

EuroSense and the Future of Participatory Decision-Making

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Introduction

The idea of collective intelligence (CI) has grown from an abstract theory into a practical necessity in today's interconnected world. As researcher Anita Williams Woolley found, collective intelligence is not just the sum of individual intelligences, but something that emerges from collaboration, competition, and consensus among many people. (Woolley et al., 2010). This shared problem-solving power is especially important now, as many of today's challenges, like climate change, inequality, or workforce transformation, are too complex for any one person, institution, or field to handle alone. Platforms like **EuroSense** represent the next generation of CI tools. Unlike traditional systems that gather data from the public but analyze it centrally, EuroSense involves people in both the collection and the interpretation of data. This not only generates deeper insights but also creates space for meaningful democratic participation where citizens aren't just data points, but co-creators of knowledge.

The EuroSense Platform: Making Collective Intelligence More Inclusive

Launched in 2023 by Volt Europa and its partners, EuroSense is a European citizen science platform designed to connect everyday people with policymakers and activists. It collects real-life stories from communities across Europe using SenseMaker®, a tool that allows individuals to interpret their own experiences through a series of structured questions called "signifiers." EuroSense benefits communities by creating a space where individuals can share their real experiences and see them reflected in insights that lead to real change. Since data collection began in March 2025, the EuroSense project has gathered more than 1,100 micro-narratives from individuals in 24 countries. The data revealed recurring themes such as social fragmentation, mistrust in governance, economic inequality, and climate anxiety, issues that may not have surfaced through conventional public consultation. Crucially, 61% of stories reflected negative or disempowered experiences, offering a sobering but valuable real-time pulse on European civic sentiment.

A Smarter Alternative to Traditional Surveying

This methodology offers several advantages over traditional research or polling methods. It captures emergent concerns before they become crises. It builds trust through transparency and inclusivity. And it ensures policy responses are aligned with actual lived realities, not just abstract metrics or expert assumptions. This approach addresses a major flaw in traditional surveys: people often tailor their responses to what they think researchers want to hear. In contrast, SenseMaker lets individuals describe

events in their own words and reflect on what those events mean to them. This produces richer, more trustworthy data rooted in lived experience.

Unlike traditional surveys, which often collect data without clear follow-up, EuroSense uses narrative-driven tools like estuarine mapping to move from insight to action. Estuarine mapping is a collaborative process that brings diverse stakeholders, community members, policymakers, researchers, and practitioners, into the same room to analyze patterns emerging from shared stories. Instead of having experts interpret everything, contributors play an active role in making sense of the data. This promotes empathy and openness across different perspectives, two traits essential for democratic resilience. By distributing both data collection and interpretation across many individuals, EuroSense brings collective intelligence to life at scale.

Another issue in traditional forms of consultation, is input is often filtered, delayed, or siloed. EuroSense's use of SenseMaker® enables a shared epistemology, a way of knowing that is both distributed and collectively owned. It is not just a tool for data collection; it is an infrastructure for democratic resilience.

Methodology: Turning Insight into Action

The methodology used in EuroSense is rooted in complexity science, cognitive diversity, and distributed systems thinking. Rather than relying on extractive data practices that separate researcher from subject, EuroSense adopts a participatory, bottom-up approach that treats citizens as sensors, interpreters, and contributors to collective insight. By combining story-based data collection with real-time, participatory analysis, EuroSense helps turn collective intelligence into collective action. This method allows communities to engage directly in shaping responses to the challenges they face, making the process more democratic, grounded, and effective. At its core is the SenseMaker® and the Estuarine Mapping Tool, which combines narrative collection with structured metadata tagging. Here's how it works:

1. Narrative Collection

Participants anonymously share short stories (micro-narratives) based on open prompts related to their lived experiences—often framed around fairness, justice, governance, community, or economic security.

2. Self-Signification

After submitting a story, participants are guided through a series of visual and abstract questions called "signifiers." These allow individuals to interpret the meaning of their own experience without researcher influence, capturing how people make sense of their world in context.

3. Pattern Recognition

The software aggregates thousands of individual inputs to surface recurring patterns, clusters of meaning, emotional tone, and contradictions. Importantly, this analysis remains grounded in the perspectives of those who lived the experiences.

4. Feedback Loops and Community Meetings

Findings are visualized and shared with stakeholders, including policymakers, advocacy groups, and the public. These insights are then discussed in structured community meetings—such as estuarine mapping

workshops—where diverse stakeholders come together in real time to collaboratively interpret the findings and co-design actionable responses.

5. Implementation and Learning

Actions identified during community discussions are piloted and monitored. Outcomes are fed back into the system, allowing for adaptive learning and continuous improvement. This step ensures the process remains dynamic and responsive to real-world impacts, reinforcing trust and accountability across the ecosystem.

From Theory to Practice: The FEP-CI Framework in Action

As a researcher in the Master of Digital Technologies and Policy (MPA) program at UCL, I've collaborated with EuroSense to demonstrate its methodology's real-world applications. My master's dissertation employed a non-computational framework, integrating the Free Energy Principle (FEP) and Collective Intelligence (CI), to analyze employment transitions among science-policy graduates. This research revealed how prediction errors, the gap between what graduates expect and what they encounter in the job market, can be systematically identified and addressed through collective sensemaking and collaborative analysis. This approach is designed to generate more legitimate, responsive, and equitable outcomes, while helping society adapt to the disruptions of AI, automation, and broader shifts in employment systems.

The Civic Digital Twin: A New Model for Governance

Building on EuroSense's foundation, I'm now collaborating with Volt Europa to pioneer what I call a "Civic Digital Twin," a real-time, narrative-based intelligence system that mirrors the collective state of communities. This represents a fundamental shift in governance technology, moving beyond traditional polling to create a living, breathing representation of civic sentiment and needs.

The Civic Digital Twin operates on several key principles:

1. **Recursive Dialogue:** Rather than one-off consultations, the platform enables ongoing conversation between citizens and representatives. Citizens share experiences on and off the application in real world meetups, to see how their narratives contribute to collective patterns, and witness how these insights inform policy decisions.
2. **Community-Based Interface:** The user experience will center on community connection. While individual posts remain anonymous, users can see aggregated metrics about how their community is doing, participate in gamified civic challenges, and track their district's collective priorities through visual decision trees.
3. **Transparent Governance:** Perhaps most revolutionary, citizens can see what patterns and insights their government is observing. This creates unprecedented oversight, not just of decisions made, but of the information landscape policymakers navigate.

Strengthening Democracy Through Story and Structure

As democratic institutions face declining public trust and increasingly complex challenges, the need for new forms of engagement has become urgent. Traditional consultation methods like one-off surveys or static public forums, often fail to capture the real-time, lived experiences of citizens or translate them into actionable policy insights. This is where collective intelligence platforms such as EuroSense offer transformative potential.

Beyond analysis, the EuroSense platform is structured to feed directly into policy and advocacy. Collected data is anonymized and published as open-access, allowing governments, researchers, and civil society groups to interpret and act on shared concerns. This feedback loop makes citizen input not only visible but operational, creating a living, adaptive interface between the public and decision-makers. By embedding storytelling and sense-making into democratic processes, EuroSense is helping pioneer a new, more human-centered model of governance, one in which citizens are not passive respondents but active co-creators of knowledge and policy. In an era marked by social fragmentation, democratic fatigue, and rapid technological change, platforms like EuroSense represent a vital shift in how we gather, understand, and act on public insight.

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