# From mobilization to consensus

*Innovating cross-media services to organize crowds into collaborative communities*

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*Abstract: The purpose of the current paper is to contribute to the field of e-participation by presenting a design concept for mediating technology that incorporates current information technology such as social and collaborative media designed for the purposes of civic engagement in society. Such technology could empower people to mobilize and engage themselves in proactive consensus-seeking and co-creation. Social media are broadly adopted in the reactive mobilization of citizen-initiated participatory activity in society such as protests like the London riots and the Occupy movements. In our view, there is a demand to organize mobilized crowds to collaborate in a consensus-seeking manner. For instance, online applications do not yet exist that specifically serve the purposes of massive simultaneous co-editing of documents by citizens seeking consensus in societal issues. However, as we argue, there is no reason for such not to be integrated from existing technological components that are commonly accessible.*

T he way people communicate online has been drastically changed by the introduction of *social media* (e.g., Facebook, Twitter, WordPress, and YouTube), defined as *"Internet-based applications that build on the ideological and technological foundations of Web 2.0, and that allow the creation and exchange of user-generated content."* (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010, p. 61). The commonly applied concept of Web 2.0 suggests that Web 1.0 preceded it and that a process of development is described by the sequence (Rosen & Nelson, 2008). It is clear that the web has transformed from being a static consumer-oriented publishing area into an interactive, social, and participatory driven area of communication. Applications and services developed within the realm of social media are often characterized by participation, conversation and cooperation (Lee & McLoughlin, 2008). The potentials created by social media are, however, not limited to user-generated content

serving social relations for their own sake but can also support the contribution of citizens to the democratic society, provided they are combined with effective collaborative tools. Media systems embedding such tools, referred to as collaborative media, are the key to our design concept. Further, social media have provided new and more efficient ways for people to align into groups in reaction to commonly identified concerns on a local level of society. Such groups emerge, act, cooperate and dissolve without external control on social media platforms. Elsewhere, several governmental or non-governmental projects that promote participation by means of online services have been developed with the aim of facilitating the inclusion of the public but few have been successful (Sæbø, Rose, & Flak, 2008). Two factors contributing to the failure are: (1) excluding the public in decision-making processes and (2) the lack of a direct communication channel in which to allow the public to express their opinions in an efficient way (Kolsaker & Lee-Kelley, 2008).

The protests in Great Britain (i.e. London riots), the Indignados in Spain, Occupy Wall Street in New York and the subsequent global Occupy Together movements during 2011 suggest a change in individuals' practice of organizing reactively against dissatisfactory political, economic or human rights conditions (Castells, Caraca, & Cardoso, 2012; Mason, 2012). Apparently, a common denominator among these examples is the use by individuals of social media to mobilize their protests. They allow an effective way for people to discuss burning issues in their social networks and facilitate quick organization of reactive action within large crowds. This appears to have happened in the London riots of 2011, where the frustration of people observing major regression without possessing means to influence the government might have fueled broad restlessness and even violent reactions. While it has been pointed out that social media should not be credited for *causing* such events whose reasons lie in political, economic or moral injustices (Howard, Agarwal, & Hussain, 2011; Lotan, et al., 2011), they are likely to have an important role in channeling the general dissatisfaction. Due to the distributed structure of the Internet and social media, it has become more difficult for governments to obstruct the mutual communication of individuals. Although it is possible to close down Internet access, as witnessed in Egypt during the Arab Spring, and mobile networks, as seen in the protests in Great Britain during 2011, such actions have drastic effects on society and are by no means invisible or quiet. Secondly, even so, technical solutions for circumventing media remain (Faraon, Atashi, Kaipainen, & Gustafsson, 2011).

Nevertheless, more important for the present study is that the apparent difference between movements that have been mobilized by means of social media and their historical predecessors: the presence of strong leadership, or *monophony*, is not necessarily to be assumed. The organization of the crowds in the former is, at the least, distributed without necessarily being authoritatively led by someone. If there is any leadership at all, then it would be hierarchically more flat than in the case of traditional movements in which already the mobilization required extensive efforts and labor through strong leadership.

