

Unraveling the Web: A Discursive Approach to Designing Websites that Encourage Participation

Zelinna Pablo, Ph.D.
Information Technology Department
De La Salle University
2401 Taft Avenue, Manila, Philippines
+ 63 (2) 524 0402
zelinna.pablo@dlsu.edu.ph

ABSTRACT

The issue of participation on websites has in the past been addressed through the mobilization of interaction mechanisms or tools such as discussion forums, chat, or online surveys. In this study I propose an alternative approach: that participation on websites can best be achieved through the mobilization of discursive strategies that enact words, visuals, and interactivity features. I argue that “tools” are too blunt an instrument to be used as a basic unit of analysis; hence dissecting them into more finely tuned discursive strategies will lead to a richer explanatory framework that will account more fully for a website’s dynamics of participation. I therefore address two research questions, the first focusing on discursive strategies that encourage participation, and the second on discursive strategies that discourage it. I use comparative case study and discourse analytic approaches. This study contributes to the field of discourse analysis as a methodology by extending discourse analytic techniques beyond words, to include visuals and interactivity features on websites.

Keywords

Discourse analysis, e-participation, Development Gateway

1. INTRODUCTION

In this study I propose an alternative approach to examining dynamics of participation on websites. There have in the past been studies [9] [17] that have equated potential for participation with the presence of certain tools on portals (chat, discussion forums, surveys, email). In this paper I argue that tools are endowed with too much complexity to be used as a basic unit of analysis for examining a website’s potential for participation. I argue that tools are made up of multiple elements (words, visuals, and interactivity features) that can be mobilized in various ways through discursive strategies. I then argue that it is these discursive strategies, not the tools, which will shape dynamics of participation on websites. This leads to two research questions on discursive strategies that encourage and discourage participation on websites.

The study is structured as follows. In Part 2 I discuss the limitations of using tools as a unit of analysis for analyzing participation on websites, and hence introduce the notion of conducting analysis using a “finer” lens: discursive strategies. In Part 3, I examine a web-based portal that makes use of multiple discursive strategies that encourage participation, despite its having only two interactivity features. In Part 4, I examine other portals where discursive strategies appear to marginalize participation. I end with concluding remarks.

2. PARTICIPATION ON THE INTERNET

There has been a long-standing debate on the role that information technology plays in democracy and participation. Utopian perspectives suggested that the capabilities of new technologies would allow citizens to access rich resources of information to enable decision-making, encourage engagement, and facilitate discussion and debate, leading to the rejuvenation of democracy [11]. Dystopian perspectives foresaw not a redistribution of power, but its concentration in the hands of a few, leading to unprecedented levels of surveillance and control rather than empowerment and participation [13].

In the midst of the debates, organizations, individuals, and international bodies have been embarking on systematic efforts to harness new technologies to achieve deeper levels of e-democracy, a term that overarches two concepts: e-voting and e-participation. In the domain of e-participation, focus has been made on exploring how government and citizens can best be brought together for dialogue and consultation [9]. The study focuses on this area.

The issue of harnessing IT to facilitate meaningful interactions between government and citizens is complex. Diverse factors must be considered, among them the level of engagement one is seeking to achieve (enabling, engagement, or empowering); the stage of decision making one is in within the policy life cycle; the actors involved; and the amount of time made available to citizens to come to a decision. Another critical factor is the issue of technology, specifically “[which] participants are engaged and by whom, and with what devices and interaction mechanisms” [10].

The issue of which interaction mechanisms are best utilized to achieve participation has been addressed in different ways. One approach involves framing one’s e-participation objectives and then selecting the tools that are most appropriate to achieve these objectives. It has been suggested, for example, that the objective of achieving basic information exchange is best addressed by tools such as web portals with online discussion forums or online chat; the objective of educating and support building can best be achieved via a discussion forum with a login feature, online chat, or email (among others); the objective of input probing can best be achieved through online questionnaires or web comment forms [17].

