

# Public Engagement, Local Policies, and Citizens' Participation: An Italian Case Study of Civic Collaboration

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## Abstract

Since the 1990s, the theme of participation has come to the fore in international debates regarding at least three critical issues: the relationship between representative democracy and deliberative democracy and the possibility of citizens' empowerment through their involvement in policy making; the role of communication and of digital media in promoting new forms of participation; the feeling of disaffection toward politics and of democratic deficit. What we observe is a proliferation of experiences of both bottom-up and top-down enhanced forms of civic engagement. Our article focuses on "public engagement." We analyze the civic collaboration policy promoted by the Municipality of Bologna (Italy) in the frame of "collaborative governance" of the commons, based on civic involvement and governance transparency. Civic collaboration is characterized by a mixed communication ecology. We focus on the inclusiveness of this form of public engagement with local policies and on the role of digital media in supporting citizen's engagement. Civic collaboration emerges as a new, interesting frontier in top-down enhanced participation in local policies. We are currently witnessing some promising changes in the boundaries of participation, in civic practices and competencies. In conclusion, we argue that the concreteness of the projects of civic collaboration can enhance citizens' trust in the municipal administration, but we wonder whether it is likely to become a substitute for fuller citizen participation in local governance and whether it could also foster a removal of the controversial dimension of the political.

## Keywords

public engagement, local government, civic collaboration, participation, digital platform, communication ecology

## Introduction

Since the 1990s, the theme of participation has come to the fore in international debates regarding at least three critical issues: the relationship between representative democracy and deliberative democracy and the possibility of citizens' empowerment through their involvement in policy making (Dalton, 2008; Moini, 2012; Rondinelli, 2006); the role of communication and of digital media in promoting new forms of participation (Bartoletti & Faccioli, 2013; Carpentier, 2011; Coleman & Blumler, 2009; Dahlgren, 2009; Papacharissi, 2010); the feeling of disaffection toward politics and of democratic deficit (Rosanvallón, 2008, 2011).

At the same time, we have been witnessing a proliferation of civic engagement experiences, divided into top-down forms (which often aim at experimenting new forms of governance and focus on inclusive processes) and bottom-up approaches, which are promoted by citizens, sometimes in partnership with public institutions. By limiting our

discussion to the forms of top-down participation, which are defined as "public engagement" (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development [OECD], 2009), we can schematically say that the debate focuses on three different positions. First, top-down citizen's engagement is considered to be an expression of neoliberal politics, aimed solely at gaining consensus through listening procedures, reducing public expenditure, and broadening the privatization of public services (Crouch, 2004; Moini, 2012). Second,

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experiences of public engagement are represented as an expression of “open government” based on the diffusion of citizens’ listening and involvement (OECD, 2001, 2009). The third position considers the approach of public engagement as an opportunity for both government and citizens to construct new ways of governance based on true and effective citizens’ participation (Carpentier, 2011; Dahlgren, 2014), as long as specific conditions are realized (Coleman & Blumler, 2009; Coleman & Götze, 2001; Moss & Coleman, 2014). In the background, we can currently perceive the feeling of disaffection toward politics and, more generally, a loss of public confidence in institutions, which are harshly criticized for failing to respond to people’s needs (Dahlgren, 2015). Most importantly, institutions are no longer trusted as protectors of the common good (about Italy, see Demos & PI, 2014; European Commission, Standard Eurobarometer 82, 2014).

In light of this, the article takes into account a set of experiences of public engagement promoted by the Municipality of Bologna (Italy) through “collaborative governance” (in Italian the so-called “*amministrazione condivisa*,” Arena, 1997) of the commons. These activities are examples of an experimental partnership between public administrations and “active citizens” to develop, treat, and reuse goods of public interest with a view to improving the quality of life in cities. Communicative practices become pivotal in this process as they range from face-to-face encounters in physical spaces to civic digital media, which foster the development of new forms of sociality and give birth to new kinds of communities, as proposed in the literature regarding digital communities—from the research on early community networks and the extent to which the Internet was transforming or enhancing communities and neighborhoods (Hampton & Wellman, 2003; Wellman, 2001), to the more recent developments connected to the social media environment (Hampton, 2016). We intend to focus on this ostensibly new form of public engagement, on its communication ecology, and on the corresponding changes in citizens’ participation.

