

# A micro-democratic perspective on crowd-work

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## ABSTRACT

Social media has provided governments with new means to improve efficiency and innovation, by engaging a crowd in the gathering and development of data. These collaborative processes are also described as a way to improve democracy by enabling a more transparent and deliberative democracy where citizens participate more directly in decision processes on different levels. However, the dominant research on the e-democratic field takes a government perspective rather than a citizen perspective. E-democracy from the perspective of the individual actor, in a global context, is less developed. In this paper I therefore develop a model for a democratic process outside the realm of the nation state, in a performative state where inequality is norm and the state is unclear and fluid. In this process e-participation means *an ICT supported method to get a diversity of opinions and perspectives rather than one single*. This micro perspective on democratic participation online might be useful for development of tools for more democratic online crowds.

## Author Keywords

Performative states; crowdsourcing; e-participation; open government; e-democracy.

## ACM Classification Keywords

Human-centered computing: Collaborative and social computing systems and tools

## General Terms

Human Factors; Design.

## INTRODUCTION

The concept open government discussed in [1–4], have encompassed a notion of a fundamental institutional transformation of government where social media applications support a more collaborative government where crowds of voluntary workers participate directly in the information production, enabling a more deliberative democratic system. However, our review of the open government paradigm shows that the dominant discourses

in these government initiated projects foremost are the protection of liberal values and enabling of innovation through open data, rather than deliberation or inclusion [5]. A research overview of the field of e-democracy as a whole also shows there is a government perspective rather than a citizen perspective[6]. Something that is less explored is democracy in a global context from an actor perspective, in scattered micro-cultures such as creative commons online[7]. Unlike nation states, these "states" are built around common denominators other than geography; it may be programming, star wars or minimal art music.

Most theories on democracy are assuming a normative idea of the state as the common and absolute unity for democracy [8, 9]. Therefore it is interesting to ask what a democratic process means outside the realm of the nation state, in a state where unequal rights is norm and the border for the community is unclear and fluid. What does democracy mean in a globally distributed environment? In this position paper I develop a micro perspective on democratic participation online that might inform the development of tools for e-participation.

## PUBLICS ONLINE AS PERFORMATIVE STATES

Most democratic models presuppose what I in a broad interpretation of the word call a state: a common issue or problem (like a piece of land), shared by a given group of participants (for example inhabitants of the land). Then the question is how the state should be ruled. In a classic democratic ideal a group of equals rule collectively based on rational reasoning and an informed understanding of the problem.

But a state can have other connotations, like a state of being, or to state something by expressing it. In this last meaning a state is something we state, that we create like a painting or a library, or the collective universe of ideas expressed as a discourse in a public sphere like for example a newspaper. Thus you can look at the public as the state, as this is where both the state and its citizens are performed and identified. Dewey uses the word "public" in this meaning, as something that is formed simultaneously with the issue or state, which can be synonym to the state:

"Indirect, extensive, enduring and serious consequences of conjoint and interacting behavior call a public into existence having a common interest in controlling these consequences."  
[10]

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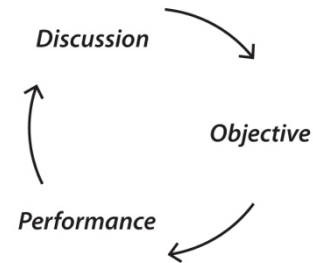
A public is not only something that you belong to, ‘public’ is also a property of something you make, why it is an interesting term in research as it connotes an action that can be observed as it is made public. The public, the place where identity and interest becomes public, is thus both a product of social or political action and a ground for further action. This means that the mode of the public expression, if it’s a conversation, an online chat, a painting or a book, is central for the forming of publics, or what I call states. Following the thoughts of Latour[11], this means that not only humans are forming states but also communication technologies have an active part.

To conceptualize the processes of creating a state also Young’s concept of series and groups are useful. Young [12] refers to individuals’ common denominator as series, as opposed to groups, as something that you belong to without necessarily being aware of it. The idea of belonging to a series instead of a group enables the thinking of individuals as passive members of a variety of interest groups (read states) with sometimes conflicting interests. A series may be race, gender, locality, language, food preferences, allergy, hair cooler, and so on, or just a certain childhood memory. These properties can unite individuals who are completely unaware of each other. A series can also be a reason for deliberately forming a group (excluding other people), the reason that you identify a common interest. By talking about series instead of groups it is possible to speak of “women”, “black” and “lesbians” as community-building, even though these series in themselves may contain conflicting interests in the form of other series like “class”, “age”, and “nationality”. A series can both be seen as a common asset that enables the actor and something that constrains her. A group affiliation is an important part of identity and feeling of community, and can range from a distant interest towards for example a certain types of books, to a strong engagement in a political cause.

