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INSTITUTIONALISING A DEMOCRATIC INNOVATION

A study of three e-participatory budgets in Belo Horizonte

Stephen Coleman and Rafael Cardoso Sampaio

ABSTRACT: This article explores the transition from democratic innovation to institutionalised political process of e-participatory budgeting in Belo Horizonte, Brazil between 2006 and 2013. It considers how the proponents and organisers of ePB conceive its function in relation to the representative mechanisms that surround it; how the citizens of Belo Horizonte have responded to it in relation to their experience of being represented; and how governments seeking to institutionalise democratic innovations with a view to establishing more direct forms of representation might learn from this exercise.

Key-Words: e-Participatory Budgeting; e-Democracy; e-Participation; Representation.

Determining normative principles likely to engender autonomous, reflective and consequential decision-making is a matter for democratic theory. Creating meaningful and sustainable innovations in democratic practice entails a range of strategic and pragmatic skills capable of translating theory into political reality. There has been no shortage of blueprints for democratic innovations over the past half century, each seeking to respond to a pervasive mood of disenchantment with the tried and tested mechanisms of democratic governance. Citizens' juries, deliberative polls, consensus conferences, visioning exercises, e-petitions and online consultations are but the most famous of numerous attempts to design better ways of giving effective voice to the demos: the citizens whose values and preferences are supposed to be

centre-stage in all democratic decision-making (Fung and Wright, 2003; Ackerman and Fishkin, 2005; Dryzek, 2006; Goodin, 2008; Warren, 2008; Pearse, 2008; Smith, 2009; Fung, 2010).

While much experimental energy has been invested in these attempts to devise fresh thinking about ways of enacting popular sovereignty and diminishing the perceived distance between decisions and those affected by them, most recent democratic innovations have been open to a common and forceful criticism: that, as exercises in speculative experimentation, they perform a largely counterfactual role. This is what democracy would be like if the well-informed public were in control, say their proponents. However, in reality, while they might create conditions for more sophisticated modes of deliberation and preference formation, there is scarce evidence of such exercises having had a significant influence upon the shaping of policy outcomes. Indeed, most of these democratic innovations have an ephemeral existence, adopted typically as pilot studies, later to be abandoned in favour of politics as usual. Democratic politics depends upon predictable mechanisms rather than exceptional bursts of innovation and, despite the justifiably celebrated social diversity, dialogical force and deliberative sophistication of the latter, the range of innovatory forms that have been adopted cannot be said to have had lasting effects upon either the policy process or durable modes of democratic representation. There is, to be sure, a crucial difference between ephemeral experimentation and embedded institutional behaviour.

Closure of the perceived gap between representatives and represented has been central to democratic innovation. The proponents of democratic change have sought to challenge the claims of democratic elitists that ‘in order to be preserved, democracy must narrow the scope of political participation and ... the only way to make democratic decision-making rational is to limit it to elites and restrict the role of the masses to that of choosing between elites’ (Avritzer, 2002: 14-15). Fung and Wright (2003:3) note that new democratic models aim to transcend narrow practices of representation, rooted in ‘territorially based competitive elections of political leadership for legislative and executive office’, which seem to be ‘ineffective in accomplishing the central ideals of democratic politics: facilitating active political involvement of the citizenry, forging political consensus through dialogue, devising and implementing public policies that ground a productive economy and healthy society, and, in more radical egalitarian versions of the democratic ideal, assuring that all citizens benefit from the nation’s wealth’. Despite such radical aspirations, the experimental nature of most democratic innovations to date has provided limited evidence that they are capable of revising the terms of democratic representation. However democratically motivated they claim or aim to be, the very point of representatives is to speak and act in the absence from the scene of decision-making of the citizens who are represented. To re-present is to stand in for those who are absent and distant, physically, cognitively or metaphorically (Pitkin, 1967). Counterfactual manifestations of ‘the public voice’ under experimental conditions tend always to be trumped by the

legitimacy claims of representatives who contend that the public as a whole can only ever speak or act for itself when it is electing surrogates to make decisions for it.

Some commentators have suggested that digital technologies, while possessing no deterministic capacity to shape political relationships, could offer a means of overcoming spatio-temporal distances between representatives and represented. By opening up possibilities for real-time as well as asynchronous interaction between decision-makers and those affected by policy decisions, the need for representation might not be eliminated (because most people lack the time, inclination and perhaps even competence to engage in the complex process of formulating, negotiating and implementing policies likely to affect them), but could be made more direct and dialogical (Coleman and Blumler, 2009). Forceful though the theoretical case for digitally-enabled policy co-production based on a more direct form of representation might be, examples of it happening are rare (Smith, 2009).

What happens to representation when digitally-enabled participatory practices designed to close the communicative distance between representatives and represented become an institutionalised feature of a political system? Such a recasting of the democratic contract would raise important questions at both a theoretical and empirical level. Theoretically, we would want to consider how the potential presence of the represented in the decision-making process affects the legitimacy of representatives' claim to be speaking for those who cannot

speak for themselves. Empirically, we would want to observe the extent to which citizens grasp the opportunity to be present in the decision-making process and to which they regard this as a more democratically efficacious form of (self)-representation than the traditional electoral system. Fortunately, an example of such an institutionalised democratic reform exists that can help us to answer these questions. This is the case of Participatory Budgeting (PB), first established in Brazil in 1989, since adopted in over 200 Brazilian cities, and now replicated on many hundreds of occasions in several other parts of the world, including Latin America, Africa, Asia and Europe (Sintomer et al, 2012).

PB has been institutionally embedded in several Brazilian municipalities, thereby avoiding the danger of studying a merely ephemeral experiment. Following Fung and Wright's criteria for new forms of representation, PB has recruited new and different types of participants to the policy process; encouraged dialogical communication leading to broadly consensual outcomes; addressed real-world problems of political economy, welfare and wellbeing; and contributed to a redistribution of power both within the policy process and in terms of distributive justice. (Fung, Wright, 2003; Smith, 2009) While PB has quite rightly been the subject of intense critical scrutiny from the perspectives of democratic normativity and instrumental effectiveness, it cannot be dismissed as a one-off pilot project. In several cases, data exist that allow researchers to assess changes to the representative relationship over time. (Wampler, 2007)

This article focuses upon one such case: the online PB (ePB) exercises conducted in the city of Belo Horizonte in 2006, 2008, 2011 and 2013. Our aim is not to provide a comprehensive account of these initiatives; less still to arrive at any definitive conclusions about the value of PB as a new democratic model. In focusing upon one city (the sixth largest in Brazil¹) and one particular form of PB - which can be regarded as an innovation within an innovation, insofar as it involves the use of digital information and communication technologies (ICT) with a view to enhancing democratic representation -, we are in a position to analyse a specific change to the representative relationship over a five-year period. This enables us to address three questions:

1. How do the proponents and organisers of ePB conceive its function in relation to the representative mechanisms that surround it?
2. Has the response to ePB by the citizens of Belo Horizonte reflected a change in their experience of being represented?
3. What are the challenges likely to face governments seeking to institutionalise democratic innovations with a view to establishing more direct forms of representation?