The tendency to equate certain tools (such as a discussion forum) with a certain level or quality of participation is logical, intuitive, and useful. It may, however, have limitations. In a previous study, for example, Pablo and Hardy [15] have suggested that a single tool can be made up of multiple elements, endowing it with complexity and rendering its impact on participation less predictable. This was seen in the case of the Australian

Development Gateway, a portal designed to assist countries in the Asia Pacific on matters related to poverty reduction and sustainable development. One set of findings in that study was that discussion forums were set up specifically to “share knowledge, contribute ideas and discuss solutions below” [AUST2005-17], a heading which appeared to be very much linked to the notion of participation. However, a closer examination of the discussion forum’s dynamics painted a different picture. First, all contributions had been posted by a party referred to as “admin”, presumably the website administrator, indicating that postings had been either initiated, or had at least been screened, by web personnel, and therefore contributions are not completely unregulated, but rather centrally controlled. Second, all the postings were in the form of questions, which suggests that the pattern of interaction being initiated was that of question-and-answer, rather than spontaneous inputs in diverse forms (questions, comments, requests) emanating from multiple sources. Third, all replies came only from one “expert” per discussion forum. Finally, there were multiple views of these forums, but with zero replies. All in all, these suggest that the discussion forum, despite its default association with participation, was a heavily regulated context dominated by a single participant, shaped by expectations of a question-and-answer type of exchange and with little uptake. Cases such as these would call into question the assumption that interactive mechanisms like a “discussion forum” or “chat” or “bulletin board” can be directly equated with participation. A tool is a convergence of many elements: words, visuals, rules that define engagement and interactivity. The argument being made here is that it is not the discussion forum per se, but the way that its elements are mobilized, that will shape participation.

The elements that make up a tool on a web-based portal are understood to take the form of “texts” embodied in discourses. Discourses include written language, spoken language, cultural artifacts, or visual representations [4]. The ways that these texts are mobilized are referred to as “discursive strategies.” A single tool on a website (for example a newspaper article) may be made up of multiple pieces of texts (words, photographs, a comment box) all of which can be mobilized using discursive strategies, which may or may not lead to participation. The proposal being made here is that efforts to achieve participation should not be grounded on tools (which may be too blunt an instrument to be used as a basic unit analysis) but should rest primarily on discursive strategies that make up different tools.

Having laid the groundwork for this approach, I now propose two research questions: (1) *What are the discursive strategies that encourage participation on a web-based portal?* and (2) *What are the discursive strategies that discourage participation on a web-based portal?*

3. METHODS

To address these research questions I conducted a comparative case study of web-based portals using discourse analytic approaches. I focused on the Development Gateway (www.developmentgateway.org), a multimillion dollar web-based undertaking initiated by former World Bank President James Wolfensohn in 2000. It is an Internet-based resource on poverty reduction and sustainable development, with reports, articles, statistics, discussion groups, transaction-supporting mechanisms, and policy analyses aimed to assist a variety of actors, ranging from large banks to grassroots organizations to individual users

[20] [21]. Among its main features are Country Gateways, a set of over 50 web-based portals established by different countries, operating locally and usually as partnerships between government and private firms or NGOs, and emphasizing the use of ICT to address development issues. Of the 50 or so Gateways, 27 of these are available in English. I have chosen to focus on the main site, the Development Gateway, as well as the 27 Country Gateways available in English.

I downloaded the homepages of the Development Gateway and for each of the Country Gateways, as well as subordinate pages one level deeper: that is, I downloaded each page immediately linked to every clickable item on the homepage. This meant variations in the number of HTML files per portal: 52 for the Development Gateway, 70 for the Georgia Country Gateway, and only 7 for the Nepal Country Gateway, which at the time of analysis was not heavily populated with resources. Downloads beyond the first level were done depending on findings, on an as-needed basis, which is consistent with theoretical or purposeful sampling [2].

I then analyzed each website as being made up of three different types of “texts”: words, visuals, and interactivity features. To guide my data analysis, I constructed a framework made up of questions that would enable me to unpack a portal’s discursive strategies. To analyze words, I drew from traditional discourse analysis [16] and from journalism [14] and formulated six questions for analyzing these words. Questions focused on the genre of resources used; topicalization, foregrounding, backgrounding; and tone employed, among other things. Each of these questions was further broken down to generate greater detail; for example, “tone” was further broken down into sub-questions on degree of formality, detachment, objectivity, presence or absence of jargon, and positioning of speaker. To analyze visual resources I drew from fields of marketing and visual design [8] [12] and formulated another six questions (e.g. layout, type of visual resources used, portrayal of subjects, modality). To analyze interactivity features I drew from information systems literature [5] [19] and formulated nine questions (among them HTML forms available on a homepage, ICT tools like chat or bulletin boards present, and depth of transactions supported, if any).