Another consequence of mobilization without predetermined leadership is that a solid argumentation or mission does not necessarily exist that motivates crowds to gather, as in classical mass mobilization. In the recent cases, social media-based mobilization can gather large crowds with a *polyphony* of issues altogether expressing only a general dissatisfaction. Figure 1 illustrates the distinction between the monophonic and polyphonic view.

The issue discussed in this article is *what follows after the reactive mobilization*, for example, in the case of the aforementioned movements of flat organization. This allows for different options, two

of them being either to elect leaders following the classical model of democracy after the mobilization, or deliberately aim at new kinds of democratic working models (Levinson, 2011).
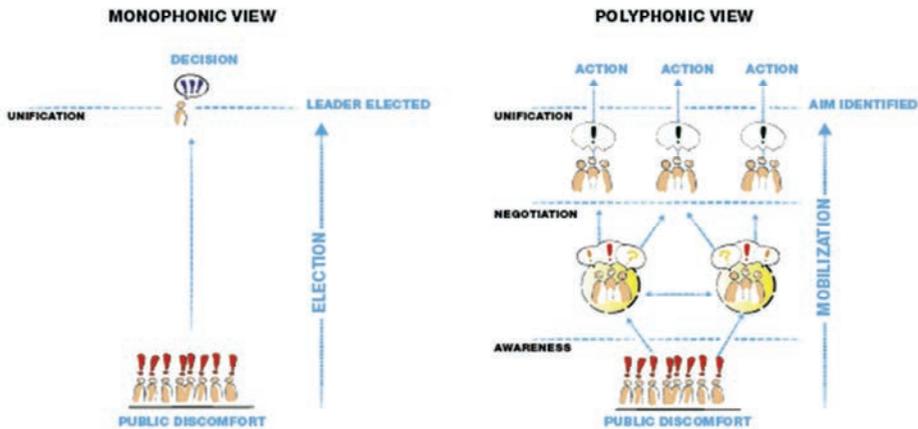


**Figure 1:. In the monophonic view (left), public discomfort is articulated by one selected voice (leadership) through an elective process whereas the polyphonic view (right), takes into account the different opinions inherent to a mass mobilization and aims towards a set of initiatives, agendas, or plans arising from the same public discomfort.**

However, we find that the prevailing discussion related to the bottom-up influence in society does not provide satisfactory means to position mass mobilization and collaboration of people within the context of democratic engagement. This leads us to look into people's everyday activities that relate to consensus-seeking or decision-making in different ways and argue that such should be regarded as manifestations of what we call *micro-democracies*. This view allows us to focus the design of technologies for mediating participatory processes on an abstraction level that is valid in democratic processes taking place on various levels of societal involvement. The development of such technologies assumes that it is beneficial for society to encourage and facilitate the bottom-up oriented practices of individuals. We will propose a design concept for a medium aiming at consensus-seeking and co-creation among mobilized crowds. As we see it, this is possible by means of integrating and adapting aspects of existing social media and online collaborative applications for broad-scale democratic processes.

## 1. Aim and Research Questions

Based on the aforementioned, the overarching research question is how to integrate the technological elements mentioned in order to answer the demand identified above. The aim of the current article is to propose and outline a design concept for active bottom-up oriented participation that allows not only mobilization to form communities of shared interest but also collaboration to facilitate democratically framed consensus-seeking and co-creation within such

communities. This approach aims to conceptualize a medium with scalability from everyday democratic practices to massive political movements without fundamentally new technological development but rather redesign and adaptation of existing social media and online collaborative applications. In the following, we structure the section on e-participation with the polarization of top-down versus bottom-up approaches, of which the latter is adopted as our starting point. Then, we propose the concept of micro-democracies as the link that allows the conceptualization and design of a democratic medium for multiple purposes and scales, which will be drafted thereafter.

## 2. Literature Review

It is by definition in a democratic government's interest to encourage citizens to participate in democratic processes, such as elections, hearings and initiatives. Many governments have over the years experienced a decline in the trust and interest in politics of the citizens and have sought out ways to encourage political participation by means of network-based services (Kampen & Snijkers, 2003; Roy, 2005), allowing, for example, petitions and initiatives to be made online (e.g., European Citizens' Initiative), as well as hearings and ultimately the casting of votes online (e.g., Estonian e-voting system). The demand for such services has been expressed increasingly often by individuals, non-governmental organizations, as well as interest groups who wish to bring forward their interests and views on public issues (Bekkers, 2004; Rose, 2007; Smith & Nell, 1997).

