

DEMOCRACY'S NEW CLOTHES – INTERNET AND POLITICS

The democratic upheaval in Tunisia and Egypt in spring 2011 once again has drawn the public's attention to the potential of the Internet with regard to democratic movements. While some considered the »Arab Spring« to be a revolution mainly supported by Facebook and Twitter, others emphasized the possibility of the ruling parties to use the Internet for surveillance, censorship and manipulation purposes. In this debate, typical patterns of a controversial debate regarding »cyberdemocracy« – which has been conducted for more than 50 years now – came to the fore. The following article deals with these discussions. First of all, it traces the technological and sociopolitical development trends which have induced the debate about digital democracy. Then, hopes and fears are presented as they appear for information, communication, participation and elections supported by information technology in a democracy. Electronic petitions of the German Bundestag serve as a current example of a specific project of e-democracy. Reconstruction shows that it is not possible to determine any cycles of the debate in which disappointments and warnings of dangers supersede (exaggerated) hopes. In fact, the typical patterns of reasoning of a debate with pros and cons are present right from the beginning.

If we try to reconstruct a debate about the significance of the Internet for politics which is conducted under the heading of cyberdemocracy, digital democracy, e-democracy, teledemocracy or similar terms, then we should recapitulate both the technological and sociopolitical developments of the past 50 years.

TECHNOLOGICAL AND SOCIOPOLITICAL DEVELOPMENTS AND PREREQUISITES

THE LONG ROAD TO THE INTERNET

The first developments regarding computer networking started in the United States in the 1950s and 1960s, mainly in a scientific context, with the research authority of the United States Department of Defense – the former Advanced Research Projects Agency (ARPA, later DARPA) – playing an essential role due to the allocation of research funds. 29th October 1969 is considered to be the day of the first remote connection of two computers, namely between the University of California (UCLA) and the Stanford

Research Institute (SRI). In 1983, the TCP/IP protocol was introduced in the former ARPANET which subsequently was spread worldwide and today still represents the technical basis of the Internet. An application of the Internet which developed in the 1960s and today still dominates is the transmission of text messages (e-mail). A completely new quality of the Internet was achieved at the beginning of the 1990s with the establishment of the HTTP protocol and graphical web browsers. From most users' view, this »World Wide Web« today has become the real »Internet« which integrates numerous, totally different applications under a single interface. Another characteristic break regarding the development of the Internet was its conversion from a mainly government-funded science network to a commercial computer network: The first domain for a business company was assigned in 1985 (symbolics.com). Then, in 1995, the Internet backbone in the United States was handed over from the National Science Foundation to commercial providers (Werle 2002).

However, with the development of the Internet alone, the technical

development would be described too one-dimensionally. In fact, interconnected communication networks developed thanks to the opportunities of electronic data transmission (via telephone networks) and to the emergence of home computers and PCs from the mid-1970s both in decentralized, private initiatives (e.g. the »FidoNet« mailbox system since 1984) and by commercial companies or public telephone companies. Of vital importance for the development of computer-mediated social communities has been the Electronic Information Exchange System (EIES) from 1976 on (Hiltz/Turoff 1978) or the Whole Earth 'Lectronic Link (The WELL) from 1985 on (Rheingold 1993). An example of commercially successful electronic communication services of that time in the United States is e.g. CompuServe. In Europe, online services have been developed under the auspices of public telephone companies from the 1970s on, which initially focused on a combination of remote data transmission (via telephone) and TV sets and later focused on specific terminals and the emerging home and personal computers. Whereas the »Minitel« online service was successfully established in France during the 1980s, the introduction of such systems e.g. in Great Britain (called Prestel) or in Germany (interactive videotex system called Btx) was less successful.

From the middle of the 1990s, all these systems have been ousted or superseded more or less completely by the Internet. However, these technological developments, which are independent of the Internet, are of a certain relevance, because they also incited essential discussions with regard to the significance of information and communication technologies for politics and democracy.

THE DEMOCRATIC AWAKENING SINCE THE 1960s

It is even more difficult to describe the social, sociocultural and political aspects of this development, because it is more complex and heterogeneous. In the United States, the 1950s and 1960s were characterized by a strong faith in technology and science as well as by large-scale public projects. A typical example are the American aerospace research program – from the first satellite to the landing on the moon – but also the »General Problem Solver« (GPS) developed by Herbert Simon and Allen Newell, a »program that simulates human thought« (as written in an article of 1961). The belief to be able to change society »for the better« and to make it become »more rational« by means of technology certainly is rooted here. John F. Kennedy's government program »New Frontier« gave this faith a political shape.