To address the first research question (on discursive strategies that encourage participation), I drew from my analysis of data from the Croatia Country Gateway [CROA2005-01], which appears to be prototypical of the participative portal [3]. To highlight its thrust towards participation I contrast it on occasion with characteristics of the main site, the Development Gateway. To address the second research question (on discursive strategies that discourage participation), I draw from multiple country gateways that contrast with the Croatia Country Gateway’s dynamics, in that they are dominated by domains that tend to be exclusive rather than inclusive.

4. DISCURSIVE STRATEGIES THAT ENCOURAGE PARTICIPATION

My findings suggest that participation in portals tends to be encouraged when specific discursive strategies create contexts of interaction (promoting multidirectional communication and relationship) amidst a plurality of players, in ways that players and the processes of interaction are kept largely free from regulation. These will be discussed in detail in the next section.

4.1 Words and associated discursive strategies

The Croatia Country Gateway shows only two interactive elements: a voting poll and an email facility for submitting articles. Under conventional analysis using tools as a basic unit, one may conclude the portal is not rich in terms of interactivity potential. However, a close examination of the words and visuals, as well as the interactivity features, unpacks website dynamics more fully. I will begin with a discussion on the discursive strategies associated with words found on the portal (which are in this case the most dominant resource), followed by a discussion on strategies on visuals, then a discussion on strategies on interactivity features.

My findings suggest that there are four word-based discursive strategies that construct the Croatia Country Gateway as a context for participation. First, *it makes an open invitation that allows for a plurality of contributors*. Second, *it establishes an egalitarian context for communication through the use of non-managerial, informal language*. Third, *it establishes a context for open, anything-goes communication by publishing articles that lambaste traditional authorities*. Fourth, *it appears to be a context for polyvocality*. Each is discussed in detail.

First, in terms of contributors, the Croatia Country Gateway makes an “open” invitation to just about anyone to contribute. On the upper right hand corner of the website is an invitation “Write for us”, and clicking on this will lead to a site with a message that reads:

“Feel that this [sic] what you have to say you want to shout out to the entire world? Feel that you have to say it our [sic] bust? We promote independence and creativity, innovation and openness and we welcome unsolicited papers, articles, columns...Write to us - so you can start writing for us...”

This communicates at least two things: first, the text producer (“us”) is portrayed as being open, accepting, open-minded, willing to consider other people’s viewpoints. Second, the user is portrayed as someone who is vocal, and has something s/he badly wants to contribute for discussion in the Croatian site.

A second strategy that constructs the portal as a participative context is that *it appears to promote a partly (not completely) egalitarian context through the use of informal, non-managerial language*, in ways that the user is not being “spoken down to”. The Croatia Country Gateway does not come across as professional or bureaucratic, as the main Development Gateway [DG2005-01] does, because of its widespread use of colorful terms (“Hunkers down”; “Eye-popping”, “Baring it all for breast cancer”) and contractions (like “advert” in “Sony pulls Jesus advert”; “preps” in “Doom Rocket Man Preps for Liftoff”; “Demos” in “Dreadnought Demos Released”), which render the language informal and dilute whatever intimidating atmosphere may have been conveyed by professional language and technical jargon.

A third strategy that constructs the portal as a participative context is *its promotion of open, “anything-goes” communication, through the publication of articles that question or criticize established authority*. There are at least four pieces that seem to advocate questioning those in power: MIT students going against government surveillance initiatives; a report criticizing World

Bank; the promotion of a book that tells about the free software movement undercutting hi-tech “titans”; a fourth one, not visible on the front page but accessible upon clicking on a link, is a blistering letter addressed to George W. Bush regarding the war on Iraq. This seems to portray the portal as extremely knowledgeable about technology, rather rebellious, willing to argue, and ready to debate on just about anything. It also suggests that the portal is a context where any opinion can be heard, even if it means going against superpowers or organizational giants.

Finally, a fourth strategy that constructs the portal as a participative context is its *prioritization of polyvocality*. On this particular portal, it appears that there are a variety of people who have a voice: an editor gets to endorse his choice of resources; four different news syndicators get to publish their news; “anyone” is invited to submit unsolicited papers, and the portal acknowledges that there are different types of users: agency, business, citizen, education, government, IT people, NGO, who may have special needs and are therefore in need of specialized entry points when engaging with the portal.