Young’s distinction between series and groups is important for the understanding of how a common identity is formed. This process of becoming aware of and identifying with a group can also be described as either seeing the other as a member of a category such as age-group or class, or identifying self or others because of a relationship like friend, colleague or family[13]. The first are analytic categories useful for researchers, the other categories show how these are expressed in practice[13]. The actors doesn’t share a group because of “class”, but because that they are friends and feel they belong.

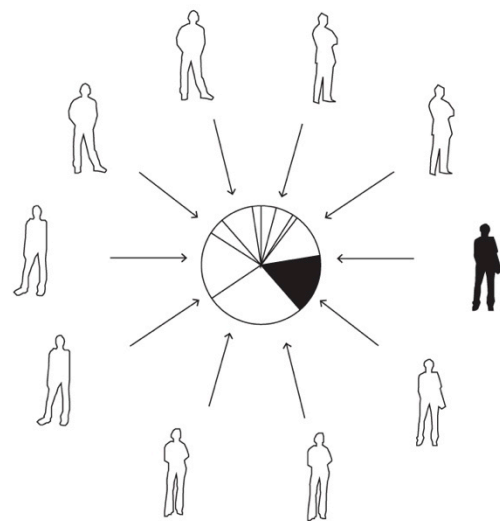
In a state where participants have chosen to participate as in collaborative crowd-work online, and the state is something the group develop together as a common interest and a belonging, the basic notion of the state as something given is questioned. Instead the state is more clearly performative, something we maintain and reproduce through our actions. The decision process in such state also becomes a bit

blurry. For example in a group based on interest very strong notions can be developed concerning who can participate, and what the issue is, but the decision process behind can be difficult to describe[14]. There are no formal criteria, and if any, they are in constant renegotiation. This can be described as an iterative process where the objective is adjusted in an iterative on-going process that produces performances that is discussed, discussions that change the objective, and so on (figure 1).



**Figure 1. A performative state where the objective is defined and redefined through performance and discussion in an iterative process.**

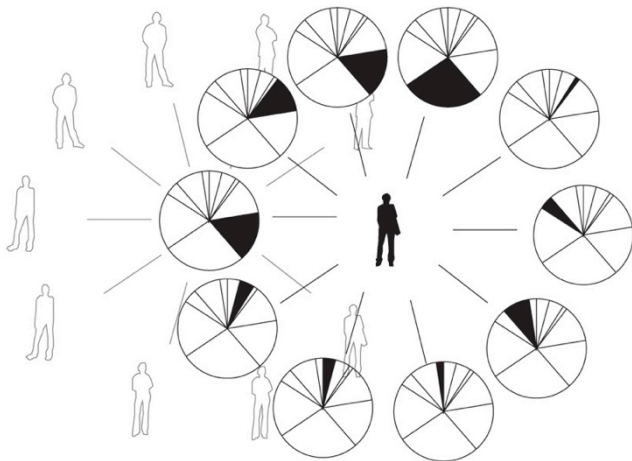
In this performative state anyone is welcome as long as they recognize the objective and are recognized as a member of the community. This means that citizenship is not something you have or not have, but rather is a scale of influence, based on your relative level of reputation and trust. Unlike an ideal democracy model, participants in this state are essentially unequal and contribute unequally to the common issue (figure 2).



**Figure 2. Unequal participation in a performative state.**

The difference between the state of an interest (like fine art), and a nation state (like Sweden) might seem too huge for a meaningful comparison, but there are similarities. Unlike the interest group, there are formal structures and regulations that regulate participation in a nation state. You can't claim that you are a resident if you do not live in the area, but you can claim other rights, for example that you are affected by what happens in the state and therefore should have a say, or that you are an expert on the particular problem and therefore should express an opinion. Just as in an online state, participation in the state "Sweden" can also be seen as performative, unequal and structured by discriminating factors. Some people take more space in the public sphere where Sweden's problems are defined and they have a greater influence on the discourses about Sweden.

