

# Analysis of public consultation on the fundamental principles of the Internet

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## Abstract

Internet is gradually shaping up to be "the largest public space that humanity has ever known"[Rodotà, 2006]. In this sense, Internet offers new instruments that facilitate the direct participation of citizens in cultural and political life of their country. The aim of this article is to describe and analyze the results of the public consultation launched by the Italian Ministry of Education, University and Research (MIUR), about the fundamentals principles of the Internet. Providing a brief description about the consultation and the tool used to gather ideas from the citizens followed by a quantitative analysis about participation and interest shown.

## 1 Introduction

During the latest Internet Governance Forum Italia, held in Turin on October 18-20, 2012, the Italian Ministry of Education, University and Research (MIUR) presented the project of a public consultation on the fundamental principles of the Internet (<http://discussionepubblica.ideascale.com/>) with the goal of defining a national position to be presented during the 7th Internet Governance Forum (IGF) in Baku, Azerbaijan, on November 6-9, 2012.

The consultation is multi-stakeholder, open for all the citizens, private organizations and public institutions. It follows the guidelines included in the document called "La posizione italiana sui principi fondamentali di Internet", which identifies five areas of interest:

- a general principles, which define the main features of the infrastructure
- b digital citizenship
- c users as consumers of services on the web
- d production and share of contents
- e safety online

The consultation is started on September 18, 2012 and lasted 45 days, until November 1.

## 2 Consultation tool

With the diffusion of Internet and the practices of online consultation, the tools available to institutions are increasing in number and becoming more specific. They have moved from the use of software such as forum and mailing list, to tools which include functionality of vote, proxies and discussions creating online transpositions of the classic processes of consultation and deliberation.

For the consultation in analysis the MIUR has decided to adopt a service called IdeaScale, a platform released in 2008 by Survey Analytics, a web application company specialized in customer feedback management services.

The success of this platform is due, in part, to its use during the campaign called OpenGov, the plan based on the principles of transparency, participation and collaboration would, in 2009, by the newly elected president of the United States, Barack Obama. The initiative has collected more than 4,000 ideas and 350,000 votes in one month, an unprecedented number for the platform.

In addition to the OpenGov, the U.S. government has extended the use of the platform to 23 federal agencies to increase the participation of citizens through crowd-sourcing. Among these agencies, the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) has received the highest number of feedback from the citizens. In that case, the FCC has used IdeaScale to draw up the National Broadband Plan, which aims to spread Internet access in all states of North America.

Recently, NASA has used the platform to actively involve the population about the project "Curiosity", answering questions from participants and establishing a dialogue about the future of the exploration of Mars. In addition to government agencies, also private companies does extensive use of the platform for receive feedback from their customers about the new products to be placed on the market. It's the case of companies like Xerox, Wired and SAP.

As regards Italy, the Ministry has used this platform on three occasions: for a brainstorming on the Italian Digital Agenda in April 2012 <sup>1</sup>, for the definition of the Italian position regarding the fundamental principles of the Internet <sup>2</sup>, which is the subject of this analysis and for Horizon 2020 <sup>3</sup>, a public discussion on the Italian system research and innovation, ended in November 2012.

The Ministry of Education is not the only example of use of IdeaScale in Italy, the new president of Sicily, Rosario Crocetta, relied on it for his platform entitled "Ideas and proposals for the Region of Sicily simple and transparent."

IdeaScale offers several pricing plans (Lite, Monthly, Annual and Enterprise) based on the number of services you want to. There are also two special plans reserved for universities (University) and public institutions (Government), the plan used for the consultation in exam is the latter.

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<sup>1</sup><http://adi.ideascale.com/>

<sup>2</sup><http://discussionepubblica.ideascale.com/>

<sup>3</sup><http://h2020it.ideascale.com/>

Following the guidelines published in [De Cindio, 2012] is possible to analyze the software platform splitting it in four fundamental dimensions:

1. community space - free interaction without a specific purpose that creates a sense of community and mutual trust among participants;
2. deliberative space - purposeful interaction for achieving, whenever possible, shared outcomes and decisions;
3. personal space - the opportunity for each participant to build visibility, reputation, and ties to others;
4. information space - gathering, distributing, and sharing relevant content from the other space

IdeaScale lacks of a community space, in fact, the only form of public interaction between the users is represented by the comments of an idea, which is in some sense not free but related to the proposal. This absence can be filled by relying on an external forum or wiki, which could be useful to compose a proposal in a collaborative way.