The choice of this case study rests on several factors. Bologna has demonstrated itself as being the most developed example of collaborative governance of the commons in Italy. It’s a seminal experience; it was the first to be activated in Italy, in May 2014, with a sufficiently large degree of implementation to provide elements that could help in evaluating what has been thus far achieved, along with insights for the future development of this form of governance in other Italian cities. Civic collaboration toward caring for the commons is an experience of national relevance. After the City Council of Bologna, 68 other Italian municipalities adopted regulations on collaborative governance, while a further 82 are in the process of completing its adoption.<sup>1</sup>

We analyze these present experiences of collaborative governance from a critical point of view, trying to highlight their potential as well as the critical situations that could have an impact on policies and on the internal processes of

public administration. We scrutinize the scope for citizen empowerment and the enhancement of their participation. The collaborative governance framework involves testing new civic practices (Dahlgren, 2009). An important issue to discuss is how widespread and inclusive these processes of civic engagement are for the existence of an effective development in participative democracy. Another point regards the role of communication and digital media in the promotion of civic collaboration between citizens and public institutions and in the transformation of processes internal to public administration (including the engagement and empowerment of civil servants themselves). As the literature demonstrates, trust and political efficacy (Coleman, Morrison, & Svennevig, 2008) are crucial issues that affect the effectiveness of any digital tool which aims to strengthen public engagement (Firmstone & Coleman, 2015).

## The International Debate About Governance and Participative Processes

Participation, collaboration, public engagement, active citizenship, and inclusion are words that highlight the need and importance of citizens’ feedback regarding the definition and management of public policies. These words were first introduced into the public debate more than 20 years ago. They revolve around the concept of enhancing the citizens’ *voice* (Couldry, 2010), albeit at different levels. The main stages of this process within the framework of European regulations are reported below, and some relevant analytical perspectives are summarized in order to provide an overview of the topic.

European Union (EU) Legislation issued in the 2000s has focused particularly on the importance of public consultation in relation to the implementation of effective forms of government, which should be efficient and open.<sup>2</sup> The concept used in several early documents is *E-democracy*, a multidimensional concept covering social inclusion, access to the information society, access to the public sphere (through participation in opinion formation, in an open dialogue between social, political, and institutional actors), electoral participation, partaking in the formation of candidate lists, citizen direct initiatives under the auspices of designated legal institutions (such as referenda or popular initiatives), and spontaneous forms of engagement represented by petitions, pleas, and the establishment of informal groups and associations. The concept further pertains to the involvement of citizens and their specific forms of association in decision-making processes (such as round table consultations on local development policies, participatory city planning, participatory budgeting; Italian Ministero per l’Innovazione e le Tecnologie. Area Innovazione per le Regioni e gli Enti Locali 2004).

This attention to citizen involvement is in part a consequence of changes in government policies, which are

increasingly oriented toward a particular model of governance. The model is characterized by the cooperation and interaction of State and non-State actors, in public–private mixed decision-making networks, and by processes of civic involvement and participation (Mayntz, 1998). Furthermore, the spread of information and communications technology (ICT) has given impetus to the relationship between institutions and citizens due to the great flow of information they currently facilitate. The result is greater awareness of the many rights that citizens can acquire, such as the right to be informed and require transparency. More importantly, citizens can now play a new role: they can be recipients as well as producers of information (Chadwick, 2009). This new social and communicative context is favorable to development toward a model of open and participative government.

In recent years, many EU Legislative measures have been implemented and have culminated in the *Open Government* project. Here, we particularly refer to *Plan D for Democracy, Dialogue and Debate* (Commission of the European Community, 2005). This framework of rules and actions aimed at engaging citizens entails a concept of participation primarily intended as a means of consultation and listening. Accordingly, participation

. . . should be a two way process, informing people about Europe's role through concrete achievements and projects and listening to people's expectations about what should be done in the future. [ . . . ] The ultimate objective of the Commission is to be able to draw lessons from the concerns expressed by the citizens. (Commission of the European Community, 2005, 3.2 and 4.3.1)

The main objective is to decrease the distrust of citizens toward EU institutions and to increase the number of people voting in European elections. This kind of involvement should be stimulated by the institutions and is mainly based on information dissemination and technical consultation on specific problems. However, this leaves little room for independent initiatives by citizens. There is no doubt expressed in the document that there will be a greater flow of information regarding institutional action, a better representation of the image of government, and the predisposition of active listening to audiences. Nevertheless, appropriate procedures have still not been defined, particularly regarding how the views of citizens will be effectively taken into account and used. In accordance with Firmstone and Coleman (2015), we could call this approach “informational engagement.” Otherwise, Dahlgren (2015) highlights that the question of the EU public sphere is not a problem of communication but of power relations, so the involvement of civil society is restricted to a few major associations “who become ‘partners’ in the discreet negotiations; all these actors seemingly share the view that publicity and open debate is not a desirable option” (Dahlgren, 2015, p. 11).