4.2 Visual resources and associated discursive strategies

In the aspect of visuals, there are two strategies that can be identified as constructing the portal as a context for participation: first, *its use of vivid, informal and diverse color schemes and visual resources*; and second, *the fragmentation of the portal into different spaces for voices instead of resources*.

In terms of *informality and diversity in terms of color and visuals*, it can be argued that the relative absence of hierarchy or authority, at least of a managerial/ bureaucratic nature as found on the Development Gateway [DG2005-01], is further amplified by the visual resources of the portal. Color saturation is high, with the entire page having a red background; color differentiation is high as well, with much of the text written in yellow or white, in stark difference against the red. The strong colors and contrast might allude to boldness and outspokenness, as compared to the relative sterility and formality conveyed by the restrained use of color in the Development Gateway. The modality and colors of the portal make it appear vibrant and strong, perhaps alluding to a young and unreserved personality. The suggestion of “youth” is reinforced by the choice of photograph that accompanies the “write for us” invitation: it shows a young, vibrant, fashionably dressed Caucasian woman who exudes confidence. This may be the personality that the Gateway is trying to achieve. In choosing this type of “person” the message transmitted may be that anyone who has something to say can say it, the only requirement being having confidence and something “you want to shout out to the world”.

On the issue of people portrayed on a portal, there is also a suggestion of diversity in that various kinds of personalities are portrayed. The portal may try to attract young and confident people to contribute (as suggested by the photograph of the young woman described above). However, there is also the visual portrayal of an editor, in this case a partial headshot of a man, seemingly in deep thought, in front of what appears to be a desktop computer. This might convey that quiet, contemplative, deep thinkers, and not just flashy confident people who have something to say, are envisioned to “be on” the portal as well. Finally, there is the photo of the Help Asia banner portraying a child victimized by the tsunami that hit South Asia on December

26, 2004, a vivid portrayal of a person in need, which might indicate that people who are concerned about such starkly realistic present-day issues are part of a participative context as well. The fact that people are portrayed so differently (male and female, bold and contemplative, glamorous and victimized by tragedy, all within the same portal) supports the interpretation that the portal is open to just about anyone. This is in contrast with the discursive strategies employed by the Development Gateway, which involve among other things using sterile, impersonal icons (and not pictures of real people) that appear to be detached from any actual social context.

A second point to note about visual resources is *the portal's fragmentation into small spaces allocated to voices instead of to resources*. It can be argued that the Development Gateway's homepage is structured around knowledge resources and knowledge areas: space on the homepage is allocated across a number of items such as a book, data and statistics, and a special report; different pages are dedicated to different topics such as ICT for Development or Nanotechnology [DG2005-01]. In the case of the Croatia Country Gateway, spaces are carved out for different participants instead of for topics and resources: it has a space carved out for an editor, where the editor gets to endorse his or her choice; it has an entire column dedicated to four news syndicators; and it has an entire section dedicated to different users of the portal.

4.3 Interactivity features and associated discursive strategies

In the aspect of interactivity features, there are two strategies that can be identified as constructing a participatory context: (1) its presentation of an inclusive opinion poll and (2) its provision of an email facility directly linked to the invitation for people to contribute.

The first is *the provision of the portal of an inclusive opinion poll*. This tool consists of a single question, with possible responses that can be ticked via radio buttons. The poll is taken to be an indicator of participation, mainly because it appears to be inclusive. As compared to polls in other portals, the poll on the Croatia Country Gateway involves a simple, straightforward question dealing with personal habits ("How much time do you spend on-line?") that just about anyone can respond to. This is a relatively accessible question, as compared to the poll on the China portal, which assumes a certain level of economic knowledge and comes across as reserved for a more elite group. Combined with the fact that the response process is a simple tick of a radio button, one may argue that the poll is something that anyone can take part in, regardless of level of expertise or specialization. A second point worth noting about the poll is that it is in English, which again makes it open to a larger number of users (at least on a global scale) as compared to what it would be if it had been presented in a local dialect. The use of local language was implemented in the case of the Poland Development Gateway [POL2005b-01], and while this could have made it more accessible to locals, one may argue that on a larger scale it can be seen as a small, exclusive area cordoned off by the language barrier as far as the rest of the world was concerned.