In the present discussion, even empowering measures of governments are conceived of as being oriented *top-down* because they assume an authorized agency that controls measures to be imposed on lower levels of the governmental hierarchy. In contrast, the *bottom-up* orientation is defined as the approach in which initiatives, agendas or plans emerge from interactions of a number of people working together without authority-control. Academic research has for a long time focused mainly on top-down empowerment of e-participation (Bingham, Nabatchi, & O'Leary, 2005; Kenski, 2005; Sanford & Rose, 2007). Over time the interest has arisen toward bottom-up oriented forms of democracy. There is an obvious need for further research into this area motivating the focus of the current article.

In our view, democracy is not only limited to government-driven channels and regulated means but can also manifest in various ways and levels, as well as be initiated and controlled by the people themselves. The Internet and, in particular, social media have broadened the range of means to exercise citizenship and collaboration in terms of *bottom-up e-participation*. We believe that technical and cultural prerequisites exist to go beyond reactive mobilization towards *proactive* and *co-creative* citizenship. In the following we will make a distinction between the two types of democratic processes, top-down versus bottom-up, by contrasting their characteristics in relation to e-participation. From the top-down perspective, the focus is on the legal relation of government and its *citizens*, while from the bottom-up point of view, the focus is rather on *the individual* and *the people* (regardless of citizenship). In the following we apply this distinction and these terms accordingly.

### 2.1. Top-down e-participation

The objectives of top-down government-provided e-participation are to (1) extend the range of the audience to enable a large-scale and more comprehensive participation; (2) aid participation through a vast range of technologies to capture the diversity of skills in citizens; (3) present information to the prospective audience in a clear and understandable way to facilitate input; and

finally (4) reach a wider audience to obtain deeper input and assist in the progress of reflective controversy (OECD, 2003). In order to understand the increased interest of governments in using e-participation we need to review a broader picture related to the current state of representative democracies. An increasingly emerging point at issue has been the idea of a weakness in representative politics in many democracies. Despite the fact that the idea of a crisis in representative democracy is not new, it has prompted an increasing urgency over the years. A major concern is the notion of a globally growing divide between citizens and decision-making bodies (Curtice & Jowell, 1997; Hibbing & Theiss-Morse, 2001; Klingemann, 1999; Pharr & Putnam, 2000). According to Rachel, Wainer, and Stephen (2008) this division is due to factors such as:

- A decrease of knowledge and interest in politics by citizens;
- A decrease of trust in decision-making bodies in society;
- A decrease of efficacy amongst citizens, i.e., those who do not believe that they can influence decision-making bodies;
- A decrease of public identification and engagement with representative institutions;
- An increase of participation divides, i.e., trust, knowledge, and engagement falling mostly among the poorest.

In addition, Dalton (2004) argue that citizens' support for public policy excessively decreased during the period 1960-2000 among the higher-educated and the young, rather than those who are at the margins of politics. In short, *"it is not so much that governments produce less, but that citizens expect more"* (p. 151). It appears that these increased expectations have formed new actors in society, such as interest groups, non-governmental organizations, and new social movements, to assume *"some of the interest aggregation / articulation functions that historically have been the province of political parties"* (p. 397). Gray and Caul (2000) demonstrated that the lack of group mobilization has been a contributing factor to the decline of voter turnout. By comparing unionization with voter turnout, the authors conclude that when there is a decline of union density, there has also been a decline of voter turnout.

In sum, while governments have developed and provided various forms of e-participation, the fact that they are based on the ramifications of issues from the governments' points of view dictates that they do not often offer means to represent citizens' everyday concerns to the government, as they are. This has led to the adoption of various social media as means of mobilization. This has been demonstrated by the protests in Great Britain, the Indignados in Spain, Occupy Wall Street in New York and the subsequent global Occupy Together movements during 2011. In this sense, bottom-up citizen-driven e-participation has gained momentum in these protests by the facilitation of social media.

