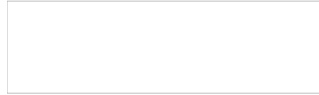


A JOURNEY THROUGH TECH FOR TRANSPARENCY PROJECTS

LE 5 OCTOBRE 2010 SYLWIA PRESLEY

Elections are what generate increased activity of various groups interested in transparency issues. Despite my assumption that this might not be the case in more developed democracies, clearly grassroots transparency movements are present and growing all across Europe.

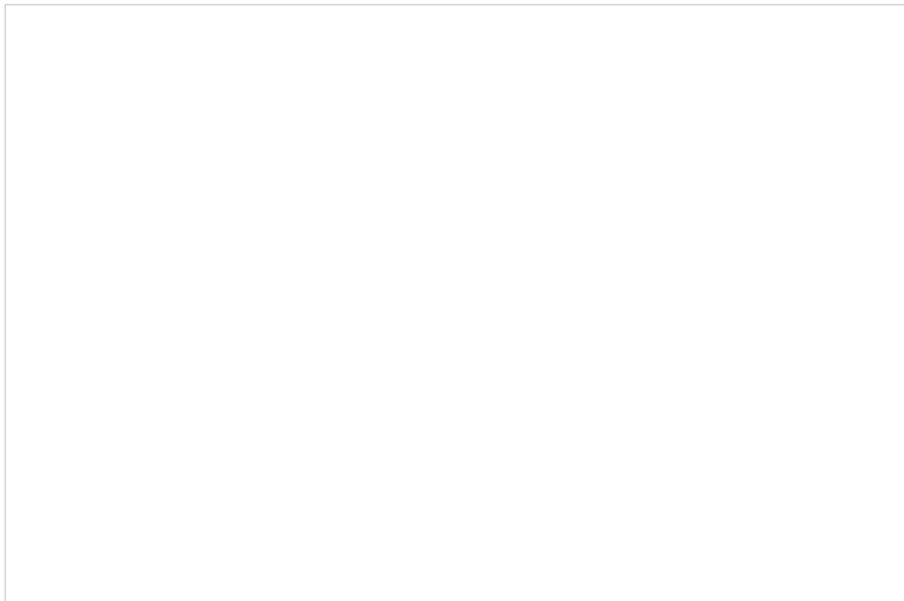


This article originally appeared on **sur Global Voices**, and was written by Sylwia Presley.

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The Technology for Transparency Network focuses largely on countries outside of North America and Western Europe. However, many of the trends in the use of technology to promote transparency and accountability, particularly with respect to open government movements, are piloted in western countries before being adapted in developing countries. We are not formally documenting these cases as part of our research, but we hope that by sharing several examples we can highlight the “state of the art” work in the technology for transparency space. Let’s start with a tour of Western Europe:

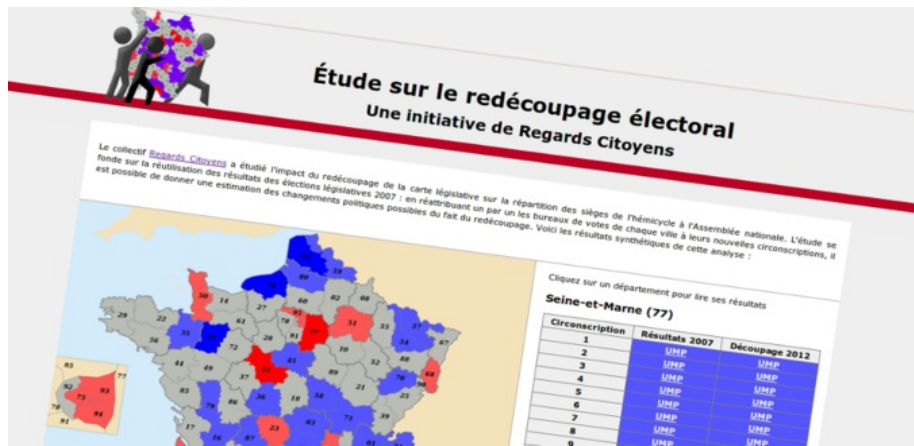
UK: A successful example of open government



Our first stop is the United Kingdom, where **They Work for You** is enabling citizens to access data about their representatives to the UK Parliament, Scottish Parliament, the Northern Ireland Assembly and the Welsh Assembly. They Work for You was originally developed by a group of volunteers. With the support of **UK Citizens Online Democracy** and **MySociety** it has expanded to allow others to use its data via an open API. Based on a simple post code search, I was able to find **my local MP** and read his bio, recent speeches and appearances, and also — more importantly — his expenses, sponsorships, and additional income.

Another site supported by MySociety, **FixMyStreet**, is a model of active civic engagement at the local level. The site allows anyone to report local problems — graffiti, potholes, broken street lights — to be addressed by local councils. By providing statistical information on how many reported issues have been resolved, the site administrators make it possible to judge the effectiveness of local authorities. If we add **WriteToThem** and **HearFromThem** to the mix (sites providing direct communication with representatives), we create an impressive picture of technological solutions for transparency in this country.

France: Citizens as watchers



Traveling south to France, we come across **Regards Citoyens**. This site, which is accessible on **Facebook**, **Twitter** and **Identi.ca**, is an umbrella of several transparency solutions. **NosDéputés.fr** is an online monitoring system of parliamentary activities. It presents 642 parliament members, profiling their activities from last 12 months (here is an **example**). I personally like the usage of tag cloud featuring words currently used by the National Assembly and graphs of current parliamentary activities on their main site. A separate part of the site is dedicated to site users and their activities related to monitoring the representatives. Another project, originally called **Simplifions la loi 2.0**, is currently a subpage of Nosdeputes.fr. It documents current parliamentary work. **Étude sur le redécoupage électoral** is a site providing great insights into the proposed changes of the constituency limits, looking also at the impact of those on future elections.