In a more recent governmental literature on the concept of Open Government, we can find other keywords, such as transparency, which promote accountability; participation which allows members of the public to contribute ideas and expertise to Government; collaboration which improves the effectiveness of the Government by encouraging partnerships across levels of government and between the Government and private institutions.<sup>3</sup>

Closely connected with the possibility of the reuse of open data, Open Government is first a project that attempts to improve the efficiency of public administrations, reducing costs and gaps and opening them up to the collaboration of other public and private institutional actors and citizens. The objective is to achieve greater efficiency and credibility in public government. According to a European Commission document on the *Digital Agenda for Europe* in February 2015,

The open government approach [ . . . ] is driven by opening up public data and services and facilitating collaboration for the design, production and delivery of public service. It is also about making government processes and decisions open, in order to foster citizen participation and engagement. [ . . . ] This approach shall also improve the quality of decision-making and promote greater trust in public institutions.<sup>4</sup>

The outlined framework offered in these documents is that of a governance in which citizens' participation is intertwined with collaboration between different social and institutional actors for better public governance. The examples analyzed so far suggest ways of top-down participation, demanded and managed by institutions so as to innovate public government. However, the explicit reference to partnerships with civic associations opens them up to the possibility of confrontation beyond the simple listening approach. The question is, “How do these top-down designed participation spaces relate to the demands for a *voice* by the citizens?”

## Public Engagement, Participation, and Civic Agency: A Literature Review

In the representation of these processes of innovation in the field of public government, much space is given to the experimentation with forms of deliberative democracy, focusing precisely on public consultation. However, as shown by some studies that have analyzed experiences based on deliberative arenas in Italy (Bobbio, 2007; Bobbio & Pomatto, 2007), there seems to be little variation in the diverse scenarios regarding these spaces of debate and open discussion, issued by the institutions, both in terms of modalities and tools used, as well as regarding the impact on citizens' empowerment that these initiatives may have. We can find similar criticism in the international literature. Schematically, we can say that there are two main critical situations:

- The selection of people to be involved, with the risk of contacting mainly active and informed citizens (Dahlberg, 2001; Norris, 2002) with a good level of education, leaving out those at the margins, also due to lack of cultural capital and skills (Chadwick, 2009; Margetts & Dunleavy, 2002). Therefore, inclusion ends up excluding marginal individuals, thus further confirming inequalities among citizens (Coleman & Firmstone, 2014; Dahlgren, 2015);
- Lack of explicit commitment by the proposing institutions in taking into account the results of the consultation in the definition of public policies (Coleman & Blumler, 2009); in some cases, scholars claim a sort of “pseudo-participation” aimed at disciplining civic energy within the constraining techno-political sphere of managed cyberspace (Rogers, 2004; Wright, 2006). This is an aspect that can reinforce citizens’ distrust toward the credibility of institutions and the value and meaning of civic participation (Coleman et al., 2008).

If this is the scenario that defines the experiences of public engagement, we should be reflecting on whether the approaches to top-down participation lay the groundwork for an expansion of civic culture and the enhancement of the sense of belonging among citizens. What does it mean today to be a citizen? Several scholars emphasize that the concept of citizenship refers to a constantly changing dimension because of the many identities that citizens assume or which are attributed to them. Coleman and Blumler (2009) show that in addition to the legal and political definition, we can speak of *affective citizenship*, “which is primarily concerned to mobilise feelings of civic belonging, loyalty and solidarity” (p. 5). Dahlgren (2009) distinguishes between *received citizenship*, which is legally and politically affirmed, and *achieved citizenship*, which is obtained through confrontations, fights, and conflicts. The latter results from the citizens’ social action and active participation in society. The former is *state-centered*, while the latter is *agency-based*. The former is the basis upon which the latter can develop. It is by feeling that you are a citizen (identity) that civic activism is promoted.

Along with Bennett (2008), we can say that “democracy is not a sure thing” (p. 1). As Dahlgren points out, the concept of democracy should be reconsidered in the light of this new dimension of citizenship, as the classic definitions seem to recognize no motivational grounding for such engagement. Dahlgren attaches special importance to the role of civic cultures and practices, which refer to cultural resources individuals should be able to utilize in order to switch from the private to the public sphere and become citizens. According to Dahlgren (2009), civic identities emerge in the process of doing things together by collective engagement, thus acquiring a sense of empowerment and awareness of having some influence on processes.

Rosanvallon (2008) introduces an interesting perspective about democracy and participation, which is referred to as

his concept of “counter-democracy”: the idea of citizenship and participation involves three dimensions of interaction between the people and the political sphere: expression, involvement, and intervention:

*Democracy of expression* means that society has a voice, that collective sentiments can be articulated, that judgments of the government and its actions can be formulated, and that demands can be issued. *Democracy of involvement* encompasses the whole range of means by which citizens can join together and concert their action to achieve a common world. *Democracy of intervention* refers to all the forms of collective action by means of which a desired result can be obtained. (p. 20)

Against these changes in the forms of citizenship, a pivotal question concerns the role of the media, particularly the role of digital media, which is potentially able to give visibility and voice to these expressions of citizenship. The scenario is complex, especially when it comes to digital media, against which the institutional referents seem to have an opinion that is sometimes conditioned by a stereotyped idea about citizens. For example, Moss and Coleman’s (2014) analysis on experiences of e-democracy proposes a classification of four types of citizenship, which differ in relation to the ways e-democracy is realized: *the deliberative citizen*, who participates in discussion forums; *the monitorial citizen*, who evaluates policies, services, and the performance of public administrations through the spread of information and data; *the single-click citizen*, who promotes and signs petitions; and finally, a *citizen who represents the “wisdom of crowds”* and participates in public crowdsourcing initiatives.