## 2.2. Bottom-up e-participation

Over time, the attention of many e-participation researchers has turned towards the potentials of technology, such as social media, to give rise to new forms of participation in different areas of society (Mumpower, 2003). There are indications that social media such as Facebook and Twitter could empower the otherwise inactive individuals to access and interact with other groups in society over issues that arise from their everyday life, as an alternative to the top-down approach

(Fisher & Boekkooi, 2010; Hampton, Goulet, Rainie, & Purcell, 2011). This is suggested by the aforementioned protests in which the common denominator appears to be the perception that governments have failed to implement democracy, and that they have distanced themselves from the citizens, particularly in relation to the division of economic responsibilities and resources. It is characteristic of representative democracy that the distance between citizens and decision-making bodies is often large and thus increases the risk of excluding citizens from decisions. When the experience of exclusion grows large, it tends to lead to dissatisfaction among people, as is suggested by the protests in Great Britain, the Indignados in Spain, Occupy Wall Street in New York, and the subsequent global Occupy Together movements during 2011. Because governmental approaches to e-participation (1) are not based on issues identified by the people; (2) do not assume the language, conceptualizations, and ontology of the people; and finally (3) are not based on technologies and practices of the people, they may not serve the purposes of spontaneous participation or activism. However, it has been proposed that communication and discussion between people and decision-making bodies contribute to a healthy and cohesive democracy (Parry, Moyser, & Day, 1992; Ranson & Stewart, 1994). According to Mikaelsson and Wihlborg (2011), confidence in democracy needs to be based on a strong relationship between people and decision-making bodies, not only in elections but constantly. Democracy often stagnates when you do not have an active and living dialogue between people and decision-making bodies.

In our view, participation in democracy is not to be solely limited to interaction with the government, but rather it is important to extend the view to also cover people's reactive and proactive participation in processes that grow from their own interests and initiatives. Reactive participation is illustrated by petition or awareness tools such as Avaaz (avaaz.org), where support is not only requested for or against an existing issue but the request is spread virally along social networks. This could, for instance, be a pending change of legislation or a situation that is perceived as unjust, e.g., against the Stop Online Piracy Act (SOPA) and the Anti-Counterfeiting Trade Agreement (ACTA) that were seen as Internet censorship bills. The support is gathered by means of name lists to represent signatures and presented to decision-makers as "the will of the people" with the aim to change or alter the said injustice.

Proactive participation concerns the perception of possible outcomes and being prepared to address or countermand, e.g., political, interest or lobbying organizations. In the proactive perspective, one of the first challenges an individual encounters when trying to create interest around a specific issue is to gather support. Being aware of an issue does not automatically give access to others sharing the same views, especially if the individual is not a "professional" initiative maker. In these cases, social media have come to play a vital part in connecting like-minded support for an issue (Lotan, et al., 2011).

The use of social media such as Facebook, Twitter or YouTube allows for a level of connectivity that would be hard to reach before the World Wide Web. Not only do they facilitate the connectivity with people but they also allow any consumer of information to be a producer, for example in terms of citizen journalism, e.g., Ushahidi, or send a short message on Twitter, i.e., a 'tweet', post a status update on Facebook, or upload a video on YouTube (Karlekar & Radsch, 2012). Integrating current information technology, such as social media and online collaborative applications within a democratic framing, could empower people to mobilize and engage themselves in proactive consensus-seeking and co-creation.

In sum, we have argued that (1) social media allow massive mobilization through online networks but there is not much to support the collaboration of the mobilized crowds in a consensus-seeking manner; (2) online collaborative applications, in turn, allow for collaboration but lack the means of massive mobilization; and finally, as we see it, (3) both social media and online collaborative applications generally lack features and functionalities for civic engagement in society, for instance the support for consensus-seeking among large crowds and voting mechanisms to resolve multiple competing initiatives. According to our inference, conditions 1 through 3 altogether constitute a need, or a potential market for a new kind of consensus-seeking medium.