The deliberative space is, of course, the main space of the platform. It permits the users to submit an idea by supplying a title, a description, few keywords and choosing a category. The ideas are gathered in different categories, called "campaigns", which makes the navigation easier. The community can vote the ideas by providing a positive or negative feedback, which is shown on the page of the respective idea, associated with the user who gave it and its date. Based on the difference of positive and negative votes the best ideas bubble up.

About personal space, IdeaScale offers some interesting features like:

- public informations, as the date of registration and the number of comments, votes and ideas submitted;
- activity stream, a public space which shows the latest activities done by a user, as feedback given and received;
- a list of all the proposals submitted to the consultation;
- a mechanism of points and badges with a related leader board, based on the participation of members;
- a private message system, to exchange messages between members of the platform

For the information space, a mechanism of tags is available when inserting new proposals, which makes possible for an user to find quickly relevant ideas. Another interesting feature is the possibility to provide open data using the built-in tool to export idea data in various formats and to publish them. When such data are not made available by the instance's administrators, end users can still access data using the API provided by the platform, which return all the information in JSON format.

### 3 Data analysis

The analysis of the ideas gathered by the consultation on the fundamental principles of the Internet is the result of a collective work made during the course of Digital Citizenship and Technocivism led by Profs. Fiorella De Cindio and Andrea Trentini, of the MA in Informatics and Communication of the Università degli studi di Milano.

The conceptual framework described in [De Cindio, Sonnante, Trentini, 2012] was used to classify the 159 ideas collected during the 45 days<sup>4</sup> of consultation activity, in eight different levels, to better understand what the population really care about and in what topics there is more divergence of opinion.

These eight levels, presented as the rainbow of the citizenship rights, are:

- Level 0: the net - right of access to the network
- Level 1: access - right of access to services
- Level 2: education - right to education
- Level 3: e-services - right to use online services, public and private
- Level 4: transparency - right to transparency
- Level 5: inform - right to inform
- Level 6: consultation - right to be heard and consulted
- Level 7: active participation - right to active involvement in choices

After the discarding of duplicate, unclassifiable and incomprehensible proposals, the resulting 87 ideas were fitted into the rainbow, obtaining the result shown in Figure 1.

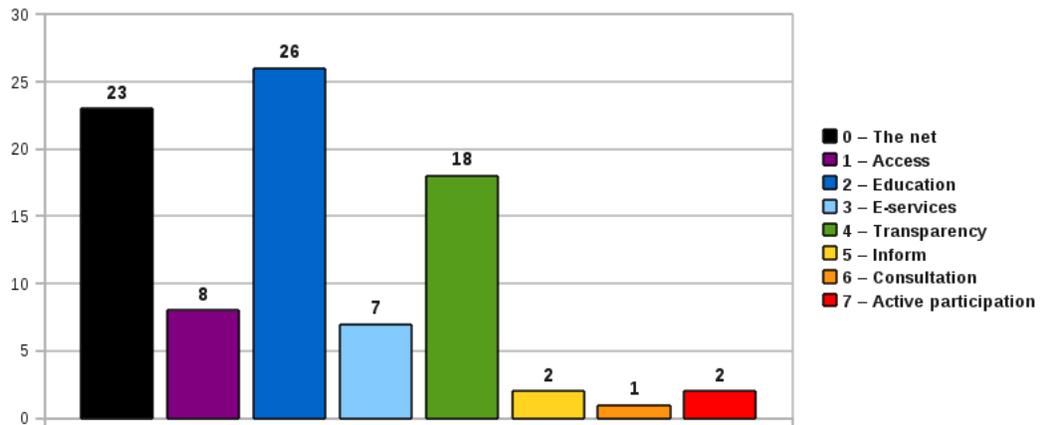


Figure 1: Classification of the proposals.