According to these authors, e-democracy projects seem to be still uncertain and full of critical aspects. Many local institutions still consider digital media mainly as facilitators in the dissemination and access to information and often turn to traditional media, in particular, face-to-face meetings with citizens, to promote active participation. Yet, there is no doubt that digital media play a significant part in redefining the role of citizens in local policies (Firmstone & Coleman, 2015). In this sense, the case study that we propose for a reflection on Italian collaborative governance is particularly interesting: the city council of Bologna invests significantly in digital media to promote collaboration with and among citizens, going beyond a mere “informational engagement” (Coleman & Firmstone, 2014).

### **Collaborative Governance for the Care of the Commons and the Digital Agenda: The Italian Scenario and the Case Study of Bologna**

The Italian experience of collaborative governance in urban commons can offer interesting insights into the recent development of public engagement. It partly confirms the existence



of some familiar problems concerning citizen participation and the potentialities of digital technologies, but, at the same time, it brings about new and further elements we can reflect upon.

In May 2014, the City Council of Bologna<sup>5</sup> was the first to adopt a “Regulation on collaboration between citizens and administration for the care and regeneration of urban commons” (henceforth, the Regulation). The aim of the Regulation is to enable collaboration between both citizens and municipal authorities, promoting the application of the principle of “horizontal subsidiarity,” “favouring autonomous initiatives of citizens, individually or in association, for the performance of activities of general interest.” The thus stated subsidiarity principle is enshrined in Article 118, which was introduced into the Italian Constitution in 2001 but is still marginally implemented.

In order to allow for an effective application of the Regulation, the municipality of Bologna promptly developed a specific administrative tool, the “Collaboration Agreement.” Its main purpose is to regulate the collaboration between citizens and the administration for specific urban commons, with reciprocal responsibilities and commitments defined according to each individual case. By “urban commons,” the Bologna Regulation means

the goods, tangible, intangible and digital, that citizens and the Administration, also through participative and deliberative procedures, recognize to be functional to the individual and collective well-being, activating consequently towards them, pursuant to article 118, par. 4, of the Italian Constitution, to share the responsibility with the Administration of their care or regeneration in order to improve the collective enjoyment. (Art. 2.a)

The first Collaboration Agreement was signed in Bologna in September 2014, and in December 2015 there were nearly 200 (personal email by the Head of the Institutional Affairs and Districts Area).

The Bologna Regulation has become a reference point for all the experiences subsequently developed at national level. This is not only due to the fact that it was the first to be adopted, but because its practical application has evolved significantly, a quite unique case in Italy. We argue that this success should be evaluated on the basis of its interaction with further coherent policies which have been recently realized in the field of civic participation, in both physical and digital places. We are referring here to the city districts’ reform (the territorial unities of democratic decentralization established in the 1960s) and the implementation of the Digital Agenda. Finally, we have to take into account the role of civic cultures as cultural conditions affecting the efficacy of public engagement actions (Dahlgren, 2009, 2014). The city of Bologna is characterized by a long-standing and wide-ranging layer of civic associations and is located in an Italian Region, Emilia Romagna, which has a traditionally high level of civicness (Putnam, 1993).

The communication ecology of civic collaboration in Bologna is influenced by its territorial organization into city districts, shaping the participation in physical places, and by the local implementation of the Italian Digital Agenda, which was launched nationally in 2012, in the context of the European Digital Agenda. Bologna City Council approved a set of guidelines proposing the adoption of a Digital Agenda in January 2012 and opened a participation process, which was offered both online and offline and concluded in June 2012. The implementation of the Digital Agenda in Bologna has been facilitated by a favorable local context, in a nationally unfavorable one.<sup>6</sup> In the 1990s, the Municipality was engaged in an innovative public policy promoting widespread Internet literacy among its citizens: in 1995, Bologna was the first Italian city to create a civic network, called “Iperbole” (Internet Per Bologna e L’Emilia Romagna), the second in Europe after Amsterdam’s “Digital City.” Twenty years later, because of the evolution of digital technologies and the emergence of social media, Iperbole was quite out-of-date. The City Council decided to invest in a redesign and rethink of its civic network, in the frame of the Digital Agenda guidelines. This process culminated with the launch of the new “Iperbole” in December 2014, which included three sections: besides the institutional web site, which has a mainly informative function, and a second section dedicated to the delivery of municipal online services, Iperbole hosts a digital civic place: “Comunità.”<sup>7</sup> Comunità is a civic digital network aimed at fostering citizens’ participation, within and beyond the framework of the Regulation on urban commons. Besides the space dedicated to civic collaboration, Comunità will host all the actions regarding online public engagement such as public consultations, open data, and, in the future, participatory budgeting. Comunità itself is defined as a “digital commons” to be collaboratively developed.