A second strategy is *the presentation of an email facility immediately linked to the invitation to contribute*. Upon clicking on the invitation "write for us", one is taken to a page with the message "Write to us...so you can start writing for us". The

"Write to us" segment of this statement is hyperlinked; clicking on this immediately launches an email software that prepares one to contact someone from the Croatia Country Gateway. The immediacy with which a user is positioned into sending a contribution seems to convey how "ready" the portal appears to be to accept contributions, which again can be interpreted as its being open and participative.

Having said that, one point must be raised. In the case of this email facility, one can immediately send an email, but it is not clear what happens to one's message or to one's contribution upon doing so. Hence as far as input mechanisms are concerned, the portal might portray an initial degree of openness, and as far as output is concerned (the finished portal), the portal also exhibits patterns of an open context. However, what happens in between the initial step of sending one's contribution and seeing an article published is a "black box": it is not clear what processes take place before one's contribution actually can come up. These mixed signals may warrant more detailed investigation in future work to establish how open the portal actually is at various stages of the publication process.

In conclusion, the Croatia Country Gateway reflects a participative portal not simply through the inclusion of interactive facilities, but through a wide array of discursive strategies involving visuals, words, and interactivity elements. It establishes a participatory context through its word-based resources, conveying openness through seemingly unrestricted invitations to contribute, its egalitarian, non-bureaucratic language, its emphasis on polyvocality and its willingness to publish articles that irreverently criticize traditional authorities. Through its visual resources, it suggests that it is a pluralist context because its visual resources convey diversity, its layout shows spaces for voices rather than resources, and its color schemes convey boldness and outspokenness. Its interactivity features include an accessible poll and a readily available facility to send email, which appear to convey that people's inputs are readily welcomed. Having said that, it must be noted that the absence of other features and the lack of transparency on contribution processes would suggest the need to examine in greater detail how interactive the portal really is.

It is important to note that the Croatia Country Gateway was contextualized within the larger Development Gateway project, which was envisioned to be an open and collaborative domain. Terms associated with the notion of participation found in planning documents include "interaction", "sharing", "collaboration", "discussions", "relationships", "exchange", "dialogue", "coordination", "bringing together", and "being heard" [DG2006-01]. In this sense the Croatia Country Gateway appears to be prototypical of the participatory portal. A comparative analysis of other country gateways suggests that creating conditions for participation was more difficult due to the mobilization of other discursive strategies. Strategies that discourage participation are discussed in the next section.

5. DISCURSIVE STRATEGIES THAT DISCOURAGE PARTICIPATION

Some portals appeared to have been created with pockets of participation, but are generally dominated by spaces wherein a small group of participants controls the arena, and interactivity seems to be relegated to the margins. For this section I will refer to these areas as "inclusive" or "exclusive" domains. I suggest

here that there are seven discursive strategies that lead to *the dominance of exclusive domains at the expense of inclusive domains*.

The first case is the Kyrgyz Country Gateway [KYR2005-01], which has a single dominating exclusive domain, its news segment. As of the date of download, a large part of the portal area (its middle portion occupying more than half the page) was devoted to 40 news articles, mostly on current events in Kyrgyz. Of the 40 news articles, 39 come from a single source called Kabar. Most of the articles are slanted to highlight one of two things: progress being made in some aspect of country life, or the eulogizing of some sort of hero. For example, the “progress” theme is seen in articles that report on the reopening of a trade center; the China-Kyrgyzstan-Uzbekistan railway; possible investment opportunities in India; cotton production going up; and tobacco production going up. The “hero” theme is seen in the President meeting with an outstanding statesman’s daughter; a new rector winning an election by garnering 260 out of 428 votes; an article highlighting how 77 crimes were solved; and an article on the Governor lauding engineering specialists.

My analysis suggests that because the exclusive domain of the news feature takes up so much space on the Kyrgyz portal, other inclusive domains are quite literally relegated to the margins. One of these features pushed to the side is a set of discussion forums. Therefore exclusive domains can be seen to “overpower” inclusive domains through a strategy that I call *peripheralizing: pushing to the margins, or to a more inconspicuous location, certain features*. A second strategy is mobilizing discursive resources in ways that *render a feature visually inconspicuous*: size-wise this means making it small, color-wise this means making it blend in with the background through the use of non-striking colors.

