

FOSTERING A CIVIC NETWORK AS A COMMON snark – space making

Tapping on a two years experience on designing and managing a local web platform for civic purposes, conceived as a digital commons, we present our insights and challenges, pointing to two questions: should it be considered an urban commons institution? What should we work on in order to obtain that identity?

We hope that it could bring relevant insights in terms of research opportunities and methodologies for the whole scenario of digital commons.

The city of Bologna first established its own web-site in 1994, along with other tools as connectivity and an e-mail address, for letting its citizens access the Internet, conceived as a public service. Since then the web-site has been known as *Rete civica Iperbole*, or simply *Iperbole*.

In December 2014, coherently with the results of the participatory process of the city's digital agenda, the city web-site has been provided with two new areas joining the informative section (<http://www.comune.bologna.it>), which operates as homepage. *Servizi Online* (<https://servizi.comune.bologna.it>) offers a personal access to several public services (welfare, mobility, taxes, etc.) and *Comunità* (<http://www.comune.bologna.it/comunita>) is a web platform for civic and collaborative initiatives.

Snark, an independent public processes design group, joined the *Iperbole* team, made of municipal offices staff, contractors and researchers, since the developing stages of the platform, to define and run community management activities. Our research in 2013 and 2014 brought a set of use cases and relevant benchmarks of civic media and digital commons, organized in a proposal of a platform aimed at hosting both spontaneous practices and those resulting from calls, policies and projects promoted by the city government and similar actors. This scheme was aimed at allowing all the relevant practices to be hosted, in order to get a significant picture of what local communities are doing, what themes are driving their efforts and which on-line tools could foster and spread such activism within the city.

Both areas are accessible employing different digital identity systems: *FedERa*, provided by a local government-owned company (the only one allowing a complete use of *Iperbole*'s services), as well as those provided by social networks as *Facebook*, *Twitter*, *Google Plus* and *Linkedin*. Thus citizens are able to employ the same identity on the one hand to access services in a customized space, and on the other hand to join the local community either to get informed about civic and collaborative initiatives or to promote them directly.

Joining *Comunità* requires individuals to undersign a charter, that along with the terms and conditions of use make them responsible for the maintenance and the growing of the platform itself, defining it as a commons, being the use itself open to all the individuals interested in getting engaged in the community, both online and offline. Many paragraphs of the charter have been written starting from the adaptation of the design principles for successful commons management as formulated by Ostrom et al., as developed by the participants of *German Sommerschool on the Commons* held in 2012 (Helfrich 2012). We wanted the charter to work as a manifesto and a declaration of openness. *Comunità* has been described as a civic network (D'Alena 2014) for the city of Bologna, translating the name of the city website (*Rete civica Iperbole*, literally *Iperbole Civic Network*), and trying to provide an effective metaphor to describe such environment. Co-designed through a series of workshops and interactions held mostly during the year 2014 with the communities already involved in the digital agenda and other participatory processes, the platform appears and works as a social network: individuals have to use their own name, can create and manage contents (profiles, posts, projects, etc.) as within Facebook, and most of the uses are conceived as horizontal and transparent.

This setting is aimed at activating peer relations between citizens and city government, as well as among citizens, with the common purpose of spreading civic and collaborative initiatives.

On the one hand citizens, both individually and for their own organizations can autonomously publish contents related to ongoing initiatives, early-stage ideas and reports, ask for support and help other peers. On the other hand they can access to participatory tools as public consultations and apply for initiatives of commoning (within the specific city regulation). The underlying principle is that they can publish informations that are relevant for the community and help each other if necessary.

As the platform went public, after a two weeks period for testing with a limited group of users, citizens began to use it and we, as community managers, began to work both off-line and on-line to spread the knowledge and the use of

Comunità, and to discover user experience improvements and development requests.

It meant that on a daily basis we've been in contact with users and stakeholders, discovering needs and bugs, collecting requests and developing new relational and narrative tools to facilitate the use and the understanding of the platform. Our approach relied since the very beginning on a combination of tools as skype, e-mail, telephone calls, one-to-one meetings, focus groups and public presentations, choosing between them on the basis of specific opportunities and the needs of users and stakeholders. On the whole we either met or helped more than five-hundred individuals, holding more than sixty meetings, mostly in physical presence, visiting companies, institutions and associations, to better understand their activities, skills and needs.

The first six months have been crucial to develop a guide and a *FAQ* section starting from users requests, to improve the front-end experience and to collect many other requests that, gradually and coherently with budget resources, we designed and then passed for technical implementation.

As soon as the platform has been launched a public consultation on the charter contents was open to its users. Its contents were very specific (creative commons licensing, community management, the presence of for profit organizations, etc.) and, considering the timing of the call and the stage of the platform, we haven't been able to attract more than twenty contributors.

A few requests have been implemented and adopted (not all of them were strictly related to the charter's contents): the contents have been made more coherent, and revised in a user-oriented style.