## 2.3. Micro-democracies

The idea of democracy is commonly associated with citizens' involvement in high-level decision-making by means of elected representatives. However, we conceive of democracy in a broader sense, as something essentially more than that. If bottom-up oriented participation is taken seriously, democratic processes at the very grassroots level should not be overlooked since it is on this level that individuals form their networks, practices, and skills. These activities often occur within structured working environments, communities and processes that are of a democratic nature in the sense that they involve negotiation and consensus-seeking. One example of this is the participation in decision-making processes of housing cooperatives, sport clubs and interest organizations (e.g., Macintosh, 2004), but primitive democracy may be seen in even less structured networks or environments such as social media, in which informal consensus-seeking may take place. This entails sharing and evaluating ideas and content within virtual networks anchored to individuals' daily life, perhaps quite close to the very grassroots of democracy. An example of this is allowing citizens to make their voices heard and have their say about issues they find important and interesting enough to share with others, as witnessed in a study where school children were allowed to share their stories about their neighborhood through multimodal storytelling (Tollmar, Harling, & Ramberg, 2010). This can be further exemplified on even a very intimately individual level, by someone posting pictures of himself trying on different outfits and asking his Facebook friends to help him decide which one to choose. The alternatives can be "liked" and discussed, involving a reactive behavior, by the peers supporting the individual's decision.

These types of activities might seem trivial, but in our opinion they contain the essence of micro-democracy: *conditions that assume a group of people determining consensual action towards common interests and goals*. These actions can merge through viral distribution to large-scale mobilizations, which can result in radical changes in society. The micro-democratic level should not be over-looked because it also comprises a great number of competencies that establish a broad base for participation in communities and society. Furthermore, one might appreciate the micro-democratic level because it is on this level where the masses are engaged. In the same way as the masses constitute a market for various kinds of online applications, such as services, social media, entertainment and games, we believe that there would also be a demand for a new category of tools deliberately designed to facilitate micro-democratic tasks of everyday routines. In our view this would merge two categories of already existing applications, social media and online collaborative applications.

While social media can contribute to mass mobilization, freely accessible online collaborative applications such as Wikis (e.g., Wikispaces, EditMe, Wikidot), document creation (e.g., Google

Docs, Sync.in, Mindmeister, Docracy), and graphical visualization (e.g., Dabbleboard, CoSketch, Chartle), could empower the already mobilized masses toward consensus-seeking and co-creation of content that contribute to common agendas. It is also significant that such applications are commercially sustainable through their wide user base and broad visibility (Cook, 2008). This further allows free access and use, but also supports co-creativity that is independent of the government's steering. Examples of collective outcomes of such are Wikipedia (wikipedia.org), a collaboratively built online encyclopedia, GitHub (github.com), an online social and collaborative coding community, and WikiVote (wikivote.ru), an online Russian service aiming to crowdsource lawmaking.

## 3. A digital medium for consensus-seeking

In this section we propose a design concept for a medium that is in essence a combination of social media and collaborative applications applied within a democratic context. It aims to facilitate a sequence of activities that directs the efforts of the mobilized crowds to creative democratic processes. This is described as consisting of three different levels: (1) invitation; (2) community building; and finally (3) consensus-seeking. We suggest, according to Table 1, how these levels map regarding facilitating technologies, people's organization, respective activities, foci, and functions.

Table 1. Levels of the engagement using the proposed medium corresponding to the facilitating technology, engaged people, their activities, foci and the function within the suggested bottom-up democratic context.

| Level | Technology | People | Activities | Focus | Function |
|-------|-----------|--------|-----------|-------|----------|
| Consensus-seeking | Social and collaborative media designed for civic engagement | Organizations | Agree | Goals | Negotiated articulation, co-creation, consensus seeking |
| Community building | Social and collaborative media | Communities | Define | Issues | Massive communication |
| Invitation | Social media | Crowds | Set goals | Concerns | Networking, social interaction, viral distribution |

These three levels can be built in as components of the suggested medium as illustrated by Figure 2. For the purposes of description, they are depicted linearly in the following. However, the process does not necessarily have to go through all levels. In the following we offer a description of the characteristics of each level.