We attempt to answer these questions by drawing upon an analysis of usage data from the three years in which ePB has taken place in Belo Horizonte, interviews with the coordinators of PB

and ePB (Garcia, 2012; Herzog, 2012; Oliveira, 2014; Sales, 2012, 2014)ⁱⁱ, a monitoring of any mentions or general buzz in Twitter regarding the ePBs of 2011 and 2013 (since these two SNS were not employed in 2008) and an analysis of online forums of 2008 (n=1227), 2011 (n = 1143) and 2013 (n = 189) editions.

Firstly, we sent the questionnaires by email to all staff involved in both PB and ePB in Belo Horizonte, trying to understand their main reasons for introducing ICT to the process and the consequences of doing so. We received seven answers including an “official” answer from the Secretary of Planning and Budget for the city of Belo Horizonte (Herzog, 2012).

Secondly, we monitored the use of Twitter from November 21th to December 11th 2011 and December 4th to December 20th 2013 (the complete duration of 2011 and 2013 ePB voting periods). In order to do this, we monitored the official profile of Belo Horizonte city hall on Twitter (@pbhonline) and the use of the hashtags #opdigital and #opdigital2013^{iv} for the same period.

Thirdly, we analysed all the messages posted by citizens in the ePB online forums during the 2008, 2011 and 2013 exercises. We were particularly interested in exploring how the ePB process affected the external efficacy of the the participants and whether they felt that their engagement in the ePB could really affect the final results – and therefore the terms upon which they were being represented.

Finally, we asked the participants whether they were satisfied with the tangible outcomes of the ePB process: the implementation of the projects voted for. As citizens cannot

usually participate through online voting in such a selection of projects to be implemented, we wanted to understand the extent to which they felt that they had achieved what they voted for. We analysed participants' posts to see whether they: i) favoured the selected projects; ii) favoured the selected projects, but also others that were not selected; iii) did not favour the selected projects, but had voted for a different one; or iv) did not mention any of the projects. (Intercoder reliability on this was 91%).

A new kind of representation?

While never intended as an alternative to political representation, PB was conceived from the outset as a means of changing the terms of the representative contract by allowing citizens to move beyond simply electing politicians to make decisions on their behalf about the allocation of local resources. The ethos of PB is that citizens determine policy for themselves by voting to allocate local resources to projects which they have first discussed and then prioritised in order of popular support. The first PB was implemented in Porto Alegre in 1989, four years after the military returned rule to civilians and in the same year as Brazil's first direct presidential election for nearly thirty years. It was a period of democratic renewal in which 'reformers and political entrepreneurs sought to devise new policies and institutions that would solve basic problems and appeal to voters' (Wampler, 2007:45/6).

PB was introduced in Belo Horizonte in 1993 by a coalition led by the Workers' Party (Partido dos Trabalhadores or PT), which had four years earlier initiated the innovation in Porto Alegre, and the Brazilian Socialist Party (PSB). The Mayor, Patrus Ananias, made it clear that the purpose of PB was 'to democratize the municipal administration through popular participation and create a new relationship between the mayoral administration and society'. From the outset, PB in Belo Horizonte was characterised by two factors. Firstly, it attracted a higher level of public participation than in several other Brazilian municipalities, including Porto Alegre - although this oscillated over the years, depending upon citizens' expectations that the innovation would be sustained, their trust in the municipal government's willingness to implement PB decisions, the decrease of the resources designated to PB and changes in the rules that were imposed over the years (Wampler, 2007). In the first three years, the number of participants increased significantly from 15,216 in 1994 to 38,508 in 1996. However, it fell in the following year (after a change of Mayor) and, as can be seen from figure i, public engagement with this exercise fluctuated thereafter.

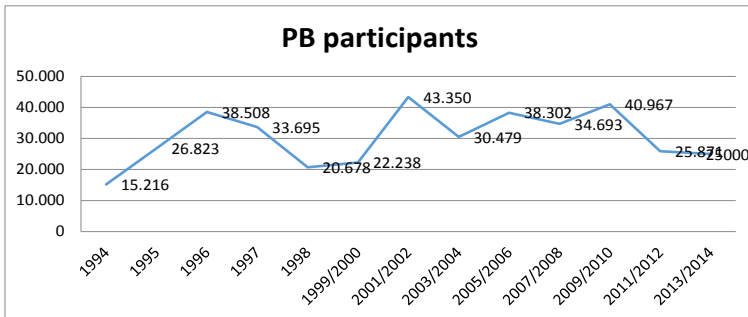


Figure i: Participants in face-to-face PB in Belo Horizonte

Secondly, those who did participate in the process tended to be poorer and less educated than non-participants (in striking contrast to most experiences of public involvement in governmental policy-making) (Nylen, 2003)^v. However, though PB delegates and participants were disadvantaged in socio-economic terms, they were not politically inactive citizens. 85 per cent of them were already affiliated to civil society organisations (CSOs), leading Nylen (2000:90) to conclude that ‘PB is not empowering the unorganized’. In short, while PB went against the grain in managing to engage the least affluent members of the population, the key participants tended to be already mobilised citizens, supported by established social networks. The poorest and least organised remained significantly under-represented in PB (Nylen, 2003; Wampler, 2007).