Completely different, but similarly shaping, was a specific American technoliberal culture of the 1960s which included both the computer developers in the legendary »garages« and the subcultural, alternative and political civil-rights, anti-war and student movements. The rebellion of students and of other groups of the population against the »establishment« also took place in Europe with its specific characteristics and called for extensive democratization. In 1969, Willy Brandt's governmental declaration took up this claim with the slogan »Let's dare more democracy« and in 1982, the political scientist Max Kaase diagnosed a »participatory revolution«. The findings regarding a crisis of democracy combined with a call for its modernization and revitalization have remained a central theme of the political, public and political science debate for decades

now, so that proponents of electronic democracy could always take up the topic.

EARLY EXPERIMENTS: ELECTRONIC TOWN HALL MEETINGS AND COMPUTER DEMOCRACY

Thus, the debate about (exaggerated) hopes and fears regarding a democracy which is enhanced in terms of communication technology is not a debate only of the past few years. An early experiment in the United States of the 1970s was the above-mentioned Electronic Information Exchange System (EIES) which primarily was conceived as an information, communication and publication system for scientific communities, but for which the application regarding an »electronic direct democracy« was considered already: »The most exciting and potentially revolutionary political application of a CC system [computer conference] is the facilitation of the direct participation and voting of citizens on important state of national issues.« (Hiltz/Turoff 1978, p. 197).

Here, Hiltz/Turoff refer to Amitai Etzioni's works of the beginning of the 1970s concerning electronically communicated »town hall meetings« (Etzioni et al. 1975). For this purpose, the new possibilities of telephone conferences were used. Etzioni developed the idea of a national dialog via the pyramidal structure of small groups the delegates of which giving information to the next higher level. Telephone conferences allowed group dialogs even over long distances, in a rather short period of time and at low costs.

In Germany, Helmut Krauch propagated the idea of »computer democracy« already in 1972 (Krauch 1972). In 1958, Krauch founded the »Studiengruppe für Systemforschung«

(study group for system research) in Heidelberg, which gave essential impetus for scientific policy advice as well as for the development of technology assessment in Germany (Brinckmann 2006). He criticized the lack of representation of citizens in democracy and considered the idea of computer democracy to be an opportunity of stronger participation of citizens. In 1971, a prototypical implementation of computer democracy was realized in cooperation with the WDR (West German Broadcasting). Under the direction of the well-known journalist Werner Höfer, the controversial topic of »environmental protection« was discussed within the framework of a TV show. The scientific state of knowledge with regard to currently emerging issues could be investigated by means of a computer-supported database. The viewers' opinions were taken into consideration »interactively« by means of telephone surveys.

HOPES AND FEARS

In general, it can be said that the capacities for storing, processing and transmitting data are enhanced considerably by the use of computers. Thus, more data can be stored, processed and transmitted in a shorter period of time and at lower costs. Moreover, there are three technological »M trends«: Computers are getting smaller (»micro«), increasingly mobile and are increasingly based on multimedia.

What does this mean for the hopes and fears regarding cyberdemocracy? For this, it would make sense to distinguish four functional areas which can be supported in the political process by the use of computers: information, communication, consultation/participation and decision.

INFORMATION – THE ELIXIR OF POLITICS

Democracy relies on informed citizens and politicians. The hope regarding cyberdemocracy is that a more comprehensive and better accessibility to (political) information could involve an improved functioning of democracy due to increased transparency and a higher level of information. Information is considered to be a fundamental resource for further types of political participation.

In fact, today, political information can be accessed electronically to an extent which was barely imaginable some years ago. This information is provided by political institutions themselves (governments, parliaments), but also by the media, by citizens, associations and non-governmental organizations (NGOs). Besides, »unofficial« data collections such as »WikiLeaks« have become more and more important. They by far not only consist of factual and textual information available worldwide, but also of multimedia documents such as speeches and interviews as audio, image and video files. There can be no doubt that the transparency of political processes and institutions has increased considerably. The targeted search for political information independent of place and time has been facilitated substantially.