This chart shows how more than half of the ideas analyzed stop at the lower

<sup>4</sup>The data used during the analysis refer to the export done on November 15, 2012, two weeks after the official closure of the consultation.

levels of the rainbow, in particular there are 23 proposals to the level 0, about the access to the network and 26 concerning the right to education, 18 proposals belong to Level 4, which is the one regarding transparency, probably due to the fact that the issue of Open Data is a particularly relevant topic in these days.

The next step was to retrieve all the useful information about the classified ideas using the API provided by the platform, such as the number of positive and negative votes and the weight of each proposal. With these data in hands was possible to look the interest shown by the population in terms of number of total votes per each level, shown in Figure 2.

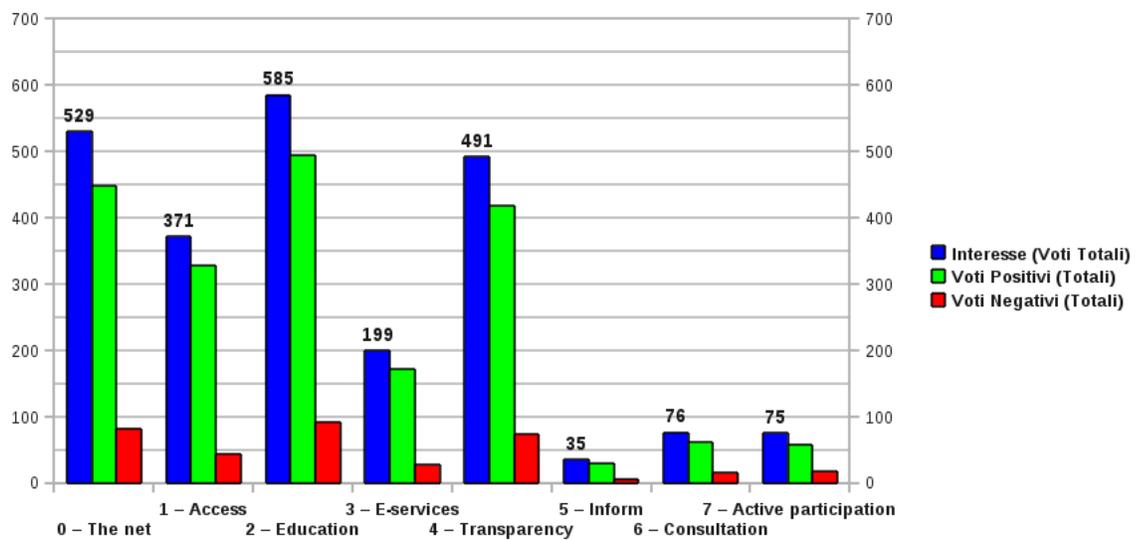


Figure 2: Interest by number of total votes.

The blue bar represents the number of total votes per each level, as the result of the sum between positive (green bar) and negative votes (red bar).

As expected from the number of proposals, this chart follows the same trend, there is, in fact, a strong predominance on the levels 0 and 2, which respectively received 529 and 585 votes.

However, looking at the average number of votes received by each proposal (Figure 3), and not doing weigh the fact that the levels 0 and 2 are those with the largest number of ideas, is possible to notice that the ideas of level 1, driven by the proposal on free software<sup>5</sup> (which received 192 votes, more than half of the votes received by all the other proposals of the level 1 combined together), have an average of about 46 votes.

It is interesting to note the fact that the only proposal of level 6, on the

<sup>5</sup><http://discussione pubblica.ideascale.com/a/dtd/Software-Libero/194544-19273>

report of inefficiency based on crowd-sourcing<sup>6</sup>, has obtained a number of votes (76) greater than those of levels 5 and 7, which counts two proposals each.