It is also noted that within the discussion forums of the Kyrgyz portal, there seems to be instantaneous publication and limited control. This seems to be ideal for participation contexts, but in the case of Kyrgyz, it becomes implemented in ways that appear to have affected the quality of exchange. For example, the single entry under the forum entitled “Preliminary Program” was submitted by a contributor named Michael on 03.09.03 (presumably March 9, 2003), and reads: “hi! I have crackers for E-Gold, WebMoney, EvoCash, PayPal for sale!” The message appears to be an expression of purely personal interest and is perceived to have no relation to the site at all. Similarly, the main discussion forum has one message simply containing the word “Hi!” from a contributor named Lira Samykbaeva, dated July 12, 2001. Hence a third strategy by which inclusive domains are marginalized is *that maintenance-wise, they appear to be undermanaged (as seen by the quality and unrelatedness of contributions) and un-updated (as seen by the dates of the contributions) in ways that suggest it has been “abandoned”*. The quality of exchange, now seen as disjointed, outdated, with little threading and uptake, has been adversely affected. This is an interesting finding in that it was initially assumed from objectives associated with participation that the lack of regulation will always improve participation dynamics. It appears that one must differentiate between a lack of regulation that is deliberately and carefully instituted after an examination of conditions (perhaps useful in mature communities that have become self-regulating), and a lack of regulation that constitutes a lack of attention.

There are other ways domains of inclusivity can be minimized, a fourth way being a discussion forum’s *being non-functional, or at least its functionality being delayed (de-prioritized) in terms of rollout*. In the case of the Uganda portal [UGA2006-01] as of January 3, 2006, the potential for participation appears to have been marginalized not only by the item “forum” being relegated to the very bottom of the page, along with items such as feedback and FAQs, but also by its failure to function (clicking on it did nothing). As of May 1, 2006, a new site had been set up, and the forum feature had been eliminated altogether from the homepage [UGA2006-20]. What has been made available instead are two features for contribution: “submit article” and “send email”, the first of which leads to an error message when clicked upon, while the second leads to an “under construction message”. This may indicate that the functionality of these features may not have been a matter of urgency, in that (a) on both versions of the site none of these features allowing for contributions had been operational in spite of the site having gone live, and (b) the forum feature was present in earlier versions yet eliminated in newer ones.

The perceived substitution of the “submit article” and “send email” to replace “forum” could be interpreted as a fifth way to marginalize participation: *by restricting the flow of contributions and community exchange through the use of less interactive ICT tools*, for example by shifting from discussion forums to email. The lack of a discussion forum and the perceived substitution of “clunkier” means of submission can be seen not only in the Uganda portal (above), but also in the case of the Rwanda portal [RWA2006-01]. What is offered in the latter is an invitation to the user to “participate” by submitting an article. This invitation to contribute suggests some semblance of participation, not just by its asking for participation but also through the use of a little icon of two people, perhaps representative of relationship or interaction. In fact, clicking on this item leads on to a page that says that the “Rwanda Development Gateway is a participative portal. Its objective is to promote development actions, actors and organisations in Rwanda.” Yet reading on, one sees that the message goes on to say “To propose an article just fill in the next form.” The form requires the submission of one’s name, email address, and the title of the article. It also requires that one find the appropriate category for the article by choosing from a lengthy dropdown menu provided. The text of the article must also be pasted on the message box provided. This procedure for contribution involves a bit of irony, in that the Rwanda Country Gateway claims to be a participative portal, yet it is instituting what seems to be a bureaucratic submission process to facilitate participation. It is also not clear where these contributions go, and what screening/ filtering processes these are subjected to before an article is actually published, and therefore the processes associated with actually getting published on the portal are not transparent.

A sixth strategy that shows inclusive domains being downplayed is *making a participation feature more restricted in terms of language*. On-line polls, for example, can be seen as a way to foster participation by giving users a chance to voice out their stance on a particular issue. In the case of portals such as Poland [POL2005b-01], China [CHIN2005-01], and Croatia [CROA2005-01], such polls are present; however, the poll on the Poland portal is in the native language. While this may or may not mean more participation at a local level (depending on the language preferences and capabilities of locals), at a global level it does tend to automatically leave out non-Polish speakers, and thus

the poll can come across as being exclusive to the Polish community, and therefore can be perceived as closed, restrictive, and limiting.

A final strategy is *the outright absence of any facility for participation*. The Azerbaijan Country Gateway [AZER2005-01], for example, does not have a provision for discussions, for sending email, or even a “contact us” facility on the front page. It might also be noted that there is generally an absence of synchronous ICT tools on the portals: Kyrgyz [KYR2005-01] appears to be the only gateway that explicitly mentioned the possibility of making use of tools like chat.