## Research Questions and Methods

Taking these aspects into account, we will now address the following issues:

- How do civic collaboration policies re-conceive and shape citizens’ participation?
- What kind of communication ecology characterizes this field of public engagement? What kind of role does the public administration assign to the platform Comunità in enhancing citizens’ engagement and participation?

We intend to address these questions from the perspective of the public administration, through the narratives of civil servants and on the basis of our observation of the process of public engagement from December 2014 up to the time of writing this article. The research includes the analysis of documents, reports, and data prepared by the municipality, along with participant observation of four information and

engagement meetings addressed to targeted citizens' groups. Finally, in the Spring and Summer of 2015, we carried out six expert interviews with officials in the city administration who have been mainly involved in the implementation of the Regulation on civic collaboration and in the development of the digital platform. We interviewed the Head of the Institutional Affairs and Districts Area; the Head of the Administrative Simplification and Promotion of Active Citizenship Office; the Head of the Digital Agenda Office; a Council's Communication Office member, a Council's social media team member, and an external consultant (a community manager for *Comunità*). We recognize that the point of view of politicians is equally crucial. To include their perspectives, the researchers participated in two public meetings where two councilors presented the civic collaboration policies and the civic network *Comunità* in the frame of the Digital Agenda policy.

We intend to address the citizens' perspective in the next stage of our research.

### Results: Charting New Forms and Boundaries of Participation in Civic Collaboration

In the city of Bologna, the Regulation seems to meet the needs and questions rising from below, which the Administration had previously been unable to address. Such demands come from a consolidated and active milieu, linked to a traditionally rich associational layer, and also to an emerging need for civic activism, which did not find adequate answers in the pre-existing participation tools offered by the municipal administration. As one official remarked,

If you recognise that there is a need and as soon as you open the door you see that your room fills up with people, it can only mean that the moment was the right one for that social need. (Head of the Institutional Affairs and Districts Area)

The Office for administrative simplification and promotion of active citizenship, in the Institutional Affairs and Districts Area, was created in Bologna in 2012. During the first 2 years of its activity, this office financed 64 projects through public calls addressed to civic associations.<sup>8</sup> The adoption of the Regulation on civic collaboration allowed an evident enlargement of civic participation, opening itself up to individuals and informal groups of citizens. The change in the boundaries of participation is confirmed by the fact that, out of 89 proposals for collaboration registered at the Active Citizenship Office up to May 2015, 40 were promoted by informal groups of citizens or individuals, who would have been excluded from participatory processes if the Regulation had not been implemented. According to the Head Officer of Active Citizenship, the Regulation also allowed to channel forms of civic activism that in the past occupied a gray area from active citizenship to real protest. Now, they have been

engaged by the municipality via adequate administrative tools. He also argues that the Regulation involved several social groups of citizens who have interpreted the opportunity of civic collaboration differently, thus adapting it to their needs and visions, without apparent inequalities between city districts and social categories; the differences in the extent of participation in the city districts are rather a result of the different commitments of the District Presidents in promoting civic collaboration. In his words,

We have intercepted the groups which have spontaneously sprung up in the territory to get involved with the Municipality. And at first this [. . .] happened with great difficulty, especially because it was necessary to set up an association and often this was seen to be quite a serious burden. (Head Officer of Active Citizenship)

A second relevant aspect concerns the relative indeterminacy of both the concept of "urban commons" and the possible forms of civic collaboration. In the Regulation and in the municipal document defining the procedure for submitting proposals for collaboration, the areas of collaboration are not described exhaustively, but just as examples: care, regeneration, and shared management of public spaces or buildings; promotion of social innovation and collaborative services; promotion of urban creativity and digital innovation (Art. 9 of the Regulation). This had led to a conscious recognition of a certain level of autonomy in citizens, thus leaving room for bottom-up social innovation and creativity:

Very often we have come to understand that the proposals which citizens put forward are surprising, in the sense that they are beyond anything which we could have ever imagined when we designed the Regulation. And from this point of view, by leaving the scope of the application of the Regulation pretty open [. . .] we have seen the real power of this instrument, because it can really stimulate the creativity of the citizens. (Head Officer of Active Citizenship)

In our turn, we argue that the Regulation and its application have enabled citizens' participation—be they individuals, civic associations, or informal groups of citizens—in defining what an urban commons is considered to be and how the collaboration can be concretely implemented. The emerging collaborative citizens and fields included, for instance, parents' groups who focus their attention on the school attended by their children; "social streets," which are informal networks of street inhabitants using the "social affordances" (Wellman, 2001) of Facebook to enhance their neighborhood networks, conceived as an urban commons; or, finally, shopkeepers whose establishments are open largely at night and therefore have a conflicting relationship with local residents.