These factors led the municipal government in Belo Horizonte to think imaginatively about how to increase the overall number of participating citizens; broaden participation beyond the already affiliated and networked; and make it more inviting to conspicuously under-represented groups, including young people and the middle class, neither of which had been inclined to give up their evenings to attend long meetings in community halls during the face-to-face PB process^{vi}. In 2006 the municipal government decided to run a parallel PB process which would take place exclusively online. They pre-selected 36 projects that had been nominated by previous PB participants (four for each administrative region of the city) and allowed Belo Horizonte's voters to choose nine of these works to be implemented (one per region). Any citizen with a voter identification number could go online and participate over a 42-day period. The ePB website provided virtual 'walks' around the city, where citizens could view proposed projects, debate their merits (approximately 1,200 messages were posted) and vote for one project to be implemented in each administrative region. A budget of \$12 million was allocated to the ePB projects (see Peixoto, 2008; Sampaio et al, 2011).

The ePB innovation was, according to Fernando Pimentel (Lana, 2011), the Mayor of Belo Horizonte who initiated it, a direct response to a perceived representative deficit:

The PB is a mobilization process, but it reaches already mobilized people. That is the truth. It involves people that already are mobilized for neighbourhood associations,

general associative activities, NGOs and entertainment clubs and that's not enough. So one could say that, in a strict sense, PB only engages the engaged. No, that is not true. It goes beyond the militants, but it does not reach that section of the population - let's call them 'ordinary citizens' – who have difficulties, such as not enough time or motivation to participate in three or four or five meetings.

According to Veronica Campos Sales (Sales, 2012), the ePB Coordinator for Belo Horizonte, moving the process online was intended as a way of reaching a different section of the population:

One of ePB's challenges was to incorporate new citizens in the PB process and to lead to the involvement of more people in discussions and decisions about the whole city ... We wished both to promote the expansion of popular participation and extend the participatory budget process to segments of the population that usually don't get involved, such as the middle class and youth.

These statements might suggest that the move to ePB was a merely technical expedient for reaching more people; a quantitative mechanism for extending participation. For Mayor Pimentel (Lana, 2011), who initiated the process, the objective was more politically ambitious

than that. He regarded the turn to digital communication as a move towards a new kind of democracy:

If we want to create a participatory democracy and not just a representative democracy, we have to be thinking all the time about how to reach the citizens who are not mobilised by the traditional modes ... At the beginning, when we established ePB, I thought we were dealing with just another version of PB, but we weren't. What we wanted was to initiate something that we could call digital democracy ... Why can't the citizen be consulted online, or by his or her cell phone, about, for example, a bill concerning smoking in enclosed places? Such a consultation doesn't have to be ... mandatory. It can be like an opinion poll. Why not? Why can't we use these mechanisms to involve more people in the governance process? This can make it easier for governments to know what to do. One can say that this is democracy. So the ePB was more ambitious than the PB process: it was not just to approve projects, even though the project approval element was important. It was about creating new channels for effective participation. In a society that is gradually more online.... if the people already vote using an electronic ballot, why we can't use these same technologies, such as the internet, cellphones etc. to hear the opinion of citizens?

In particular, Pimentel saw this new mode of representation as being likely to motivate younger citizens:

Internet voting was made available to all of Belo Horizonte's voters, independently of their location. With the implementation of this new modality it has been possible to extend the participation of the community, incorporating youth sectors and spreading the culture of the virtual world as an instrument of democratisation (OIDP, 2007, pp 21).

At the very least, ePB was intended to broaden the range and number of actively participating citizens in the policy process. At a more ambitious level, the new institution was conceived as a step towards a form of more interactive democracy; perhaps even a foundation of digital democracy, in which the structures and processes of political representation would adapt to fit in with the communicative practices of a generation for whom virtual connectivity was becoming the norm^{vii}.

Did citizens feel better represented?

In the first ePB in 2006 there were 192,229 visits to the website and over 500,000 votes cast by 172,938 citizens of the municipality. (The discrepancy between voters and votes cast was because, on average, each participant voted for four different projects to be implemented). This means that approximately 10% of Belo Horizonte's active voters participated in the ePB

process, compared with about 4% who participated in the municipality's face-to-face PB in 2005/2006^{viii} (See Peixoto 2008, Matheus et al 2010) .

Were the 10% who participated in ePB socio-demographically different from regular PB participants? Curiously, given that a key purpose of the initiative was to recruit specific socio-demographic groups (youth and the middle class), no data were collected by the city hall to find out whether this actually happened. Rather than draw upon any definitive data, we are left with a series of clues to the possible effect that ePB had upon the active representation of citizens. Drawing upon the city government's Quality of Life Index (IQVU^{ix}), Peixoto (2008) has suggested that there was no correlation between socio-demographic variables (such as age or family income) and participation in the 2006 ePB. This suggests that participation was not directly affected by a 'digital divide' in Belo Horizonte, which would certainly have been consistent with sharp differences in the age and income of participants. Based on the different Planning Units (PUs)^x of Belo Horizonte and the voting numbers of those regions in the 2006 and 2008 ePB, Lana (2011) has attempted to measure the extent of participation by youth and middle-class citizens. By interrogating data from the IQVU and conducting a multivariate linear regression, Lana was able to analyse the influence of income and age (independent variables) upon participation in the 2006 and 2008 ePB (dependent variable). (Gender and literacy levels were used as moderating variables). The conclusion of Lana's analysis was that the city hall's objective was partially fulfilled: in 2006, young people were

more likely to participate than their elders, but the middle-class citizens were not; in 2008, both youth and middle-class citizens were more likely to participate in ePB voting process than the rest of the population^{xi}.

Even though evidence that ePB extended the range of represented citizens in the governance of Belo Horizonte remains tentative, what is manifestly clear is that ePB became less popular each time it was tried. If ePB was intended to make the citizens of Belo Horizonte feel more adequately represented and able to speak for themselves, it failed to stimulate such feelings. As shown in figure ii, the number of citizens who voted in the ePB process fell from 172,938 in 2006 to 124,320 in 2008 to 25,378 in 2011^{xii} – (a decline of just under 700 per cent) and to 8,900 in 2013. As can be seen in figure iii, the decline in ePB participation was much steeper than a more gradual decline in PB participation over the same period.

