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Online tools used by public administration to collaborate with Citizens: A review of the talk London platform

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Abstract

The online environment manages to provide public institutions with new methods of contact aimed at listening to the voice of citizens and acting to satisfy their desires and needs. Smart cities manage to identify various methods of maintaining contact and achieving collaboration. In this review, I will present the functioning of online discussion platforms and the impact they have on the relationship between institutions and citizens, analyzing the Talk London discussion platform.

Keywords: Talk London, online platform, two-way communication, collaboration, smart city

1. Introduction

The use of online platforms for collaboration between state institutions and citizens is an increasingly common method among smart cities, which are managing to generate positive results for the community, depending on the desires and needs of citizens. This two-way communication method not only reduces the costs of collaboration, but also manages to involve more citizens compared to traditional methods. Thus, smart cities are making the transition to collaborative governance using online tools.

The use of information and communication platforms within public administrations is currently very common in many countries around the world. However, not all cities manage to provide citizens with the transparency necessary to validate a collaboration through these platforms. To obtain validation, public administrations must not only listen to citizens, but also engage in discussions with them, subsequently generating public policies based on the desires and needs expressed in the discussions. And to increase the degree of trust in the act of collaboration, public institutions must make these discussions transparent and demonstrate that they have taken action as a result.

To see how online platforms present in smart cities work, I will consider in this paper the online platform Talk London managed by the city hall. In order to establish the degree of collaboration through this platform, I will monitor the degree of citizen involvement within it, the possibility of interactions between citizens, the responses received from city hall representatives and the actual results following the discussions within the platform.

2. Materials and Methods

In this paper, I will start from the idea of smart city found in the article published by Meijer, Lips and Chen, continuing by identifying an analysis, carried out by Peixoto and Fox, of online platforms that highlights the moment when the state decides to act in accordance with the wishes and needs of citizens. Thus, in this article, I will conduct an analysis of the Talk London platform through observation, with the aim of answering the following research questions:

1. Does the Talk London platform manage to provide citizens with the mechanisms of a successful collaboration (transparency in collaboration, the possibility of participating in public decision-making, the possibility for citizens to generate discussion topics)?
2. Do the authorities manage to take concrete actions following public consultation, based on the wishes and needs of citizens?

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3. Talk London Platform Functionality

The Talk London platform was launched in 2012 with the aim of listening to the wishes and needs of citizens and ensuring that public policies adopted are effective for the community. We thus observe that the main purpose of this platform is to ensure collaboration between the city hall and citizens by creating a two-way method of establishing the needs of the community.

Discussions within the platform are carried out by creating a user account through which the public institution requests data about the person behind the account: name, surname, date of birth, gender, ethnic group to which he belongs; and also data that are essential in establishing the profile of the person involved in the act of collaboration: employment status (student, pensioner, employee), housing situation (personal property, rent) and the area in which he lives. The citizen also creates a public name through which he will interact on the platform, this being essential in protecting personal data. By creating this name, users are stimulated to participate in public decision-making without worrying that their opinion will in any way affect their relationship with other citizens.

Entering the user profile, I see the interaction on the platform displayed, the votes for and against the issues raised by other users, the surveys to which the user responded, the comments and ideas added to the platform. This structuring demonstrates that through the online platform, citizens can interact with each other, discussing topics important to the community. By adding votes, comments and ideas, the institution ensures that public policies can be modified according to the wishes of the majority. However, entering the discussion area, I was not able to identify the negative vote option that users can give to comments with which they disagree, but only the like and care options. However, for each comment there is a reporting option, which can represent a negative vote option, but regarding the way in which the message is presented.

Regarding the generation of ideas by citizens, the representatives of the city hall introduce topics within the platform divided into eleven areas of action, relating to art and culture, economy, education, environment, health and others. Citizens interested in a specific field select areas for which they want to submit ideas and can enter comments if they are still active. To identify how this type of discussions that have the role of public consultation works, I will analyze one of the topics introduced by the administration, Memorial to victims of transatlantic slavery. This public consultation has already ended, which is why I will be able to follow its finalization based on the discussions held within the platform. The representatives of the city hall initially entered all the data necessary for the public consultation into the project page: a description of the reasons for which this project will be carried out, its name and a list of proposals selected by specialists in the field. Citizens had to analyze these proposals and vote for the option considered the best for this monument. In the results section, we found the description of the public consultation process, the duration of the consultations and the number of participants. Thus, we could see that public consultation was not carried out strictly in the discussion platform, which represented only fifty percent in making the final decision. The city hall ensured that, regardless of whether citizens use the platform or not, they can take part in the public decision. Of course, these discussions were also held with experts in

the field, ensuring that the final decision is correct.

Also, within the platform, citizens can follow the implementation status of the project, its completion deadline and can opt to receive the latest news in the field by e-mail. These things demonstrate a high degree of transparency of the local public administration, but also the fact that the institution promotes public consultations among citizens. Another aspect identified in the page of projects subject to public consultations is the conduct of opinion polls aimed at improving the proposed projects. The number of respondents in these surveys is also over a thousand people, a fact that demonstrates that citizens are involved in the act of collaboration.

Another functionality of the TALK London platform is the series of discussions. Even though the topics discussed are introduced by the representatives of the city hall, they come in the form of questions. The role of these discussions is to create an online community that participates as much as possible in the activity on the platform by creating a natural environment for discussions. Also, these discussions have the role of promoting events that will take place in the coming period, being described in the continuation of the questions.

Even though the public institution demonstrates a high degree of transparency and collaborates with citizens in public decision-making, I have not been able to identify a section where citizens can generate discussion topics. This aspect can be introduced into the platform by creating a separate page where citizens can introduce discussion topics with a voting option. When a certain topic receives a large number of votes, which can be set at over a thousand votes considering the general number of citizens' participation in the project proposals on the platform, these should be brought up for discussion by the representatives of the city hall.

5. Conclusion

Considering the first research question, I conclude that the TALK London PLATFORM is an online tool that promotes collaboration between citizens and local public administration. This platform has almost all the characteristics of a successful collaboration: public consultations, transparency regarding collaboration mechanisms, news about completed public consultations and information options via email. The only aspect that I did not find present within the platform is the option to generate discussion topics from citizens.

Regarding the second research question, the city hall has also demonstrated that it acts according to the wishes and needs of citizens, which is essential in establishing collaborative governance.

Considering all these aspects, I can conclude that the degree of collaboration between citizens and local public administration is high.

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