All of these elements, together with the fact that the collaboration agreement is the outcome of a process of negotiation and

co-design between citizens and administration, seem to demonstrate that civic collaboration can pave the way for civic empowerment. In the case of Bologna, civic empowerment entails civic skills and competencies (Dahlgren, 2009), such as the identification of a commons and ways to take care of it; the ability to establish relations of cooperation among citizens and with the offices of the municipal administration; and the ability to engage other citizens.

Civic empowerment also implies a change inside the municipal administration, which is asked to relate with active citizens challenging consolidated routines and the attitudes of civil servants. The Regulation had been strongly supported by the top management of the municipal administration, but it was not equally metabolized by the different offices. On the eve of its implementation, some stakeholders identified internal resistance to change as critical to its effective application (Margetts & Dunleavy, 2002). The spontaneous participation of citizens and their prompt requests for collaboration have been used by the local authority—more or less strategically—as a lever to promote internal change. As two of the interviewed officials noted,

. . . You're no longer talking to a citizen who needs you, you're talking to a citizen who has come to you for . . . —I don't want to say "because the administration is in need of them," even if it's probably true in certain situations [. . .]. It's a very difficult job inside the municipal administration, but it's also a job which, if it works well, as well as confirming the administration as a credible partner for the citizens who want to collaborate, I think it can generally improve the quality of the administration inside the City Council. (Head Officer of Active Citizenship)

Another positive is that, at the beginning [. . .], even inside the administration, it wasn't easy to convince colleagues to have an enabling behaviour, as article 118, par. 4 states. Today we see that this enabling has made inroads even in our administrative culture. (Head of the Institutional Affairs and Districts Area)

In conclusion, we argue that the concreteness of the civic collaboration projects, their proximity to the everyday life of the citizens involved, and the capability of collaboration agreements to produce visible and sufficiently immediate effects on their surrounding social environments are, on the whole, elements that can enhance citizens' trust in the municipal administration, thereby mitigating the "efficacy problem" (Firmstone & Coleman, 2015). This corresponds with findings from other research regarding citizen engagement in local policies, emphasizing the importance of local attachments (Coleman et al., 2008). Coherently with this perspective, civic collaboration seems to represent a privileged field of affective citizenship (Coleman & Blumler, 2009):

The motivation towards civiness can also be intellectual, broadly speaking a political cohesion, but . . . involve other facets of life . . . you don't repaint a wall just because that wall needs repainting, but because you do it with others who live

nearby, and because it is a sign of pride and of belonging to the city. (Head of the Digital Agenda Office)

We have to emphasize that collaborative agreements represent preliminary acts of trust, and we wonder whether they are adequate to engaging citizens who find themselves in the gray area of protest, of autonomous and extra-collaborative action (such as activists who take care of occupied spaces in extra-institutional form, such as guerrilla gardeners, squatters), or of indifference.

Finally, we still wonder how civic collaboration experiences can be intercepted and channeled from the Municipal Administration in order to inform the design of public policies. In other words, a risk is looming: public engagement that is able to produce trust in local administrations and political consensus through micro-projects may replace a fuller citizen participation in local governance (Coleman & Firmstone, 2014).

### *The Communication Ecology of Civic Collaboration*

The public engagement in the urban commons of Bologna is characterized by a mixed communication ecology, integrating face-to-face meetings, interactions in a digital civic place—Comunità—and more consolidated digital communication tools (i.e. emails). The communication and engagement promoted by the administration in this first stage were realized mainly through meetings in physical places—we are referring both to civic collaboration and the development of the digital platform.

Initially, the Regulation was not widely advertised, and the main process of public engagement was entrusted to the city districts, which are privileged areas for both traditional administrative decentralization and new forms of civic collaboration. District Presidents played a fundamental role prompting participation of the active networks already involved with the municipal administration (associations but also informal groups of citizens).

In this context, we asked what role the digital platform was expected to have in promoting citizen's participation, as the third and non-mandatory section of the City Council web site. One interviewee explained,

The challenge is precisely this, that the digital dimension not only makes everything which happens offline visible online as well [. . .], but that it is "of itself" a procreative environment of relations [. . .] which have the aim of allowing bottom up proposals to emerge . . . of civil services and civic behaviour, stimulating and integrating horizontal relations. (Head of the Digital Agenda Office)

The challenge, in other words, is to facilitate the generation of civic "connective actions" (Bennett & Segerberg, 2012), enabled by a digital civic place, going beyond the

familiar forms of civic activism. In order to achieve this, the first months following the launch of *Comunità* (December 2014–June 2015) were dedicated to the population of the platform and the implementation of further tools and affordances addressing the needs of their inhabitants—according to the values of inclusion and openness and in alignment with the principle of granularity so as to enable different repertoires of civic engagement (Chadwick, 2009). The platform, according to its Charter of Values, was itself collaboratively designed and developed. In the months before its launch, the City Council reached out to people who had already participated in the process of the Digital Agenda. After the launch of the platform, the community managers of *Comunità* organized many presentations of the platform on the occasion of public meetings, which were not necessarily focused on civic collaboration, thereby potentially enlarging the boundaries of public engagement—although the known risk of a self-selection of digital skilled elites should be carefully evaluated.