However, in cyberdemocracy not only much more political information is available than ever before, political activities themselves permanently generate new »data traces« and the search for information and their dissemination can be traced as a matter of principle. For this reason, there was fear right from the beginning that with political information being digitalized the possibilities of citizen surveillance by the state or by large corporations would be extended considerably (Donk/Tops 1992, p. 180 f.; Hiltz/Turoff 1978, p. 486 ff.).

The hope that more political information, which can be accessed more easily by citizens, would stimulate and improve democracy is based on an understanding of politics as a rational process. The better politics are informed, the more political action can be improved, because it would be more »rational«. However, this neglects the fact that »information« in a political process is evaluated against the background of political basic concepts and interests and that different conclusions are drawn from this subsequently (Donk/Tops 1992, p. 183).

Again and again, hopes have been placed in a more immediate and direct exchange of information between politicians and citizens. Mediating entities, particularly the media with their own interests, forms of presentation and agendas, then could become dispensable. This would offer the advantage of political actors being able to transmit their information to the respective addressee in an unbiased way. However, the renunciation of such mediating entities, which reduce the complexity of information by selection and evaluation, proved to be ambivalent, if not illusory. An increase of information in the political process involves new costs regarding the search, selection and evaluation of information and there are people who cannot or who do not want to bear these costs (Schrape 2010; Zittel 2009).

COMMUNICATION WITHOUT LIMITS

The Internet offers a wide range of communication possibilities from the purely written to sound-and-image communication, from bilateral and group communication to mass communication of a »sender« to many »recipients«. Communication can take place across continents, regardless of time or as an immediate exchange of messages, in a comprehensible

manner for direct participants only (i.e. in private) or in public. Typical of Internet communication – though not mandatory – is that there is no differentiation of the sender and recipient roles anymore and that intermediaries can be omitted as it is the case for mass communication transmitted by media.

Communication of politicians with their voters and citizens as well as with the public (transmitted by media) plays a very important role both regarding the self-conception and the time budget of the politicians (Riehm 2010). Hopes placed in the various possibilities of Internet communication are directed towards an intensification of this communication relationship and towards the idea that citizens can get a more direct access to politics and that they can better prepare, coordinate and communicate their own political activities in the public.

However, some politicians are afraid of not being able to cope with communicative demands due to the new variety of communication possibilities and their wide availability. The citizens' expectations regarding a dialog between citizens and politicians could be met only to a very limited extent for reasons of considerable workload. Thus, politicians focus less on a direct and equal communication relationship with the citizens than on a sender-dominated communication, e.g. in form of messages to specific lists of recipients (newsletters, mailing lists, Twitter and so on).

However, another concern is that specific and ever smaller population groups might be addressed in a very targeted way in terms of political direct marketing campaigns and thus that politics and powerful groups in society might have a considerably increasing potential for manipulation (Donk/Tops 1992, p. 181 f.). Similarly, there are

fears that the Internet makes it easier for like-minded people to find each other, to organize themselves and to reinforce each other with regard to their views. This is considered to be particularly critical for democracy, if so-called »electronic tribes« (Hiltz/Turoff 1978, p. 482 f.) pursue extremist and antidemocratic objectives. In this context, a balkanization of the electorate and »demographic ghettos« have been discussed as well (Donk/Tops 1992, p. 181).

Finally, the explosion of informative and communicative possibilities involves excessive demands on society. Many people do not have the necessary resources regarding qualification and time to get involved in the »Internet community« (Grunwald et al. 2006) and there are strong indications that privileged groups of the population can benefit from cyberdemocracy to a much higher degree than the general public (already mentioned by Hiltz/Turoff 1978, p. 167 ff.).

CONSULTATION AND PARTICIPATION

Political *communication* can be initiated by very different actors with regard to various topics and is only loosely connected to political processes in the strict sense, where appropriate.

Political *consultation*, in contrast, generally is initiated by politics, focuses on a specific topic and is closely linked to political procedures. With regard to a legislative project or a political program, e.g. a ministry or parliamentary committee can invite associations, experts or citizens concerned who will answer given questions and who shall contribute their own expertise concerning the topic.

