Democratic Evaluation & Crowdsourcing: It's a Match!

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Background: After attending professional evaluation conferences, and having the privilege of listening to the founders of the discipline of Evaluation, the author reflects on how the new generation of evaluators should aspire to upgrade their role in society by making the most of the tools and social dynamics of new technologies, and exploring ways in which evaluation could operate in both present and future scenarios.

Purpose: To foster democratic evaluation as a powerful tool for more democratic government, by expanding traditional ways of reaching the community, either as evaluation participants or traditional funders, leveraged through new technologies.

Setting: Not applicable.

Intervention: Not applicable.

Research Design: Not applicable.

Data Collection and Analysis: Not applicable.

Findings: There are powerful potential synergies that the evaluation community could explore between participatory evaluation approaches –such as *democratic evaluation*– and the *democratization* (*democratic:* for all those individuals who have internet access) of participation facilitated by new technologies –in terms of voting, giving opinion, donating or contributing in some way via internet. .

One of these possibilities is known as *Crowdsourcing*: asking services, ideas, or content to a large group of people, and especially from an online community. This alternative has started to be used in many disciplines. In particular, two crowdsourcing modalities have been found to be directly applicable:

- *Crowdvoting:* asking the public's opinion regarding certain matters, not only in the data collection phase of the evaluation, but in the phases of analysis and judging, or even in the evaluation design, as a way of introducing other voices into the evaluation process.

- *Crowdfunding*: asking citizens to contribute with small amounts of money to support the evaluation of public services and programmes, as an alternative to depending solely on the funding decisions of traditional decision-makers. This can be very pertinent in cases where decision-makers are not following the general interest and democratic evaluation appears to be the best approach to follow for citizens to try to induce a change of policy.

However, further research is needed to explore these and other modalities and synergies, with special emphasis on experimentation to test such hypotheses.

Keywords: democratic evaluation; participation; synergies; crowdsourcing; crowdfunding; new technologies.

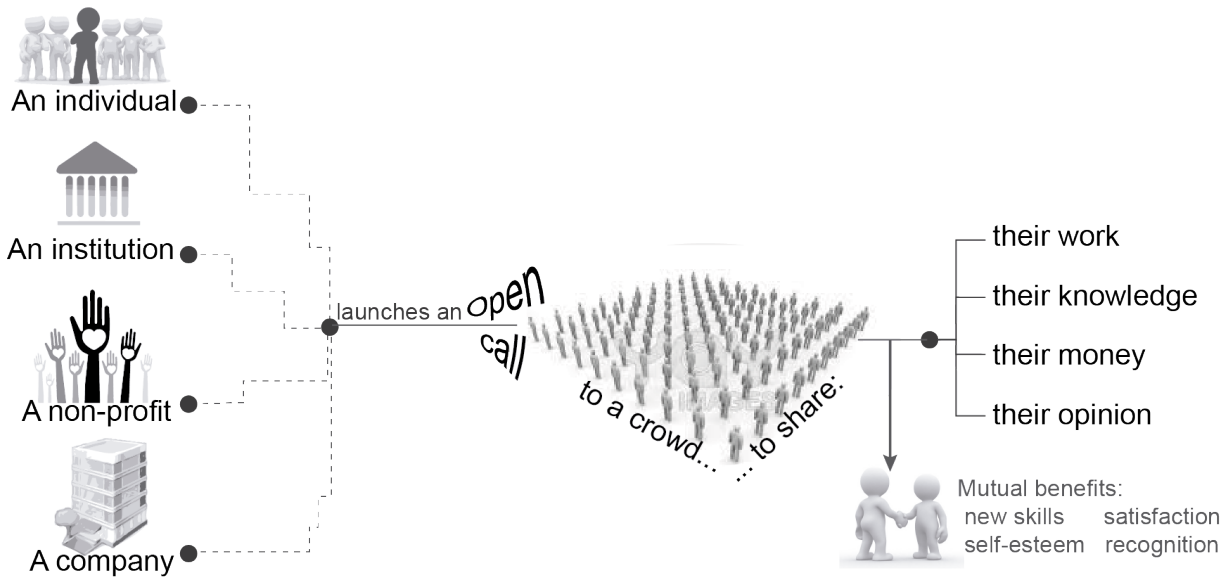# What is Crowdsourcing?   It's a participative online activity...

Figure 1. Crowdsourcing

What is Crowdsourcing?

Crowdsourcing is the process of obtaining needed services, ideas, or content by soliciting contributions from a large group of people, and especially from an online community, rather than from traditional employees or suppliers (Merriam Webster, 2012).

Coined in 2005 (Howe, 2006), the word "crowdsourcing" can apply to a wide range of activities. Crowdsourcing can involve the division of labour for tedious tasks by using crowd-based outsourcing, but it can also apply to specific requests, such as crowdfunding, broad-based competition or a general search for answers, solutions or a missing person.