The citizens who took part in the development and assessment of the digital platform, through online forms, face-to-face public meetings, or restricted encounters, identified some crucial points that *Comunità* needed to urgently address in order to effectively enhance citizen participation. First, the platform should afford horizontal interaction among users. *Comunità* should support the matching of resources needed and offered by citizens or organizations and allow similar projects to come into contact with each other. For instance, the social streets network would ask for tools supporting internal civic coordination and citizens' engagement in a public place. This would be coherent with *Comunità*'s aim to promote civic interaction:

One of their needs [. . .] is to have coordination environments which are not those which can derive from Google and especially not from Facebook . . . tools to coordinate themselves which can be hosted on a public platform. Another thing is the possibility of having tools which promote initiatives to the city which are similar to public tenders, or calls, and questionnaires. (*Comunità* community manager)

In the near future, *Comunità* should be developed in order to further foster both transparency and civic collaboration. The next planned step is to allow citizens to make their collaboration proposals immediately visible on the platform so as to facilitate the sharing of on-going projects and to crowd source resources, collecting comments and collaboration from other citizens. The platform should thus constitute the first space of a shared evaluation of identified commons, testing the adequacy of the proposal and of the network of actors involved in the process. This first assessment by the civic community should precede the definition of the collaboration proposal and the eventual co-design of the collaboration agreement and could prevent possible conflict among citizens. This evolution of the digital places of civic interaction addresses a “monitorial citizen” (Schudson, 1998), who in our case is monitoring not only the process of

project selection which the administration recognizes as being of public interest but also the credibility of other active citizens in identifying common goods and caring for them.

We agree with our interviewees that a definitive assessment of the efficacy of *Comunità* in enhancing and widening citizen participation remains premature. We can, however, notice both positive indications and emerging problems. A challenging point concerns the interactions between top-down and bottom-up forms of engagement. *Comunità* is itself conceived as a digital commons needing civic collaborative care. Active users are also asked to participate in the community management process, but there is no assurance that this will occur, even if there are some positive indications:

Some users are particularly attentive but what's missing at the moment, like every common good, [. . .] are spontaneous community managers [. . .] We should probably proceed one at a time for a while yet . . . but with spokespeople, [. . .] users who can be used as territorial or community spokespeople. (*Comunità* community manager)

Moreover, there is no assurance that these crowdsourced community managers will fulfill the expectations of the City council when they appropriate *Comunità*. We need to take into account the unexpected uses of digital technologies on the part of citizens—users accustomed to the affordances of social media (Dahlgren, 2014). One official cautioned,

I think there is a risk connected with the irreversibility of opening it up to external sources [. . .] you can't just do it by halves, it won't work if it's only done by half, when it's open, it's open and must be ready to deal with a free context, even though it must have shared rules [. . .] when it comes to network models if you're not inclusive, the model will come back to bite you. (Head of the Digital Agenda Office)

In conclusion, the digital platform supports offline civic collaboration practices without replacing them. This accords with findings from the international research regarding earlier online communities (Wellman, 2001) on how Internet affects network capital and participatory capital (Wellman, Haase, Witte, & Hampton, 2001) and technologically enabled civic participation (Firmstone & Coleman, 2015). The point is that, at this stage of its development, *Comunità* has rarely fostered interactions beyond the already existing citizen's networks while it seems to already be supporting the development of civic practices and a new conception of citizens' participation shaped by civic collaboration.

## Discussion and Conclusion: The Pros and Cons of Civic Collaboration

Civic collaboration emerges as a new, interesting frontier in top-down enhanced citizens' participation in local policies, but we have to acknowledge that some critical issues exist and that further research is necessary, also from



a comparative perspective, as soon as further Italian city councils begin consistently to implement collaborative policies in the field of urban commons.

A central issue in the literature is the actual inclusiveness of public engagement enabled by digital technologies (Coleman & Blumler, 2009; Coleman & Shane, 2012; Firmstone & Coleman, 2015). How are collaborative citizens reached and how are they selected or self-selected? Are they individuals or groups already included in relatively strong networks—some “usual suspects” (Coleman & Firmstone, 2014)—allowing them to intercept resources, contacts, opportunities, and so on? This possibility might introduce some doubts regarding their ability to be representative in the definition of instances and practices of active citizenship. At the same time, it would weaken the effectiveness of the policies of civic collaboration on the growth of trust in the administration.