Participation procedures in a narrower sense are referred to, if there are particularly legal requirements – such

as in urban and transport planning or for environmentally relevant large-scale projects – which stipulate the involvement of the people concerned in the planning and decision-making process. Generally, these procedures are based on the fact that appropriate decisions require experience and expertise from society. By taking into consideration the different views of society for the decision-making process, politics or administration shall be better enabled to balance these different interests in terms of a common welfare.

As these processes deal with the exchange of complex lines of reasoning in which more or less people are actively involved and which a broad public generally is interested in, the use of electronic group communication is an appropriate solution. This tool not only could support the current communication within the process, but also store the entire procedure and make sure that the data can be called up again at any time for subsequent evaluation. In the 1970s already, there have been experiments with such (purely text-based) computer conference systems which today can also integrate audio and video elements, of course.

Besides this information and transparency function, hopes regarding electronic consultation and participation processes are also placed in a possible opening to the broad public. As a matter of principle, anyone could participate regardless of his/her status (egalitarian tendency of the Internet), his/her resources (only one Internet access is required) and his/her location (distances do not matter anymore). Another advantage of electronic consultation and participation procedures is seen in the fact that it is possible without major effort to provide the people involved with comprehensive procedural documents

and opinions for the use of which an informed participation is expected. E-consultation and e-participation as integral parts of digital democracy are already used routinely to some extent, e.g. by the European Commission (Grunwald et al. 2006, p. 87 ff.) or by the Canadian government (Lindner 2008).

Nevertheless, previous experiences have shown that the general opening of the procedures »to everyone« meets with a corresponding response under very specific conditions only and that only few people actively participate in the process (Grunwald et al. 2006, p. 15 and 21). Even more critical, however, seems to be that this type of procedure raises expectations regarding a substantial influence on political processes which in part already fail due to the fact that the opening and expansion of the »input channel« is not complemented by a corresponding expansion of processing capacities. This results in disappointment among citizens.

DECISIONS IN VOTES AND ELECTIONS

Democracy should not be understood merely as an act of electing representatives at intervals of several years or as a vote in democratic bodies. The act of voting is preceded by election campaigns and majority decision is preceded by a substantial debate. Nevertheless, elections and majority votings are something like the culmination of democratic exertion of power. By means of these processes, changes in the political course become visible, laws are set and political programs are determined.

The (supposed) simplicity of the decision-making process – normally, it is about a decision between different alternatives or a choice between different persons – suggests the use of computer assistance. In the 1980s

already, there were hopes for a more efficient process and – in view of increasing electoral fatigue on the part of the citizens – for an increased voter turn-out due to automated counting procedures. As a matter of principle, votes and elections can be conducted from anywhere. For proponents of direct democratic procedures, e-voting (Beckert 2011) offers better possibilities of being able to conduct more votes with relatively little effort and thus involving more citizens in real political decisions.

»Simple« votes in terms of a determination of public moods and opinions among the population and individual groups have become more or less accepted across the board. Particularly websites of newspapers and broadcasting companies offer such »polls« almost routinely. The electronic signing of appeals and petitions is a further, rather demonstrative than decision-relevant type of »vote« even if partly formal procedural privileges could be achieved via quorums. In contrast, there are only few electronic parliamentary elections and they exist only in a few countries.

Here, it is feared that error-prone computer programs might produce wrong election results, that the anonymity of the electoral process might be endangered and that transparency of the ballot count of votes and elections might not be ensured anymore due to the »black box« characteristic of the computer. Moreover, there are warnings that the unity of debate and decision might be lost in favour of the mere act of voting. This danger was referred to as »push-button democracy« by critics already 20 years ago (Donk/Tops 1992, p. 170 and 174 f.). Today, with a similarly critical intention, it is referred to as a reduction of political activities to »clicktivism« (Karpf 2010; Shulman 2009; White 2010).

ELECTRONIC PETITIONS

In recent years, the Office of Technology Assessment at the German Bundestag (TAB) has done extensive research on the introduction and use of an electronic petition system (Riehm et al. 2009; TAB 2011). The German Bundestag provides for the possibility of petitions being submitted via the Internet and of publishing them on the e-petition platform of the German Bundestag at the request of the petitioners and following a specific authorization procedure. Further characteristics of the momentarily main e-participation project within the framework of the e-parliament strategy of the German Parliament are the possibilities of discussing petitions in an online forum and of collecting signatures supporting the respective petitions. When having reached a quorum of 50,000 co-signatures, the Petitions Committee of the German Bundestag will hold a public Committee Meeting to which the petitioners are invited in order to bring forward their concerns in person and to answer the questions of the Members of the Bundestag.