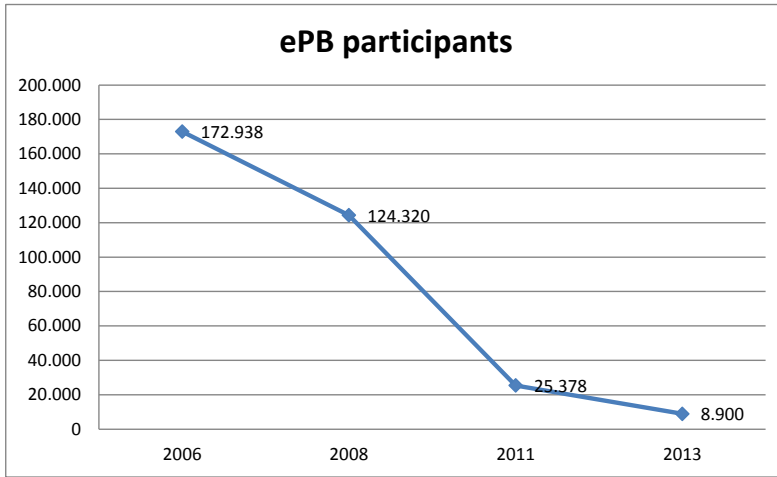


Figure ii: Participants in ePB in Belo Horizonte

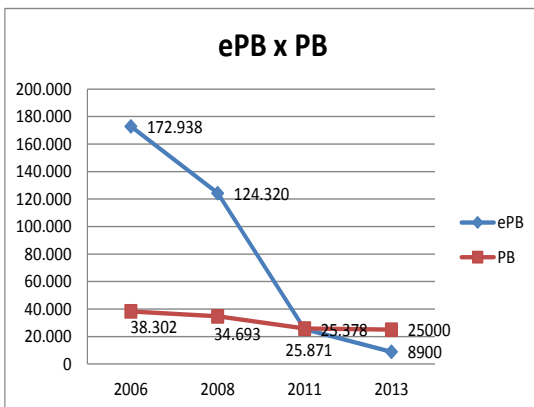


Figure iii: Comparison between PB and ePB participation in Belo Horizonte, 2006-13

Explaining how ePB failed to appeal to citizens as a more participatory form of representative democracy raises important questions about what it means to feel well represented. One of us has argued elsewhere (Coleman, 2013) that the feeling of being represented cannot be reduced to a simple question of mechanistic procedure. Feeling represented entails at least three kinds of experience. Firstly, a sense that one belongs to a community of represented citizens capable of defining who they are and what they stand for. In this context, it should be relatively simple to register oneself as a represented citizen who can claim the right to be counted. Secondly, an awareness of the opportunities and appropriate times for making one's voice heard. This is a communication challenge, calling upon a range of mediating technologies that call attention to the presence of a potentially collective 'we' which has rights and responsibilities in relation to its own representation. And thirdly, a belief that one's democratic actions can make a difference; that there is a line of communication between oneself and the authorities who make and implement political decisions. (This latter belief is commonly referred to as political efficacy). Our analysis of the three ePB exercises in Belo Horizonte leads us to suggest that they were lacking on all three of these counts.

Barriers to entry

To be a democratic citizen is to enjoy an expectation that one's presence as a member of a community will be acknowledged and that opportunities to exercise one's influence will be meaningful and unhampered. Whether it is their votes that citizens expect to be counted or their

voices that they expect to be heard, the means of registering their political presence should not be so cumbersome as to deter participation. When technologies are employed – as in the case of casting a vote or contributing to an online discussion space -, one of their key democratic functions should be to facilitate rather than impede the expression of views and preferences.

So-called participatory technologies can, however, have unintended effects. Given that the design of tools and their rules of use always embody implicit values that will affect the ways that people use them (in a Latourian sense), it is important to understand the implicit values that are materialised in ostensibly democratic technologies. Macintosh et al's (2009:6) empirical findings from their evaluation of a range of eParticipation projects, showing how officials' assumptions about contexts of use, user skill levels and political ends modify both the practices and outcomes of such exercises are relevant in this regard. In the case of Belo Horizonte's ePB, successive changes of socio-legal design served to undermine the principle of inclusive participation that the process was intended to enhance.

All of our interviewees emphasised that modifications to the design and regulation of the ePB process was probably responsible for a decline in participation between 2006 and 2011. In 2006 anyone could take part and vote in the ePB by simply providing their voter identification (ID) number. In 2008 the entry threshold was raised: participants were required to type in a random series of letters before voting, as well as producing their voter IDs. By 2011 (and again in 2013)

citizens wishing to participate in the ePB were required to download a security app, produce two voter ID numbers (electoral and personal), their email address and then confirm it on a separate occasion - and then answer personal questions about their age and gender. The reason for this, as explained by Mayor Pimentel, was that ‘in the first ePB [2006] a lot people voted in place of others, so we decided to require extra information from voters’. This change was introduced by legal officers of the state – the General Auditor of the Municipality and the Brazilian Public Prosecutor – in response to allegations of corrupt practice in the 2006 and especially 2008 ePB.

According to the Secretary in charge of the ePB process in Belo Horizonte (Herzog, 2012), the introduction of greater hurdles to being counted as a legitimate citizen may well have deterred people from participating:

The increased levels of security information demanded by the General Auditor of the Municipality and the Brazilian Public Prosecutor may have increased public distrust in the process. Citizens feared that their personal data, such as an email address, could be used by a third party. At the same time, a sense that the time needed to complete the voting process had become excessive might have put some people off.

It was after there were further allegations of voter impropriety in the 2008 ePB that a security working party was set up by the municipal government, as a result of whose recommendations new regulations added considerable time to the vote-casting process and called for more sophisticated digital literacy on the part of participants. We also could find several citizens who went online to complain that they were no longer able to use the ePB site because the process had become too difficult for them. The overall effect of these legal changes was to bureaucratise participation.

One might say that the ePB process came to be framed in the minds of both policy-makers and citizens in terms of suspicion about illegitimate civic inclusion rather than its original intention, which was to prevent democratic exclusion. While the Mayor was appealing to a rhetoric of transformed, inclusive citizenship and digitally-enhanced, accessible democracy, the design and regulation of the ePB process seemed to be inflected by an ethos of intense apprehension. Indeed, by the 2011 ePB even non-online voting options, such as free-toll phone or SMS voting were considered too insecure to be implemented^{xiii}. As we shall argue in the conclusion, the framing of communication tools as either sources of or barriers to democratisation all too frequently draws upon a discourse of technological determinism that fails to take account of the extent to which they are shaped by politically contestable values.