In our case study, we are witnessing some interesting changes in the shape of civic participation—at least when it comes to boundaries, practices, and competences. Civic collaboration has allowed an enlargement of the opportunities for participation, both in terms of quantity and quality, including individuals, groups, and also issues not involved before. The matter is not about vulnerable citizens, who in some cases are rather addressees of collaboration agreements. We notice the emergence of unfamiliar and innovative modes of civic activism, less formally organized and more individualized.

This change in civic participation in local governance, enabled by the Regulation and supported by the civic network, is clearly an expression of wider societal and cultural changes and is consistent with the international debate on political and civic participation in contemporary western democracies. Collaborative citizens are not just engaged (Dalton, 2008) and affective (Coleman & Blumler, 2009) citizens. They are also an expression of a networked individualism (Wellman, 2001) reconfigured by the new social media environment (Hampton, 2016), shaping civic engagement and participation in city districts and neighborhoods. The challenge of the civic (social) network *Comunità* is to further support this change by promoting connective actions—typical in the field of contentious politics—in a quite uncontroversial civic collaboration in local policies. Bennett and Segerberg (2012, pp. 752-753) have submitted that

in this connective logic, taking public action or contributing to a common goal becomes an act of personal expression and recognition or self-validation achieved by sharing ideas or actions in trusted relationships. [. . .] They do not require a club, a party or a shared ideological frame to make the connection.

We need to stress that public engagement in urban commons in Bologna is not precisely addressed to atomistic, independent, rational, and general-interest citizens, as is the case of many e-democracy experiments which have been carried out in the United States (Kreiss, 2015). The City council has an

increasingly individualized and loosely networked citizen in mind, may be disaffected by traditional politics but committed to its local social environment and willing to give the local government a chance. The question remains whether this development also represents a growing fragmentation of participation in a post-political framework and a removal of the controversial dimension of the political “that always in some way involves struggle” (Dahlgren, 2014, p. 257). We wonder whether this might weaken rather than strengthen the capacity to produce far-reaching and inclusive public policies.

Civic collaboration entails new civic practices, which are rather uncontroversial and more individualized, and requires new civic skills (Dahlgren, 2009, 2013) that are influential on the inclusiveness of public engagement. Civic interaction in a public digital place reinforces the need for communicative competencies and requires capacities of accountability and engagement of a civic community, which is monitoring and assessing citizens’ proposals in peer-to-peer interaction. Citizens who possess such competencies, which were not taken for granted in familiar processes of active citizenship, will be privileged in their access to civic collaboration opportunities and resources. Finally, active citizens who do not possess adequate computer and Internet literacy are deprived of the engagement and civic interactions occurring in *Comunità*.

In conclusion, we can say that Bologna’s experience of collaborative governance highlights a process of citizen engagement which widens civic participation boundaries in local governance, through the enhancement of citizen voices and the construction of civic practices focused on the concept of the common good. The scenario that emerges is complex and uncertain: if we are clearly beyond the model of “informational engagement,” the context nevertheless seems to be that of a “monitorial citizen” who monitors, evaluates, and suggests but has reduced decision-making powers. Finally, in accordance with the analysis of Rosanvallon (2008), we can say that the experience of the City Council of Bologna draws on the scenario of “democracy of expression,” but also opens spaces for the construction of the “democracy of involvement” and the “democracy of intervention,” which are both aimed at enhancing collective action.

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### Notes

1. See <http://www.labsus.org/2015/04/i-comuni-de-regolamento-per-i-beni-comuni-di-labsus/>, last accessed 22 December 2015.

2. Among initiatives launched by the European Commission to promote participation in the European political process, see in particular the *Your Voice* portal, the *Plan D for democracy, dialogue and debate*, and the *European Citizens' Initiative*.
3. See the *Memorandum For The Heads of Executive Departments and Agencies* of the Director of the Office of Management and Budget of the White House, December 2009. [https://www.whitehouse.gov/sites/default/files/omb/assets/memoranda\\_2010/m10-06.pdf](https://www.whitehouse.gov/sites/default/files/omb/assets/memoranda_2010/m10-06.pdf), last accessed 5 June 2015.
4. <http://ec.europa.eu/digital-agenda/en/open-government>, last accessed 5 June 2015.
5. Bologna is a city in northern Italy, with a population of 386,000 in 2014.
6. Internet users per 100 people in Italy are 62, fewer than 78.3 of the Euro area and 87.4 of the United States (year 2014), <http://data.worldbank.org/>, last accessed 21 December 2015.
7. <http://www.comune.bologna.it/comunita/>, last accessed 21 December 2015.
8. [http://www.comune.bo.it/media/files/sintesi\\_dei\\_primi\\_due\\_anni\\_di\\_attivit\\_di\\_cittadinanza\\_attiva.pdf](http://www.comune.bo.it/media/files/sintesi_dei_primi_due_anni_di_attivit_di_cittadinanza_attiva.pdf), last accessed 5 June 2015.

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