate efficiently with the others. In other terms, what are the synergies between this method and the others already put in place that can add value? This question remains unstudied for public displays [2], and is the focus of the UbiPart Project.

2 Project Steps and Expected Outputs

The first step of the Ubipart project would be to study the literature to identify potential complementarities with public displays. For example, a study found that public displays can attract much more citizens than online platforms but are less suited to collect rich data [3], thus suggesting interesting complementarities with online platforms. This first step leads to the identification of candidate methods to be combined with public displays. Then, for each method, a public display prototype would be developed to have a testable implementation of the pair. To be complementary to an online platform, a public display, performing well at conveying information to a large audience and collecting simple data, could show a visual overview of the ideas on a public display and allow voting. The display would also serve as advertisement for the participation platform and redirect citizens interested to contribute a richer feedback, since public displays are not suited to collect detailed data. Finally, following the practices of research on public displays, the prototype would be evaluated through a field study [2]. This process, exemplified with the online participation method, can be repeated for each method identified early in the project.

The Ubipart project is still at an elaboration stage, this paper being the first attempt to formalize it. The project requires expertise in citizen participation, development, and user studies. In order to ensure that several prototypes can be developed in an iterative way, the project should employ two researchers over two years. Regarding its output, the Ubipart project aims at a twofold contribution. First, a contribution for research lies in the synergies identified on which other researchers can build. Second, the developed and tested public displays can be reused by governments and thus constitute contributions for practice.

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