### 3.1. Invitation

When identifying an issue, be it societal, aesthetic, political, or economic by nature, an individual may choose to take an action with the support of others. The proposed medium offers a registered

member a means of mobilizing people behind such an issue. In the process envisioned, this would start by sending invitations, for example, by means of social media networks or e-mail, urging them to join the action. The invited people may also be given the option to register in the system, with the advantage of keeping their support anonymous, desirable in the case of sensitive issues. In addition to individual invitations, the system provides effective means of suggesting anonymized recipients based on metadata related to the interests they have previously reported that would render them likely to support the initiative. Metadata of members' interest profiles can accumulate, for example, by interpreting the acceptance of an invitation as support for the particular interest or by occasions of voting about issues. While securing the anonymity, the interest profiling is kept transparent to the members themselves.
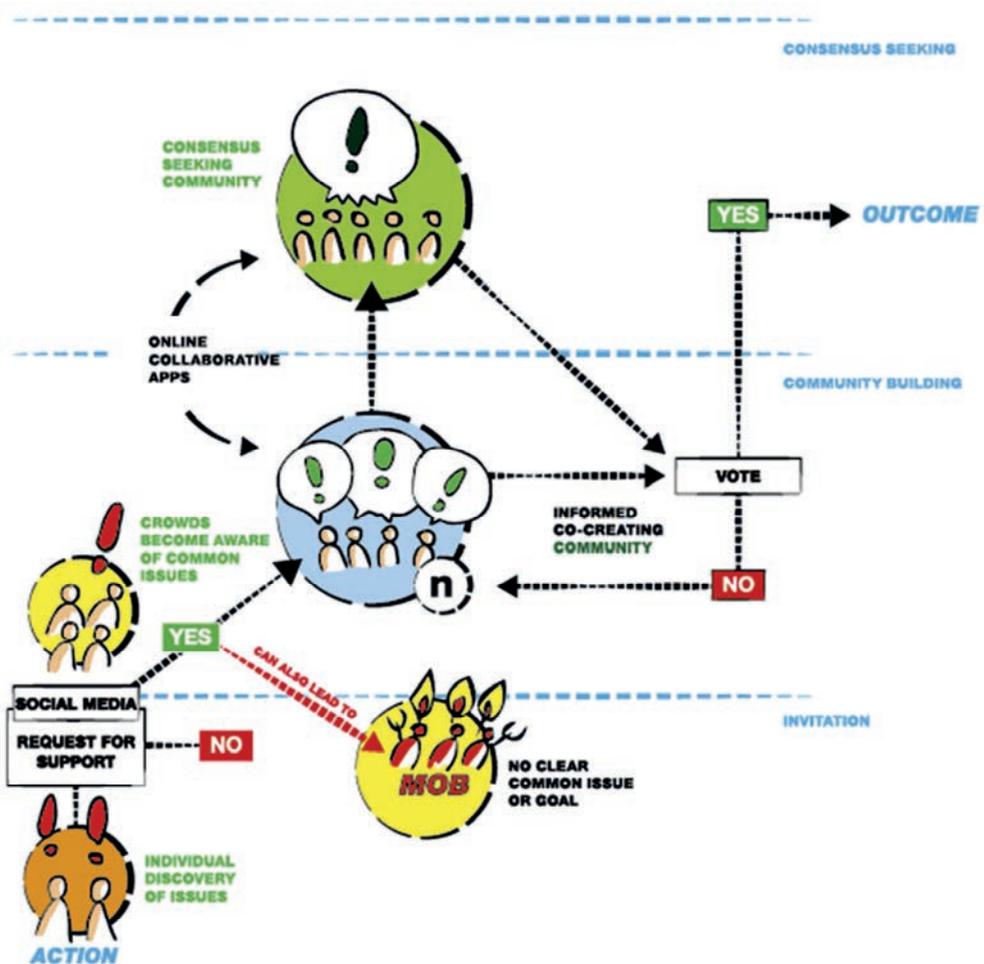


**Figure 2. Abstract overview depicting the path of an individual discovering an issue towards becoming engaged and contributing to the process of creating a "solution" to the said issue reflecting the previously mentioned three levels: (1) invitation; (2) community building; and finally (3) consensus-seeking.**

### 3.2. Community-building

A community supporting an issue consists primarily of individuals that have chosen to participate in the following process by accepting the invitation. One may generally assume that this phase corresponds roughly to a situation where only a common interest has been identified and from a sense of community having been established. This alone does not assume an elaborated agenda or a determined goal. As pointed out earlier, we consider the possibility that the generally accessible and usable online collaborative applications offer the option for such an already mobilized community to act towards meaningful, concrete and constructive outcomes, termed co-creation. In short, online co-creation may constitute means of defusing the frustrated crowd from turning into a mob, instead of a community, as illustrated in the case of the London riots in 2011. However, in order for such activities to yield useful outcomes, the multiplicity of disconcerting voices of the crowds needs to find a consensus.