Limits of reach and attention

Before any system of democratic representation can speak to, with or for citizens, it must come to their attention. This is a communication challenge facing any government seeking to promote common knowledge (Rogers and Storey, 1987). Embedding a democratic innovation in public consciousness is no easy task, especially if the motive for introducing it is to ‘reach citizens who are not mobilised by traditional forms of participation’ (Pimentel). The PB process had been originally set up with a view to favouring ‘low-income residents over those of the middle and upper class’ and providing ‘structural incentives that make participation more attractive to those who are ordinarily less likely to participate in politics’ (Fung, 2006: 67). By 2006, there was growing evidence that the most disenfranchised citizens of Belo Horizonte – not only the poorest and least educated, but also the least politically confident or mobilised – were not being attracted to PB. For this group to be engaged, there was need for a publicity strategy that would make them aware of the possibility of participation – even if this was not information they would normally be seeking or thought that they needed.

In the contemporary era, public information campaigns are most commonly conducted via the mass media, for these are the main sources of common knowledge for people who are not already politically engaged. The aim of such mass-media campaigns would be to draw the audience’s attention to the possibility that they could become influential civic actors by engaging in a specific fashion. According to Cabannes (2003), the main media used by Brazilian municipalities to make citizens aware of the PB process were local newspapers (75%),

local radio (74%), loudspeaker vans (74%), mass mailings (67%) and posters (58%). Television (17%) was much less commonly used.

When ePB was introduced in Belo Horizonte, the same focus upon local media continued (with local newspaper and leaflets), but it was supplemented by a strategy intended to reach citizens in the whole city, firstly using mass media ads (TV and Radio) and secondly via digital communication networks (OIDP, 2007). This strategy was based on the assumption that the two most significant target groups – young people and the middle class – were the most likely to be users of digital networks. According to the ePB coordinators, local blogs, social networks sites (SNSs), emails and SMS were used widely to tell people why they should and how they could become involved in ePB. Indeed, officials claimed that as many as 3 million SMS messages were sent out to over 1 million cellphones alert people to the 2011 ePB^{xiv}. (Herzog, 2012) There were also online forums set up in which citizens could debate the merits of various projects and these attracted around 1000 posts in each edition from 2006 to 2011 (Ferreira, 2012; Peixoto, 2008; Sampaio et al, 2011), but only 189 in 2013.

Given that such energy and resources were committed to publicising ePB, why did participation decline? The strategy failed for three main reasons. Firstly, the digital communication campaign came to replace rather than supplement a mass-media strategy. In 2006 the ePB was widely publicised in the press and on radio and television, partly through paid official

advertising (Herzog, 2012; OIDP, 2007; Sales, 2012), but mainly because it was ‘news’. The mass media were fascinated by the arrival of a local innovation – one that was ahead of other cities in Brazil and allowed journalists and politicians to discuss whether the Internet would make a difference to the level and composition of public participation. During and shortly after it took place, the ePB took centre stage in the mediated public sphere, with ads from the city government proudly proclaiming, ‘You can be proud of it – Belo Horizonte is the first city to adopt digital participatory budgeting’. This clearly contributed to a level of public awareness that resulted in the 2006 ePB engaging more citizens than previous PB exercises. In 2008 the municipal government continued to advertise the ePB in the mass media, but it was no longer a novelty. By 2011, a decision was made not to target the mass media, the ePB advertisement was done together with City Hall’s ads (Herzog, 2012; Sales, 2012). In 2013, they used the TV ads once more, but again together with other City Hall’s publicity (Oliveira, 2014; Sales, 2014). – and by this time, for reasons that will become clearer in the next section - citizens were becoming more sceptical towards ePB. The online publicity campaign in 2011 and 2013 mainly replaced rather than supplemented appeal via the mass media. But the citizens of Belo Horizonte, as in most other parts of the world, were still receiving their main news from the traditional agenda-setters: newspapers, radio and television. In short, the e-publicity strategy served to marginalise the process.

Secondly, as publicity moved online, the city government found itself mainly appealing to people who were already in touch with it. The city government's database comprised contact details of people who had already communicated with it and/or had registered their email addresses or cellphone numbers. Local citizens who were the most disengaged from the affairs of local government were the least likely to have registered their addresses with it in the past and were therefore effectively doubly excluded from the cycle of participation.

This was exacerbated by a third factor: instead of creating profiles on social networking sites where people might already be discussing civic or political issues, the city government directed all online traffic to its official online site, thereby isolating itself from the vibrancy of popular conversation. During the voting period of the 2011 ePB (November 21 to December 11) the City Hall's official Twitter profile posted only 39 messages about ePB and did not enter into any dialogue with citizens; it merely retweeted profiles of the city's daily newspapers when they commented on the ePB. The city government's official profiles hardly proved to be popular: its Twitter profile had around 8,000 followers and its Facebook page around 2000 'likes'. This was reflected in the low buzz in social networks sites. For example, the hashtag #opdigital, used by the city government on Twitter had only 182 posts. Of these, 50 were posted by local government officials and 25 by political representatives. Only 99 messages were posted by individual citizens or civic associations. By contrast, in the same year a local grass-roots campaign in Belo Horizonte against a Bill to raise the salaries of politicians on the

municipal council attracted considerably greater participation than the ePB. There was so much on discussion on the topic that the Municipal Council's Communication Secretariat launched a video on television and YouTube to justify the salary increase. In response to this, citizens produced a video a few days later which countered most of the council's arguments and this received approximately 200,000 hits on YouTube as well as local media coverage. While online discussion surrounding the ePB produced only minor ripples, this online protest demonstrated the scope that existed for public debate when it took place on citizens' own terms.

In 2013, the situation was not different. The ePB website received about 1.5 thousand 'likes' and 150 tweets of the main page. The official city hall's Twitter profile (22,000 followers in 2013) tweeted 93 times in 2013 and tried to reach the profile of local news outlets, nevertheless the buzz was still lower with only 11 messages using the 'official' hashtag #opdigital2013 , only two using #opdigital and 45 messages just adopting 'opdigital' in 2013.