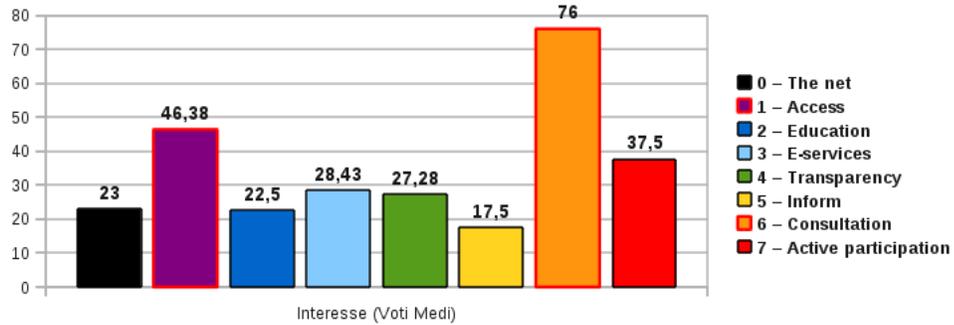


Figure 3: Interest by average number of votes.

Regarding the concordance between the weight of each proposal, given by the difference between the positive and negative votes, expressed as a percentage of the total number of votes (Figure 4), even in this case, level 1 is strongly influenced by the proposal of free software, which has about a 85% of concordance (177 positive votes, 15 negative votes).

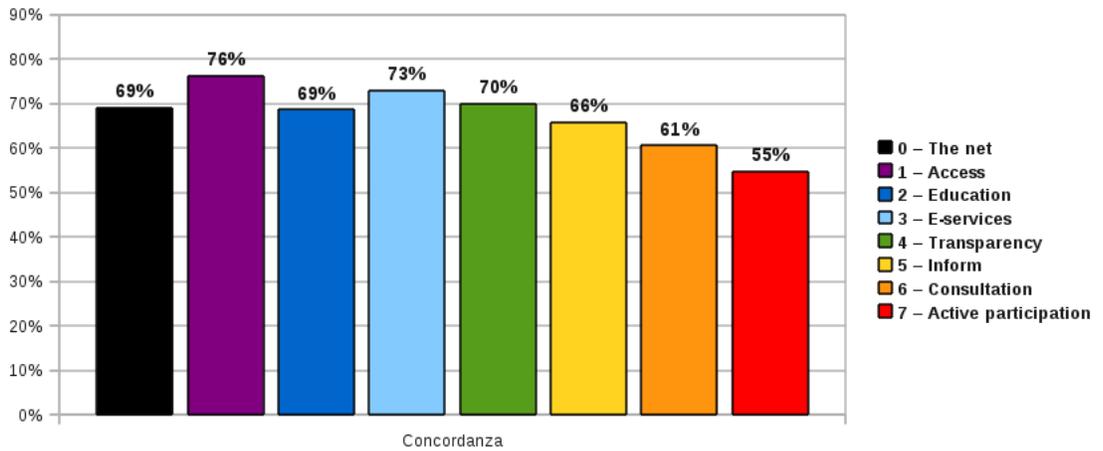


Figure 4: Concordance of votes.

It is also interesting to note how the proposals of level 3, concerning the accessibility of public services through the network, will agree most people with a 73% of agreement. In particular, among these proposals the one about Chamber

<sup>6</sup><http://discussionepubblica.ideascale.com/a/dtd/Mappa-dei-disservizi-pubblici-e-delle-soluzioni-online/201075-19273>

of Commerce online<sup>7</sup> got 20 positive votes and no negative, showing a 100% agreement.

## 4 Conclusions

So in the light of the results obtained, the issues relating the access to the network and the right to a conscious use of it are particularly relevant for the citizens who participated to the consultation. After all, it is not surprising, considering that according to [Eurostat, 2012] only 54% of Italians use the Internet, a value well below the European average of 71%, and only 41% of them do so to search for information on goods and services.

However, among those who have the ability to access and use the network, there is a need to be heard and consulted via social reporting as well as have access to services offered offline, also via Internet.

In conclusion, this consultation is modern, placed on level 6 of the rainbow presented in Section 3, the one about consultation. It changes, furthermore, the classical top-down approach usually used when it comes to introducing reforms or, as in this case, define the position of Italy about a certain topic. For this reason is also courageous, considering as stakeholders all the citizens without distinction of race, sex or age. Finally, the use of the Internet makes the consultation smart, which greatly reduces the cost and potentially allowing for greater participation and transparency.

## References

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<sup>7</sup><http://discussionepubblica.ideascale.com/a/dtd/Camera-di-commercio-on-line/209757-19273>