This concrete parliamentary e-democracy project also shows the typical patterns of the long-lasting debate about Internet and democracy.

The hopes of the initiators in the German Bundestag focused on a modernization of a very traditional right of political participation and on a political upgrading associated with that. The objective was to increase procedural transparency, to make the right to petition available to new groups of the population, to hear the pros and cons of a petition and, if appropriate, even to enter into a dialog with the citizens. Those hopes are shared by the citizens and petitioners who – according to surveys carried out by TAB – additionally have expected

that their arguments submitted in the online forum would be considered in the petitions procedure.

However, exactly this point has been doubted by critics, because the formally weak position of the petitioners and of the Petitions Committee even with regard to the implementation of objectives which have been considered to be legitimate has remained unchanged. The fear that processing capacities cannot keep pace in case of an expansion of the »input channel« due to online forums has been confirmed by this example as well. The quite procedurally relevant contents of the discussion are integrated only unsystematically or sporadically into the procedures.

The fear that personal data are generated which might be used against the citizens is typical for the debate about e-democracy. Thus, in case of e-petitions, the names of the co-signees are accessible to anyone on the Internet. Up to now, anonymous or pseudonymous forms for co-signature are not admitted. However, there are also fears regarding the fact that the possibility of masking one's own identity on the Internet might involve misuse or that groups and organizations which are well-organized via the Internet might use the electronic petitions procedure for their political campaigns – for which it is not intended.

Unsurprisingly, the empirical studies carried out by TAB show a very differentiated picture. Altogether, the modernization of the German petitioning system by using the Internet has enhanced public awareness for this subject as well as its political significance. The citizens' intentions of using it exceed by far the capacities which the German Bundestag can provide so that many public e-petitions cannot be admitted.

For some petitions, the discussion forums show a considerably high level of participation with a generally good quality regarding the content. In fact, the use of the right to petition has been successfully extended to new groups of the population – particularly to younger people. However, the composition of the group of petitioners still clings to the typical social pattern of a kind of political participation which is characterized by a higher level of education. The fears regarding misuse by organized campaigns, by groups which are well-interconnected via online networks or by feigning false identities generally could not be confirmed.

CONCLUSION

The Internet provides an unimaginable degree of politically relevant information as well as manifold possibilities of communication and participation in democratic processes. More transparency and openness of the political system, opportunities for use which are independent of the social status as well of time and place are further typical hopes which have been expressed since the beginning of the debate about cyberdemocracy.

However, the debate also has been characterized by certain fears such as the danger of manipulation, censorship and surveillance, the social selectivity of use, excessive demands on the users in terms of information due to an elimination of mediating entities ensuring quality as well as certain opportunities for populist policy approaches.

It is impossible to determine an unambiguous cycle of *hopes*, *hypes* and *fears* over the years. Right from the beginning, there have been both hopes in favour of the topic as well as critical fears. Even the scientific and empirical

analysis of the development of Internet use in democracy is characterized by this ambivalence. How can this be explained?

First of all, one reason is a one-sided technologically deterministic question: Does »the Internet« represent a benefit or rather a menace to democracy? However, the Internet is not a *hope* or *fear* technology per se, but a technology which is shaped and can be further shaped. On the one hand, the question whether rather egalitarian or hierarchical forms of communication are promoted depends on the concrete technical implementation, on the corresponding types of use and on the embedding of Internet applications in society – and not on the »Internet« itself.

On the other hand, the evaluation of specific properties of cyberdemocracy is also an issue of political basic concepts and interests. A proponent of direct democracy would consider the opportunities of e-voting rather to be a hope, whereas a proponent of representative democracy would rather consider them to be a danger. From the citizens' perspective, the possibility of directly contacting politicians and political institutions is a benefit, but for the contacted people it is often not more than just an additional burden.

After 50 years of debates about and experience with Internet and democracy, we know definitely more about the concrete conditions under which the positive potentials can be realized rather than the negative ones. Technology assessment as well – which can look back on a similarly long history – has made its contribution to this development again and again.

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