Efficacy

For citizens to feel that they are being democratically represented, they need to believe that there is a meaningful relationship between their input to the political sphere and policy outputs. Introduced to political science by Angus Campbell and his colleagues from the Survey Research Centre at the University of Michigan in their first US national election survey in

1952, the term political efficacy was conceived to refer to people's subjective belief that a communicative relationship exists between themselves and the institutions that govern society. A political efficacious person is able 'to construct a psychic map of the political world with strong lines of force running from himself to the place of officialdom'. (Easton and Dennis, 1967: 26) Various studies have reported that those who feel that they can exert effective political influence, individually or in concert with others, are more likely to be actively involved in politics than those who do not. (Campbell, Gurin and Miller, 1954: 194; Milbrath, 1965: 59; Sullivan and Riedel, 2004: 4353) Milbrath, on the basis of a synthesis of existing survey research, found that 'persons who feel efficacious politically are more likely to become actively involved in politics'. (Milbrath, 1965: 56) (See also Verba & Nie, 1972; Verba, Scholzman & Brady, 1995, Finkel et al, 1989; Chavis & Wandersman, 1990)

On the face of it, PB would seem to be an ideal mechanism for generating political efficacy. Given a clear mandate to determine how local resources will be allocated, we might expect participating citizens to come out of the process feeling more confident about their own capacity to affect decisions (referred to as internal efficacy) and the openness of political institutions to hearing and learning from them (external efficacy). Indeed, there is evidence to suggest that this is precisely what happened. Surveys of the population of Belo Horizonte conducted by Wampler and Avritzer (2004:305-6) found that 60% of respondents said that they relied on politicians to act for them in securing public goods before PB was introduced,

whereas after the experience of PB 60% of respondents stated that they were able to gain access to the resources they needed by participating in the new democratic process themselves and 67% said that they were no longer dependent upon politicians' interventions in order to secure public goods. In short, PB undermined the clientelist tradition of politics in Belo Horizonte whereby the principal-agent relationship had come to be based on a spiral of favour seeking and granting. Furthermore, the experience of PB seems to have strengthened the confidence of the poorest citizens in Belo Horizonte and contributed to new functions and dynamics for civil society organisations. By introducing a new technology of participation to the process, ePB might have been expected to enhance even further such foundations for political efficacy.

Contrary to that expectation, all of the interviewees we spoke to identified the apparent failure to implement ePB decisions as a major cause of public disenchantment with the process. The most popularly-supported project (voted for by 48,000 citizens) in the 2008 ePB had still not been enacted in 2011 when the next (third) ePB was due to take place or yet in 2013 when the last edition took place. To make things even worse, the project that came second in the 2008 vote was implemented by a private corporation. (This was compounded by the fact that a local private company implemented its own, small-scale adaptation of the winning project, leading many citizens to conclude that this was the city government implementing a watered down version of what had been agreed upon by the voters). In the absence of evidence of tangible

democratic outcomes, a growing mood of political inefficacy replaced the earlier optimism of public hope that a more transparent and effective form of democracy was being ushered in.

In this sense, we have analysed the online forums of ePB looking for marks of this feeling of external efficacy. The results are displayed in the table below.

		Year		
		2008	2011	2013
A-External efficacy	External political efficacy – positive	429 (34.9%)	88 (7.6%)	73 (38.6%)
	External political efficacy - negative	46 (3.7%)	170 (14.8%)	53 (28%)
	It didn't occur	752 (61.3%)	885 (77.4%)	29 (15.3%)
	City Hall's messages	0	0	34 (17.9%)
Total		1,227	1,143	189

In 2008, almost 40% of the messages presented some mark or reference to external efficacy and 35% of the total showed a feeling of being more efficient to influence the policy.

All these works are of considerable importance and they may decrease the number of traffic accident in our regions. So let's vote for this one work that is the most necessarily to Belo Horizonte. ePB offers a democratic condition for voting in what is best for the city (M.H.S.O., 25/11/2008, ePB 2008).

In 2011, the occurrence of external efficacy falls to 20% of all online messages. From those, most showed a feeling of being less able to influence the final decisions of

ePB. Specifically, 77 (6.7%) messages in 2011 mention the work that won 2008 ePB edition, but was not realized, as one can see in the messages below.

Why should stimulate the votes or posting opinions in ePB? There are several pendencies to be done or explained. E.g. ePB 2008/ São Vicente Square plus works to solve the traffic problems that should be prioritized over requalification projects (E. A. S., 04/12/2011, ePB 2011).

It's a scandal this biased management of the city hall that did not do the winner work of ePB 2008 – São Vicente Square and directed the resources to Belvedere. The works proposed in ePB 2011 do not justify a voting – they are all of low impact and necessary for the everyday of the city [...] (J. G., 29/11/2011, ePB 2011).

I encouraged many people for this Project of São Vicente Square and where is the work????????????????? It's only deception.... How to vote again???????????????????? (m.a., 28/11/2011, ePB, 2011).

In 2013, there were mixed results. The number of positive feelings represented 38.6% of total, which is very high, still the number of negative feelings was high as well, representing 28% of total. Specifically, 25 messages (13.2%) of all messages still mentioned the work of 2008 that was not realized until 2013. According to Sales (2014), ePB faces a bigger challenge than face-to-face PB, because it is still a new program. Thus the people cannot see many works approved and realised by their votes. She believes that the main challenge of ePB is delivering the works faster to build the trust of citizens once again. The message below illustrate the frustration of the participants:

I agree with the inquiry from other citizens. Why not to finish the works selected in last editions before proposing new works? For instance, the São Vicente Square [...] (R.F.S., 05/12/2013, ePB 2013).

I agree with J. There are PB approved works that weren't realised yet and the city hall is putting others for vote. We are also awaiting a response from the City Hall regarding the approved work of São Vicente Square. [...] (E.S.P. 11/12/201, ePB 2013).

Moreover, regarding this very practical side of PB, we have analysed the approval of Works in each edition. In 2008, almost all messages (95.5%) mention the works somehow. Still in 2011, only about 11% of the messages did not mention any work at all.

		Year			Total
		2008	2011	2013	
Does the message endorse the work?	It approves the work	869 (70.8%)	424	25	1318
	It approves the work, but suggests minor changes to it or another work in the same time.	172 (14%)	275	38	485
	It does not approve the work and suggest another work in its place.	131 (10.6%)	315	61	507
	It doesn't mention the work at all.	55 (4.4%)	129	31	215
	City Hall's messages	0	0	34	34
Total		1227	1143	189	2559

These results show that clearly the forums of ePB were used to debate or at least to vocalize the citizen's opinions regarding the works chosen by the city hall, stating the approval of this selection or rather suggesting other works. Again, one can see a clearly more negative feeling in 2011 and 2013. Whereas in 2008 almost 71% of all messages showed some approval for the works indicated by the city hall (option#1 and #2 in the

table), this value fell to 37% in 2011 and 33% in 2013. In the same sense, the number of messages suggesting minor alterations in the suggested works raises from 14% in 2008 to 24% in 2011 and 20% in 2013 and disapproval of the works increases from 10.7% in 2008 to 27.6% in 2011 and to 32.2% in 2013. Regarding 2011 and 2013, one could also see that 51.7% and 52.3%, respectively, of all messages were not totally satisfied with the preselected works, suggesting modifications or even other works in their place.