In summary, the marginalization of inclusive domains can be found on portals in the form of discursive strategies that can be harnessed to play down a domain, among them relegating a feature to a portal’s fringes, endowing it with inconspicuous discursive resources, rendering it non-functional, reigning in a user’s ability to participate (for example, accepting contributions via email instead of chat, or by restricting participation through language), or making it entirely absent. Acknowledging the nuances of these strategies helps us consider that the mere “presence” of a certain feature may not necessarily translate into the pursuit of participation in meaningful ways. A portal may claim to “have” topic facilities and a forum; however, if the forum turns out to be a tiny, nondescript facility equipped with asynchronous, heavily controlled HTML contribution mechanisms, then one may argue that participation is actually being pursued in largely nominal, superficial ways.

6. CONCLUSION

In this study I have argued that mobilization of interactive mechanisms or tools can be limited in seeking to achieve participation on websites. I propose that it is not tools per se, but the discursive strategies that mobilize the elements within those tools, which shape dynamics of participation on a portal. Findings suggest that the mere presence or absence of a tool on a website may not be a strong indicator of participation. In the case of the Croatia Country Gateway, for example, only two interactive tools were present (an email facility for submissions and a poll), yet other discursive strategies such as inclusive language, use of layman’s terms, and the use of photographs of diverse subjects could all arguably amplify a website’s inclusiveness and hence its predisposition towards participatory dynamics. On the other hand, other cases showed that the participatoriness of a website with interactive features could be weakened by a number of strategies: peripheralizing the interactive mechanism, rendering it inconspicuous, loading it with inefficient or bureaucratic requirements, or replacing it with other less interactive features.

In this study I have also made a number of methodological contributions, specifically by extending the application of discourse analytic techniques in two ways. First, I have applied discourse analytic techniques to websites. While work has been done to study discourses on the Internet [7] or about the Internet [22], limited work has been done to apply discourse analysis to the contents of specific web portals. By applying discourse analysis on websites I build on a small but growing body of work [1] that extends discourse analysis to the new media.

A second methodological contribution that I have made is extending the application of discourse analysis beyond traditional textual resources. Many of the ICT studies that have employed discourse analysis have focused on words. The study of Wyatt

[22] on the Internet draws primarily from words used in Wired! magazine. The study of Schultze and Orlikowski [18] on virtual organizing draws on words from practitioner-oriented journal articles. The study of Kent [7] on the World Wide Web focuses on “managerial rhetoric”. Even Kendall and Kendall’s [6] study draws significantly (though perhaps not completely) from language associated with system development methodologies (terms like “team members” being “motivated” lead to the game metaphor). In this study, I have focused on words and on visuals, both of which have been the subject of some form of discourse analysis [12] [16]; importantly, however, I have also analyzed the interactivity features of websites. These include HTML forms like radio buttons, or synchronous and asynchronous communication tools like chat and bulletin boards, which remain relatively unexplored as discursive resources. In doing so I have expanded widely held understandings of how texts come to be embodied in the new media.

The focus on specific discursive strategies also makes contributions to practice: it allows IS researchers and practitioners to fine-tune their approaches to designing and analyzing websites. Instead of deciding on a “discussion forum” to achieve participation, one may now have to specify “a discussion forum associated with the following discursive strategies”. It can sensitize website producers and users to the possibility, as well as the dangers and consequences, of cosmetic, superficial fulfillment of specific website functions.

7. ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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9. LIST OF URLS DOWNLOADED:

REFERENCE	URL	DOWNLOAD DATE
AUST2005-17	http://www.developmentgateway.com.au/forums/index.php	26 December 2005
AZER2005-01	http://gateway.az/cl2_gw/pages/en	9 October 2005
CHIN2005-01	chinagate.com.cn	7 October 2005
CROA2005-01	http://gateway.hr/	3 October 2005
DG2005-01	http://www.developmentgateway.org	3 October 2005
DG2006-01	http://www.developmentgateway.org	19 September 2006
KYR2005-01	http://eng.gateway.kg/	27 December 2005
POL2005b-01	http://www.pldg.pl/pldg/portal#	8 October 2005
RWA2006-01	http://www.rwandagateway.org	26 January 2006
UGA2006-20	http://www.udg.or.ug/	1 May 2006