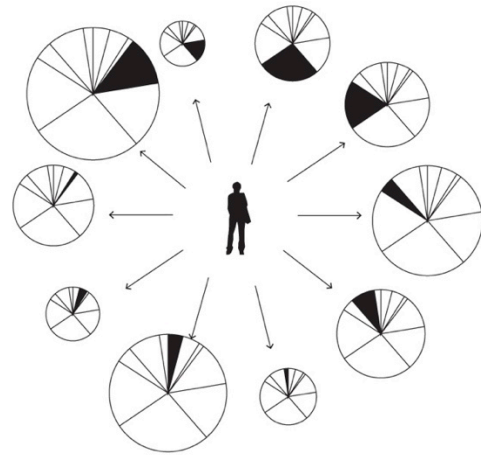
Another similarity between a performative state and a nation state is in my description of them. Both the case of the art and the case of Sweden focuses on one issue; one state; "Art" and "Sweden", and presuppose that this is the main issue at stake that engage participants in collective action. But in reality, there might be many competing states. The individual participates in a variety of states that divide her or his attention (figure 3).



**Figure 3. Instead of looking at the state from a collective perspective, as a shared asset, one can look at the individual as shared between different states.**

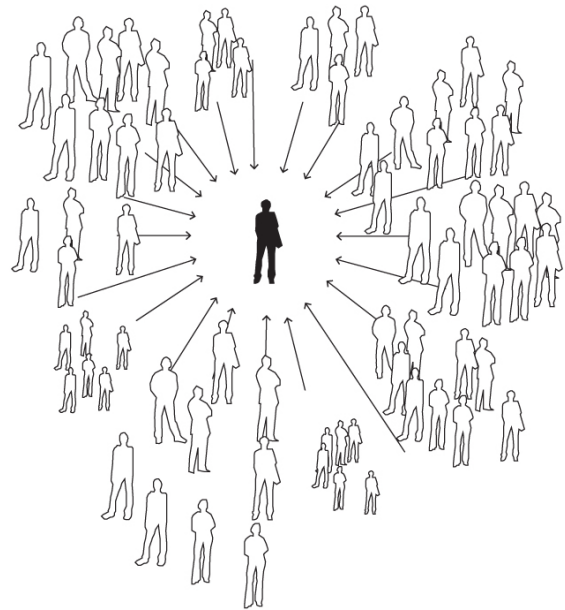
One can call it plural shares in different states, which all together define the individual (figure 4). These states can be smaller or larger, and consist of more or less tightly connected networks of people. They also compete. Therefore a person's participation in one state not only depends on the individual's literacy and motivation, but on the alternative costs and benefits of participation in other states.

So, now we have gone from a democratic model where people have equal shares in the state, to a model where people have unequal parts, to one where several states have unequal parts in the individual.



**Figure 4. The individual's participation and different shares in multiple states, which all together define the individual.**

Each state in the model is defined and performed by the people that participate in the state. Without those people there are no states. In this perspective, the individual is not only defined by her or his shares in different states, but by his or her shares in the people that define the states. Consequently, as these people have shares in the states the individual contributes to, they also have shares in the individual (Figure 5).



**Figure 5. The amount of peoples that that have shares in the individual, and who all together define the individual.**

The result of this individualization of states points to a relational form of collectivism, as interdependency and relations became central rather than a common issue. To point to the relations between individuals also introduce time to the equation, as relations are something that develops over time.

## A MICRO-DEMOCRATIC PERSPECTIVE ON CROWD-WORK ONLINE

So what does democracy mean in this relational form of collectivism where inequality is the norm, citizenship are in multiples and time is an important factor? A scenario where people tend to abandon states (in the way they can) that don't recognize them and their interests? How can the democratic ideal be practiced in a scenario where the individual's multiple crowds of people are the starting point rather than one more abstract "common"?

This call for e-participation tools that helps the individual to practice democracy. This means to enable autonomy and support plurality, but also work for consensus and transparency within the performative state. This can be described as:

- 1) Means to perform states:
  - Management of a diversity of crowds
  - Deliberative communication with peers
- 2) Means to enable a sustainable collaborative work over time
  - Visualizing interests
  - Visualizing belongings
  - Multimodality considering differences in literacy

In this democratic process democratic participation simply means *a method to get a diversity of opinions and perspectives rather than one single.*

In other words, democratic crowd-work as a process that anyone, institution or single person, can use to engage others in a collaborative effort to understand something or to develop something; an e-supported participatory methodology. As relations are central in the network, the outcome of participation depends on the nature of the relations in the process. Therefore it is interesting to further look at how crowd-work in general can be described as relations, and how means to establish and maintain these relations can be understood.

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