Italy: Civil society's struggle against corruption

In Italy, **Openpolis** is the site to check out. With a community of more than 13,000 members and various content management options (tagging, graphing, etc.), it allows users to find their local representatives, 'adopt' them, follow their activities and contribute to an online database by uploading updates on the chosen representative. Openpolis' sub-site **Open Parlamento** is a great real-time monitor of parliament activities, including **this impressive visualisation on voting sessions** and **this profile of Silvio Berlusconi**.

The image shows the Openpolis website interface. At the top, there is a logo for "openpolis" and the text "indipendente e senza scopo di lucro". Below the logo are navigation links: "home", "politici", "dichiarazioni", and "comunità". The main content area is divided into three sections:

- conosci i tuoi rappresentanti**: tutti i 130mila politici eletti dal parlamento europeo fino al più piccolo comune d'Italia.
- adotta un politico**: monitora gli incarichi, le carriere nei partiti e nelle aziende, i voti espressi e le presenze nelle istituzioni.
- pubblica cosa dicono**: raccogli le dichiarazioni e gli impegni assunti su ogni argomento per avere memorie e confronti.

At the bottom, there is a search bar with the text "chi sono i tuoi rappresentanti?" and a "cerca" button. The search bar contains the text "Inserisci il tuo comune di residenza".

Openpolis is a product of **Depp** and **Memefarmers**. Depp is an association dedicated to e-democracy and open civic participation with an impressive range of experiences in the field of transparency. Depp developed a technology called **politicaldesk**, which enables the real-time tracking of parliament activities. They were also the authors of **Voi Siete Qui**, a platform that publishes the results of a questionnaire conducted with representatives of most of the participating parties in Italy's 2008 elections. The questionnaire consisted of questions related to 25 major issues chosen by Depp's community of users. It was sent to all parties, most of which responded (the parties that did not cooperate are clearly identified). The results are available as visualization of distances between various parties on different topics prepared based on a **multidimensional scaling** algorithm. The site also allows new users to find out their own score on the chosen issues by **filling out the questionnaire online**.

Another Depp project, **Eworkshop Senato Ragazzi**, targets students at secondary schools, who are given a chance to actively learn about work of parliament by suggesting, rating and commenting on bills proposed by others. This e-learning community consists of students, teachers, and **parliament representatives** and is incorporated into larger platform, **Senato**

Ragazzi. Economia Partecipata is a showcase of how local authorities (in this case in the Lazio region) can provide their citizens with channels for increasing both transparency and active dialogue and civic engagement.

Switzerland: Exploring e-democracy



Navigating over to Switzerland, I was advised to check out the activities of **Politools – Political Research Network**, which brings together specialists from social sciences, political sciences, geography, history, information technology and art history to work on various project dedicated to transparency. The first of these is **Smartvote**, established in 2002 and still running today. The website allows citizens to find the candidates whose views most closely align with theirs based on a publicly available analysis of responses candidates have provided on 30-70 questions. The site was used for the first time during the 2003 elections. Another platform, **ParlaRating** (active since 1997), is using a multidimensional scaling method to rate political positions of various representatives on a scale from -10 to 10.

Convergence and differences

While studying the projects above I was trying to compare various aspects of their approach to what I have seen so far in Central and Eastern Europe. Recently I was conducting interview with a representative of Polish website **Mam Prawo Wiedziec** (“I have the right to know”). Their work is very similar to projects I have found in Western Europe from many points of view. They also use questionnaires to gain information about candidates in local, regional and national elections. They post profiles of politicians on their website and educate citizens on their rights. They focus on raising awareness around elections, aiming to convince citizens to vote for people who actually represent their views. They also mention a lack of proper political education (for which the Italian e-learning solution is a perfect answer). Other projects we have looked at in our first phase of research were also very close to those goals. I am more confident today in stating that most of the transparency projects throughout Europe might have a lot in common.

Now, if the goals and ways of work are more or less similar, I wonder where they differ? It would be interesting to see how projects in Western Europe are funded, for example. I have seen MySociety mentioned as a sponsor in the UK, and I know their work in Central and Eastern Europe is tremendous. I have seen Transparency International mentioned in connection with the French platform, and I know this organization is heavily involved in work in Hungary and in Poland. It is good to see those international organizations having impact in various regions of Europe and helping to keep many of those valuable projects sustainable.

Grassroots transparency movements as a regional (and global) trend

As the final question to the readers and hopefully something to initiate further discussion I would like to mention the civic engagement itself. During a recent conversation with Polish transparency organization **Watchdog**, I heard something interesting – it seems that elections are what generate increased activity of various groups in Poland that are interested in transparency issues. It is also noticeable that the number of those short-term, spontaneous groups and projects is increasing. Organizations like Watchdog and Stowarzyszenie 61 (the organization managing Mam Prawo Wiedziec) find it fascinating and comforting that more and more civic actions are born during the times of elections, as this proves that the society’s involvement in public matters grows from one year to another. Despite my assumption that this might not be the case in Western Europe in seemingly more developed democracies, I see now clearly that grassroots transparency movements are present and growing all across Europe.