Many examples prove that crowdsourcing has been in use for decades (i.e. blood donation, reconstruction works after a disaster, etc. Also see next section). However, crowdsourcing nowadays has been transferred mainly to the Internet. Global connectivity provides a particularly good venue for crowdsourcing as (1) location or distances are no longer barriers for connecting and collaborating; and (2) individuals tend to be more open in web-based projects where they are not being physically judged or scrutinized and thus can feel more comfortable sharing.

Successful Cases of Crowdsourcing

Examples of successful crowdsourcing themes are problems that annoy people, things that make people feel good about themselves, projects that tap into the niche knowledge of experts, subjects that people find sympathetic or any form of injustice (Henk van Ess, 2010).

As an illustrative, but not exhaustive, inventory, we can mention the following real cases:

a) Offline examples:
- The Oxford Dictionary:
  In the mid-19th century, an open call for volunteers was made for contributions to define all the words in the English language, with quotations to exemplify usage (Winchester, 1999)
- Early crowdsource competitions to find solutions: The French government proposed several of these competitions, often rewarded with Montyon Prizes, created for disadvantaged citizens who had done virtuous acts (Auget & de Montyon, n.d.).
- Blood donation drives:
  Traditionally, these initiatives have been carried out by appeals to the public to give blood.
- Urban and transit planning.

b) Online examples:
- Crisis mapping: real-time gathering, display and analysis of data during a crisis. It was first used massively after the Haiti earthquake in 2010.
- Citizen science: scientific research conducted, in whole or in part, by amateur or non-professional scientists, often by crowdsourcing and crowdfunding.
- Community-based programme design: a social program design method that enables social service providers, organizers, designers and evaluators to serve specific communities in their own environments (Brabham, 2013).

Types of Crowdsourcing

As mentioned above, there are many offline examples, but we will be referring here to the modern-day modalities of Internet-based crowdsourcing.

According to Jeff Howe (2009), there are four main types of crowdsourcing:

a) *Crowdwisdom:* asking questions and searching for answers from the online community.
b) *Crowdcreation:* collaboratively creating designs, written materials or illustration work.
c) *Crowdfunding:* funding a project by a multitude of small contributions.
d) *Crowdvoting:* gathering the opinions of a large group.

Although there may be synergies between all of these and evaluation practice, for the present article we will focus on the third type: crowdfunding.

We have chosen this type as it could make possible to finance and conduct resource-consuming types of evaluation (longer than the average and therefore more expensive) by collective contributions from the community or other interested individuals. This way, the evaluation approach chosen would be less dependent on policy-makers' decisions. In some way, the civil society would become the evaluation commissioner.

Types of Crowdfunding

We will take a closer look at this type of crowdsourcing, where we ask the public for money from a crowdsourcing platform. It can take any of these forms:

c.1) *Equity-based:* Contributors receive some equity in exchange and become shareholders.

c.2) *Donation-based:* Money is asked for a charitable cause.

c.3) *Lending-based:* Investors are repaid their contribution according to the agreement they make.

c.4) *Reward-based:* Contributors receive some item, service or privilege in return.

The modality that stands out as the most applicable for the evaluation context would be c.2, donation-based, after having dismissed the others:

c.1 is not applicable as there is no equity or property associated to the exercise of evaluation.

c.3. does not seem to apply either as contributors would not be providing their financial contributions in terms of a loan, but on donation-basis so repayment is not due.

c.4 is more associated with commercial purposes, to encourage contributions for developing some kind of project. Contributors to crowdfund a democratic evaluation would be motivated by the very evaluation effects and outputs, so the reward-based crowdsourcing type would be necessary.

Modality c.2. Donation-based seems to be consequently the most appropriate one, as the money would be asked for a social, general-interest cause.

Why Crowdsourcing can Promote Democratic Evaluation

Democratic evaluation incorporates democratic processes within the evaluation to secure better conclusions (House & Howe, 2000). The aspiration is to construct valid conclusions where there are conflicting views. The approach extends impartiality by including relevant interests, values, and views so that conclusions can be unbiased in value as well as factual aspects. Relevant value positions are included, but are subject to criticism in the way other findings are. Not all value claims are equally defensible. The evaluator is still responsible for unbiased data collection, analysis and arriving at sound conclusions. The guiding principles are inclusion, dialogue, and deliberation, which work in tandem with the professional canons of research validity.

Compared to other approaches, this type of evaluation requires longer time horizons–and therefore more funds–than other less deliberative modalities. In contexts where evaluation is often perceived as a luxury instead of a powerful management and decision-making tool, this costly approach seems to be less likable to be chosen by evaluation commissioners of public programs' evaluations due to a variety of reasons: as mentioned before, it implies long looping process of deliberation so it needs professionals facilitating the process (evaluators) during longer assignments; the politician loses control of the decision-making process, as it means a perfected democratic process (beyond voting); besides further demands and requests are probable to surface, due to the deep quality of the consultation At the same time, all those reasons are the proof that this evaluation approach is a form of perfected democracy.

Using Crowdfunding

However, the perception of pertinence may differ enormously between public programs' commissioners and the citizens, direct users or benefited agents of the program. This is especially true when it refers to community services that communities appreciate and value, or where there is an underlying conflict of interests between different communities or stakeholders, and the decision-maker does not seem to have taken into account all pertinent considerations.