Many of them requested to change the Creative Commons license applied to the platform and to the contents generated by the users, from the *Attribution-NonCommercial 3.0* to the *Attribution-ShareAlike 3.0* in order to ease the diffusion of the informations. Such adaptation was to be undertaken within a whole revision of the charter but the whole process is still in progress after several months, leaving users with a limited understanding of the process in such a critical stage.

Since the platform went public, its software code has been released within the GitHub platform (<https://github.com/ComuneBologna/comunita>) by the developers, in order to offer the code to other actors and developers. But as many specific releases and fixes followed, the opportunity to get the developing community engaged hasn't been taken due to the lack of resources and organizational solutions to open and maintain such process.

Finding the relevant themes of the city activism was and still is one of our primary goals for the first year of the platform. We tried to first work on promoting direct interactions. Thanks to the use of tags and a taxonomy of items, activities, resources and needs the platform could be able to provide a suggestions tool in order to promote horizontal collaborations. In the meantime we undertook the effort to punctually investigate the contents as soon as they are published trying to promote connections, both online and offline, inviting users to get in contact. Relying just on on-line interactions didn't prove to be a self-standing approach, then in June 2015 we started to invite users for public presentations, organized either around specific themes or neighborhoods, in order to have them presenting their own practices, skills and needs, and letting other users to freely interact. It is an attempt to take the platform off-line, promoting discussions and matching that could be then taken and completed on-line. Obviously such process is highly time-consuming but it proved to strengthen the interactions opportunities and the platform understanding.

At the very beginning we thought that some thematic rooms could be developed to host discussions and interactions, such design is still underway. The first thematic areas actually emerged clearly, and we currently see a few nodes as circular economy, mobility, public spaces regeneration, education and welfare. This is due to the growth of the platform in terms of users (more than 2.000 by end of September, according to http://dati.comune.bologna.it/statistiche_rete_civica) and contents published (proposals within consultations, posts and projects): we actually find more than 100 users that actively created contents and dozens of them that just commented and interacted somehow, thus overtaking the so called '1-9-90 rule' for on-line communities.

The next challenge is actually how to get them engaged in the designing of their own *rooms*, which value and support provide them, considering that other social networks offer a more immediate answer under many dimensions.

Such effort has to be highly cared by us, as the platform has already began to develop new features oriented at promoting public policies transparency and accountability. Since July 2014, after to a months-long designing and developing process, associations and non profit organizations can use a procedure hosted within the platform to confirm their accreditation within the city government register for social and civic engaged actors, whose status is officially recognized by the government itself. The procedure has been conceived either for making the city government support more transparent and such organizations more accountable, and for innovating and easing the procedure for the office in charge for the procedure. On the one hand, considering that about one thousand organizations have to complete the procedure within the current year, this is a relevant opportunity to populate the platform, in fact one in ten of the news users, aside from completing the procedure started to use the platform in various ways. On the other hand this challenges the perception of the platform as horizontal tool, as bureaucracy, even when designed within a relational impact, as we tried to do, can compromise the understanding of the whole opportunities. In a joint effort with all the offices involved and a few associations, we set a campaign of one-to-one meetings, various help-desks and four

public presentations to offer both a detailed explanation of the procedure and an introduction to the opportunities for new collaborations.

All these activities are making us more aware of our current role as a *trading zone*, where we deliberately try to summarize requests of improvements, new engagement and matching tools coming from the users, as well as transparency and simplification initiatives requested by city government offices. Combining them together can represent the first step to build an accelerator for civic engagement and social innovation.

So far we can report a positive assumption of the platform as a commons, but it is also evident and public that this stage is a beta version of an object that has still to be escalated.

As communities are still to be hosted with proper *rooms* and the governance of the platform is still within the city government field, we see the next few months as crucial to generate the debate on this issues and the co-design of such elements. We have clear that in order to let the platform grow as a digital commons, the effort of all the actors involved has to be put on the openness of the resources and of the infrastructure governance, as effectively defined by Morell (2014) when analysing the *Online Creation Communities* (OCC), if it is possible to consider *Comunità* as an OCC.

So far the platform resources can be considered open and available but, given what we reported on informations licensing and on the software code use, it actually generated a limited amount of interactions, improvements and forms of reuse by developers and practitioners, that maybe didn't feel invited to join. Without developing a suitable environment for scaling and fostering the communities, the openness of resources alone is not sufficient to generate a commons.

The government of the platform doesn't offer to those users already engaged and willing to contribute a relevant opportunity to take care of the platform and its governance. Publishing accurate contents and pointing out potential unfair uses could be granted with a request to join a group of peers that contribute to the managing of the platform, as a first step to build a community governance of the platform.

These are the questions driving our research and practice during the current months and the ones coming. We didn't want to question the actual condition of the platform as a commons.

We wanted to find suitable research and practice questions to foster it in such direction.

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