### 3.3. Consensus-seeking

By online co-creation we refer to activities that aim to identify the previously inarticulate issues and to express them in terms of a joint artifact that consists of items such as text and images, for instance. The goal of the process may be an initiative, petition, manifesto, plan, design, visual demonstration, or even a budget that crystallizes the initially implicit idea. We assume that an iterative process can be abstracted by which consensus emerges within the community about the shared goal and has the support of a number of people. There is also a mechanism that allows, in case of disagreement, the community to split into two branches. This causes the joint artifact to duplicate into two copies that are initially identical, from which event they start diverging. This allows for parallel evolution of a co-creating process. Also, in case of a 50-50 deadlock vote, the medium will offer splitting as a default option. Such processes may in many cases use features of commonly accessible online collaborative applications, for example version tracking (i.e., history) to keep a record of supporters and branches. The significance of the co-created outcome is that it is a manifestation of a broad consensus and an intent, which addresses the initially implicit idea in a coordinated manner and is validated by the explicit unanimous support, as framed by the medium.

## 4. Discussion

The aim of the study was to propose and outline a design concept for active bottom-up oriented participation that allows not only the mobilization of communities of shared interest but also collaboration within such communities to facilitate consensus-seeking and co-creation. Top-down approaches to participation in society are based on the point of view of authorities and do not necessarily represent citizens' everyday concerns. Instead, popularly adopted social media have shown their usefulness as means of mobilization, as demonstrated by various *reactive* protests, such as the London riots in Great Britain and Occupy Wall Street in 2011. However, these media were never designed for democratic goals and purposes in particular, and therefore their usefulness for more *proactive* contributions to society is limited. To fill this gap, we propose a design concept for active bottom-up oriented participation that is based on the following reasoning: (1) social media allow massive mobilization through online networks but there is not much to support the collaboration of the mobilized crowds in a consensus-seeking manner; (2) online collaborative applications, in turn, allow for collaboration but lack the means of massive

mobilization; and finally, as we see it, (3) both social media and online collaborative applications generally lack features and functionalities for civic engagement in society, that would allow their utilization in the seeking of consensus among the mobilized community. In order to have an anchoring on the level of crowds and their activities, we infer that a medium aimed to serve bottom-up influences to society needs to follow the pattern of popular social media in that they have discovered previously dormant needs of the crowds. This has two important consequences that are worth aiming at, namely, the accumulation of a broad user-base and a market, as well as the creation of an enormous reserve of digital media competencies among people. The prior allows economically sustainable media without the steering of the government, while the latter allows the involvement of a broader range of people than any deliberate government-initiated participation platform.

Accordingly, we suggest that needs exist in the everyday practices of individuals that can be compared to those of social media in volume and significance. In our view, activities that occur within structured working environments, communities and everyday processes may constitute such needs. Many of these are of a democratic nature in the sense that they involve negotiation and consensus-seeking. We identify that these contain the essence of what we refer to as micro-democracies, i.e., conditions that assume a group of people determining consensual action towards common interests and goals. The concept of micro-democracies is instrumental in determining design constraints of the suggested medium, including its purposes, target groups, and flow of processes. It facilitates the design for democracy in a general manner that covers a range of activities between the micro and the macro levels. While it is quite obvious what democracy means on the macro level, it is not as clear what it means on the scaled-down level.

As to practical implications, the proposed medium could empower people to influence on multiple levels ranging from their daily tasks and routines to issues that concern society as a whole. The discussion of citizen's direct impact on decision-making in institutional and legal terms, e.g., citizen initiatives, is outside the focus of the current article. It suffices to assume that the sheer visibility of collaboratively-built mass consensus in social and journalistically-edited media, particularly when boosted by viral distribution, is significant enough to have democratic and constructive impacts on society, and goes beyond the state of the art. Finally, it is up to future discussions to consider the relevance of the proposed concept for offline contexts.

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Robert Ramberg studied cognitive science and psychology and got his PhD in cognitive psychology at the department of psychology, Stockholm University and now holds a position as professor at the department of computer- and systems sciences at Stockholm University. His research has a focus on how artifacts of various kinds (information technology and other tools) mediate human action, collaboration and learning.

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