This is why, even though decision-makers may not find it necessary to fund democratic evaluations of certain interventions, individuals may disagree and react. The author is of the opinion that if asked, the concerned individuals would contribute in the form of small donations to perfect their democracy and to claim their right as citizens to know whether the intervention is fulfilling its mission, according to the majority.

Using Crowdvoting

In addition, *crowdvoting* is another internet-based crowd-oriented modality that could be surely be incorporated as an evaluation online method. It has sometimes been used in the form of online surveys in the data collection phase of an evaluation (Azzam & Jacobson). It could also be applicable for global programs or policies (for example: if we would like to assess from the world's civil society whether UN Women has had an impact at their level since its constitution in

2010, or in similar circumstances). However, in order to make other phases participative –such as data analysis, or evaluative judging, or even evaluation design– the Internet and other new technologies could help to incorporate other actors into the process. In cases where big data is available and difficult to make sense of, evaluators could ask via crowdsourcing for voluntary individuals with data science skills to give their insights about their interpretation of the data regarding the evaluation questions. This practice is common within companies such as Evaluation is Beautiful only with very different motivation and purposes (http://www.informationisbeautiful awards.com/challenges).

Advantages of Crowdfunding Democratic Evaluations

From a generic point of view (i.e. not specifically for democratic evaluations), crowdsourcers may find multiple reasons for turning to this modality of resource-gathering. Among these might be:

- to offload peak demands
- to access cheap labour or cheap information
- to improve results
- to have access to better talent

From the public's perspective, contributing can be attractive for the following reasons:

a) Intrinsic motivations*:*
-   Enjoyment-based
-   Community-based, such as participation, community identification and social contact.
b) Extrinsic motivations *:*
-   Immediate pay-offs
-   Delayed pay-offs
-   Social motivations, such as rewards for pro-social behaviour, prestige or status.

From an individual point of view, citizens might see many reasons for crowdfunding a democratic evaluation on a sensitive issue. Contributing variable small amounts, according to general and personal contexts (as little as one US dollar, for instance) would be seen as a worthwhile social investment, with other citizens contributing the rest.

In the specific case of an evaluation funded by the contributions of numerous individuals, an extra benefit would be a feeling of ownership experienced by the community with regard to the evaluation results (since in effect they all would

become the commissioners of the evaluation), and eventually their empowerment to put these results to use.

Main Disadvantages of Crowdsourcing

There are two main criticisms of getting resources from these type of sources:

One is in relation to access. These forms of participation rely on internet access and literacy. Hence, communities or groups not familiarised with online activity are less prone to be eligible to promote or participate in an initiative like these.

The other main disadvantage could highlight is that the initiative aimed to be crowdfunded only will take place if it finds sufficient support, that is, if the amount requested is raised. Under the assumption that each individual is financially capable of donating, this is also a natural way of filtering collectively-demanded evaluations from not so interesting ones (although this assumption is not often a fact).

Finally there is an important challenge to consider: when crowdsourcing is used for voting, and as long as the decisions being voted are more similar to democratic micro-elections for a territory, univocal identification is mandatory, rooted in a system similar to official online IDs. However, this is will not apply if the purpose of the voting is not binding.

Specific Ideas for Merging Crowdsourcing into the Practice of Evaluation

Some evaluators have already begun to use crowdsourcing platforms for specific uses (Azzam, 2013). They suggest, for instance, the platform MTurk can be used to establish the validity and reliability of survey instruments before giving them to intended participants by collecting responses from individuals with similar background characteristics as the intended participants.

Furthermore, they wonder if respondents should be used to create a matched comparison group in evaluation studies or if it is possible to use respondents in a matched group pre-post design, or even if it is possible to use them to help with the analysis and coding of qualitative data.

The author's contribution is to add a new idea to these: this would be to include a catalogue of pertinent potential democratic evaluations within crowdfunding platforms such as Kickstarter.com. These platforms already gather and present all types of projects and initiatives that individuals are seeking funding for, collected in categories.

In the case of Kickstarter.com (through which, since 2009, 7.1 million people have pledged $1 billion, and funded 71,000 creative projects), projects have up to now been classified into the following categories: art, comics, crafts, dance, design, fashion, film and video, food, games, journalism, music, photography, publishing, technology and theatre.

So why could this type of platform not include a new category called "Evaluation", or "Social Justice"? This may be even easier in sites specific to non-profit crowdfunding, such as Globalgiving.org and many others.

We acknowledge that this idea might be difficult to put into practice, but we would not like to miss the opportunity to launch it, and we are confident that evaluation community will find ways to make this happen.

Conclusions

There are many gaps and opportunities for the evaluation community to take further advantage of in this era of connectivity, to foster the quantity, quality, involvement and effectiveness of evaluation practice in our world. Exploring the possibilities of crowdsourcing initiatives is, without a doubt, a highly promising one for certain situations and contexts.

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