Finally, we could also see that even these requests for changes were significantly different between 2008 and 2011. While in 2008 the requests were focused on punctual changes, in 2011 (27.6%) and 2013 (32.2%) most of these messages brought complaints regarding the low relevance or impact of these works for the whole city, thus asking for larger interventions or yet to improve the size of the suggested works. Often these complaints were voiced with a feeling of insurgence.

These projects really disappointed me, because they don't represent what really afflict the people of Belo Horizonte. I was checking the partial results and I came to a doubt: or the people are really concerned with public security or the high specificity of some works and the ignorance of their utility obligated us to use a process of elimination among the alternatives . (G.S., 21/11/2011, ePB 2011).

It's so hard to decide among such mediocre options! Installation of security cameras or the requalification of a single sidewalk? I am impressed. These two options should not even be called options... (D.M., 21/11/2011, ePB 2011).

I agree with [D.M.]. It's sad that we have to decide among such mediocre projects. Security cameras are useful only to see in the TV the crimes committed against the people. Rather I prefer to gather all available resources to make some road works. [...] (L., 22/11/2011, ePB 2011).

In 2013 specifically, there was also a feeling of not being able to decide even the details of each proposal, since one of the three options was general stating the 'building of a multiuse space for sports, culture and pastime', but not informing the exactly location or function, which would be

‘discussed later with community leaders’. This ‘open’ option generated feelings of frustration and also lack of trust in the city hall’s options:

I didn’t understand it well, they want to build a multiuse space, estimation 50 millions [Brazilian currency], but they do not indicate the place, they don’t say the size, they don’t show pictures or details. Until today, the city hall has not finished the approved work from last years, how they want to do this one... I hope the people is not ignorant as before and we can manage to pursue our rights and track our money that has been thrown in garbage (I.C.O.S., 03/12/2013, ePB 2013).

The scope of the works is ridiculously generic especially for so elevated costs. How can we vote in something that we don’t know where and how it will be built? I fancy the proposal of entertainment and pastime, but how should I vote for something that we don’t know if it’s going to worth or not? (S., 11/12/2013, ePB 2013).

Wampler’s (2007:3) observation that ‘PB programs can ... produce weak outcomes that will not transform basic decision-making processes or allow citizens to be directly involved in policy making’ could be applied to ePB, at least at the subjective level of public perception. Indeed, there are two respects in which inefficacy were built into Belo Horizonte’s ePB, even before the failure to implement the winning 2008 project. Firstly, the gatekeeper role of the city council in relation to the ePB website made the process feel empowering in many respects than the offline PB. Whereas the latter involved live, physical interaction that simply cannot be easily managed, the ePB site was constructed in such a way that users were placed in a responsive rather than proactive role. The city government did not respond to messages from citizens or encourage citizens to engage with one another and share content. Unlike the now

famous Dean and Obama social media campaigns, which succeeded because they surrendered significant communicative power to the grass roots, the ePB showed no real signs of moving beyond a vertical relationship with citizens. Secondly, before even reaching the stage of debating competing projects, citizens were excluded from the prior stage of determining which projects could be voted upon. In this sense, citizens were from the outset forced to engage with an agenda that was not of their own making.

The most impressive claims made by proponents of PB and ePB are that firstly, they have real-world impact; that, unlike so many of the experiments involving selected mini-publics and counterfactual deliberative fora, these democratic models involve whole populations and socially material effects; secondly, that they empower citizens to formulate their views together; and thirdly, that it is citizens rather than elites who determine the outcomes. The moment that these conditions are undermined, claims to be introducing a new, more inclusive and efficacious mode of democratic representation are bound to lose credibility.

Conclusion: sustaining a democratic institution

The city government of Belo Horizonte is committed to sustaining ePB as a democratic institution. It is not alone: many of the most recent attempts to adopt PB in countries beyond Brazil have opted for a significant online element to the process. (Sintomer et al, 2011) ePB is moving beyond the stage of innovatory novelty. Building a democratic institution entails

establishing a predictable political mechanism, the outcomes of which provide a reliable environment in which social interaction can take place securely. Unlike ephemeral experiments, which are always bound by the limits of contingency, institutions need to be capable of generating generalised and enduring trust. (Offe, 1999; Freitag, 2006; Herreros and Criado, 2008) If ePB is to be embedded as a mode of more direct representation, what can governments do to avoid the problems that have contributed to declining public trust and participation in the Belo Horizonte ePB?

Firstly, the terms upon which citizens are acknowledged as eligible participants must be thought through and made clear. These should be neither too lax nor excessively onerous. The ease of entry to the 2006 ePB was seen as providing risky opportunities for corrupt practices to take place. This undermined the democratic legitimacy of the process. The increasingly demanding requirements facing voters from 2008 to 2013 ePB were regarded as having deterred some eligible voters from participating. All electoral situations (offline and in person as well as online and remote) entail a trade-off between accessibility and security. Striking this balance should be a matter for careful policy reflection before the online innovation is institutionalised. Citizens are likely to accept reasonable and carefully explained security provisions, but if these are suddenly bolted on to the process, often in response to legalistic wrangling, they can have the unwanted effect of diminishing trust in the process.

Not only must the rules of engagement be trusted if ePB is to assume an institutional form, but so also must the technology upon which so many of its claims rest. Distracting, rhetorical invocations of the supposed deterministic effects of digital technologies, whether imagined as panacea or high risk, are unhelpful. Those entrusted with the design of a new political institution need to understand that its technological infrastructure is itself a product of design intentions, sometimes encoded from the outset to constrain user options and at other times constructed with a view to maximising user flexibility. If the aim of ePB is to maximise the scope for autonomous expression by citizens, that needs to be communicated to the software and graphic designers as much as to the city hall officials and lawyers.

Secondly, public engagement with the new democratic institution depends upon its visibility and framing within both mainstream mass media and new social media networks. Persuading the local media to publicise an ePB when it is a novelty is relatively easy. Sustaining an ongoing link to the local media ecology entails more than issuing occasional press releases. At the level of mainstream local media, newspaper opinion pages and broadcast studios can become fora for vibrant debate about the pros and cons of competing ePB projects. Rather than simply reporting on ePB (and all too often dwelling upon its failings), local media have a potential role to play as a prominent stage within a revitalised local public sphere. Governments could be using the media to explain precisely how they are going about implementing projects

that have been voted for. Local citizens could be encouraged to go to the media to evaluate ePB projects as they begin to impinge on their lives.

Online networks are bound to play a key role in this ongoing conversation, but that should not be to the exclusion of the press and broadcast media – which, in almost every city and country, remain the main source of local news. Rather than adopt a policy of urging citizens to register as members of its own official networks – often on the assumption that these can be more easily ‘managed’ -, ePB organisers should engage actively with already existing civic networks. And where these do not exist, citizens should be encouraged – and, if necessary, incentivised – to initiate such networks with a view to speaking for themselves to one another rather than as ‘guests’ within a government-managed space. Digital social networks do not develop overnight and will not be sustained if they are only reactive to top-down agendas. The notion that an ePB happens once every two or three years needs to be abandoned; the final decisions might be made at such intervals, but the supporting communication environment within which such decisions are arrived at should be permanent.

Thirdly, although we recognize that the participants of online forums are not representative of the whole population of Belo Horizonte, we believe that our analysis shows good evidence of how the feeling of self-efficacy decreased significantly from 2008 to 2013 and at the same time how the level of disapproval of preselected works raised in the same period.

We speculate with some confidence that there is such a relationship and that the extent to which citizens feel that they can influence decisions may well be the most significant predictor of whether they will feel moved to participate in a decision-making process. While the flow from political will to policy implementation is rarely smooth, and there are surely times when the best-made democratic mandates cannot be enacted, governments need to understand that the institutional sustainability of ePB depends as much on subjective perceptions as procedural technicalities. If there is no demonstrable effect that the ePB has made a difference, participation levels will plummet.

In the case of Belo Horizonte, all three of these conditions call for attention before this new democratic institution can be made sustainable. Assuming that public confidence in ePB can be realised over time, the normative political question of whether this could lead, in the words of Mayor Pimentel, to the creation of ‘a participatory democracy and not just a representative democracy’ remains to be answered. Our argument in this paper has been that the evolution of a democratic innovation into an enduring political institution calls for critical attention to ways of generating and sustaining a popular feeling that the terms of representation have changed for the better. In this regard, we are impressed by Rothstein’s (1999) discussion of the notion of ‘collective memory’ and his assertion that ‘variation in the ability for groups to handle social dilemmas can be found in the variation of the collective memories of the agents’. The essence of this argument is that feelings of popular identity with an institution do not simply arise from

an amorphous entity called ‘culture’, but are constructed and disseminated by strategically acting agents with a view to fulfilling specific political goals. If the aim of ePB is to strengthen civic participation, while making political representation more direct, then as much effort must be put into persuading citizens to absorb such values as in refining the procedural technicalities of the process. Stated simply, we might say that the sustainability of the ePB institution depends upon its capacity to resonate with the cognitive and affective maps in the minds of the citizens upon whose participation its success depends. Currently an implicit feature of its structural design, the normative aims of ePB need to be embedded not only in the design of the new institution, but as part of the collective memories of citizens being called upon to move from clientelist to democratic political orientations.

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ⁱ Belo Horizonte is the capital of Minas Gerais and the sixth largest city in Brazil, with 2.4 million inhabitants. Founded in 1897 as the first planned city of Brazil, its development was based primarily in commerce. Like many Brazilian cities, Belo Horizonte has a number of socioeconomic disparities, but overall, it is well ranked in terms of GDP (US\$ 23.44 billion) and HDI (0,880). Historically, after the democratization of Brazil (1985), Belo Horizonte has tended to elect leftist or centre-left parties.

ⁱⁱ Interviews were conducted in Portuguese by Rafael Sampaio and subsequently translated into English by him.

^{iv} In Portuguese, Participatory Budgeting means “Orçamento Participativo” (OP).

^v According to Wampler (2007), who made a comparative study in Brazil, this is a characteristic of Brazilian PBs and not Belo Horizonte alone.

^{vi} One can say that is a trend among the oldest PBs in Brazil. Beyond Belo Horizonte, also Recife (2001-2013) and Porto Alegre (1989-2013) have introduced online phases in their PB processes. For more, see Matheus et al (2010), Ferreira (2012).

^{vii} According to CETIC research (2012), one can see a direct correlation between income (or social class) and level of internet access in home n Brazil. On the other hand, the access is more distributed among the different age groups nowadays. For example, 27% of internet users are from 10 to 24 years old and 36% are from 25 to 44 years old. Source: <http://op.ceptro.br/cgi-bin/cetic/tic-domicilios-e-empresas-2011.pdf>.

^{viii} According to Peixoto (2008), one cannot affirm that PB numbers refer to individuals, since they are based on estimates and double counting of participants could happen.

^{ix} The IQVU (Quality of Life index) is an index measured by the city hall to analyse the access of the population to municipal services and facilities. It is composed of 10 variables – Supply, Culture, Education, Sports, Housing, Infra-structure, Environment, Health, Urban Services and Urban security. It’s main used by the city hall for the distribution of resources within PB. The less healthier PUs receive more resources using the IQVU as the main index. In those 3 editions, there were not such a rule for ePB.

^x Belo Horizonte's city hall has divided the city in 80 Planning Units, which contains several neighbourhoods with similar socioeconomic characteristics. Several PUs together form the administrative regions of the city.

^{xi} Both Peixoto's (2008) and Lana's (2011) results need to be regarded carefully. As both researches are not based on surveys or actual data from participants, one could point these results as case of ecological fallacy.

^{xii} Other indication of less interest in the process is the number of hits of ePB website. The number was 192,229 in 2006, increased to 217,651 in 2008 and highly fell to 86,279 in 2011, which is less than half than any of the other years. Once again, this number fell to 31929 in 2013, which is less than half of 2011.

^{xiii} In 2013, the vote was enabled by cellphones once again using an app (for IOS and Android). Surprisingly, only 144 votes were cast in this way, which does not contradicts our point regarding the lack of trust in the process.

^{xiv} According to Oliveira (2014), this tactic was not employed in 2013, because the results were not satisfying in 2011 and also because of received complaining of "spam" by the population.