Direct democracy – the role of electronic communication forums for a new public in the information society

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Abstract

We examine whether electronic communication forums (ComFor) can be considered adequate means to establish new forms of participatory direct democracy in the information society. We take an information science point of view towards democracy and investigate the role of information and communication for politics and democracy respectively. The value-added properties of communication forums in general are outlined, and the chances of transforming the current distributive monopoly of the mass media into interactive forums are discussed. We give some examples of how electronic communication forums are being used in the pre-election phase of the federal election in Germany in 1998. Although forums, which follow in the tradition of USENET newsgroups and chat boards and are increasingly constructed in the World-Wide Web environment, are becoming more user-friendly and usable by the public, they still follow the old thread paradigm. More elaborated orientation, navigation, and visualization tools are needed and, in addition, more comfortable techniques for monitoring complex discussions and establishing automatic links between different forums and these forums' statements respectively. To avoid highly atomized divided „publics" (which are counter-productive for democracy) forums need to be organized according to an open systems architecture which allows access to different forums and thus the exchange of heterogenous opinions. Intensive usage of inter-related forums may not lead to a new media democracy or may replace the indirect representational forms of democracy but it is likely to raise public awareness of the political importance of information and communication and increase participative responsibility in political affairs.

1 Objectives

This paper discusses and evaluates tendencies toward direct democracy in the Federal Republic of Germany („Bundesrepublik Deutschland"). „Direct democracy", of course, is a very broad concept and has been intensively discussed in the political science literature (cf. sect. 2). We discuss „direct democracy" from an *information science point of view*. Therefore we give primary · consideration to the role of information, media, and communication in the development of direct democracy. In this context the concepts of „access control" and „right of information autonomy or self-determination" („informationelle Selbstbestimmung") play an important role (cf. sect. 3). We thus down-size the topic of direct democracy by concentrating our discussion on the role of electronic communications forums (cf. sect. 4) and demonstrating how they are being used in the context of the federal election in Germany in September 1998 (cf. sect. 5). We conclude this paper with some remarks on the relevance of communication forums, not as a

substitute for current democratic practice but as an enrichment through forms of direct participation (cf. sect. 6).

It is still too early to present a well-founded theory on the consequences of communication forums for political praxis. Therefore this paper does not aim to make a theoretical contribution but instead to survey the role that electronic communication forums are playing in Germany three months before the federal election of September 1998.

2 The concept of direct democracy

Direct democracy is a form of political organization in which *direct participation* of the citizens in political decision-making is dominant, or at least occasionally practiced, in contrast to indirect or representative forms of democracy, in which political (legislative and executive) practice is delegated to special people (delegates, representatives) who have been elected by those with the right to vote. Direct democracy as a form of self-governing democracy („Selbstregierungsdemokratie") [Sartori/Wildenmann 1992] is more common on the municipal or regional level. On higher political levels, such as states, where more complex tasks need to be carried out, forms of indirect/representational democracy are dominant. The direct election of the president of a state, anchored in the constitutions of many states, is one striking counter-example to the otherwise representational dominance[1].

In addition to the direct election of delegates, one distinguishes as principles of direct democracy between initiative, referendum and recall [Walker 1987; Cronin 1989]. An *initiative* is a procedure by which a prescribed number of voters can enforce a binding poll on new or existing laws. The *legislative referendum*, also determined on the basis of a specified percentage of voters, petitions to approve or to reject a bill that has passed through parliament. The *recall* enforces the right of the people to petition for the holding of a vote on the removal of a public official. All these classical forms of direct democracy are obviously more effective and also safer if they are organized in an electronic environment. The argument that not everyone has access to these systems or is willing to use techniques such as electronic polls is not really convincing. People would still have the right to go to the polls personally, but electronic elections would be a perfect substitute for the postal vote. The explosive force of electronic polls lies in the potential of immediate feedback, with the consequence that voting patterns are susceptible to being influenced by the intermediate results.

If the concept of direct democracy is taken literally, not only the criterion of participation needs to be fulfilled but also the criterion of *co-presence*. Co-presence in time and space is, of course, only possible when a very limited number of people is involved. In theory and practice co-presence is not demanded as an exclusive condition for direct democracy [Rourke 1992; Boyer 1992]. As we will see, this is also true for the modern means of direct democracy. Although synchronous communication (with limited multi-presence) is of growing importance, for instance in chat boards and tele-conferencing environments, asynchronous and, of course, dislocated communication is dominant in modern electronic communication devices such as email or electronic forums. The latter are considered in the following as an appropriate means of direct democracy in the (electronic) information society.

Direct democracy in contemporary societies is not considered by most political scientists and politicians as a real alternative to the existing political system of indirect democracy, where it is mainly political parties and political institutions which have the mandate to formulate and to carry out official politics, which are made public by the mass media. The

greater rationality and efficiency achieved by delegating political tasks to professionals and competent specialists are considered the main advantages of indirect democracy.

The media are also part of indirect democracy. Journalists and their employers, the media companies, co-decide which topics are policy-relevant and they clearly contribute to the construction of public opinion. In addition to the media, many (professional) interest groups from all areas of society are involved to establishing public and societal consensus and compromise, through which opposing interests can be reconciled. These interest groups work in different arenas and do not have a common platform of publicity. Therefore there is only a limited exchange of positions between them. This is one of the potentials of electronic communication forums, in which people with different organizational backgrounds can communicate with each other.

To conclude this section on direct democracy: Indirect, representative forms of democracy are still dominant, but there is a tendency in many states to strengthen forms of direct democracy [Budge 1996], permitting active citizen participation not only in the direct election of representatives such as mayors of cities or even presidents of states, but also in legislative and executive processes such as initiatives and referendums. Therefore there is no mutual exclusion between direct and indirect forms of democracy. In the current climate of openness to experimentation with new forms of direct democracy, electronic communication forums are likely to spread and to be find use, not only in the realms of science and economy but also as tools in the general political arena.

3 Information, communication, media, and democracy.

The interrelation between information, communication, media, and democracy has been intensively discussed in the literature of political science [Hill/Papathanassopoulos 1991; Grofman 1995; Man 1995; Kubicek 1996; Kubicek/Schmid/Wagner 1997; Leggewie 1996; Sussman 1997], of information science [Kuhlen 1995; Wersig 1996], of media science and in the „cyber" literature, for instance with respect to the challenge of the information age [Grossman 1995; Kahin/Keller 1996; Kahin/Nesson 1997] or of cyber future [Sardar/Ravetz 1996] in cyber space [Ludlow 1996] and with respect to the consequences of building a new media democracy [Hazen/Winokur 1997] or a cyber society [Jones 1995; Schuler 1996] or creating postpolitics where „netizens" can play the new electronic games of direct democracy [Hauben/Hauben 1997; Katz 1997; Rash/Wayne 1997].

Among the many issues which are discussed in the interrelated fields of politics and information society, those concerning privacy [Agre/Rotenberg 1997], information inequity [Schiller 1996], information rich and poor [Haywood 1995], information ethics [Smith 1997; Kuhlen 1998] and information control or access [Belloti 1997; Samarajiva 1997] are most relevant in a political perspective. With respect to the more specific topic of direct democracy we will concentrate here how publics and public opinion are differently constructed in an electronic environment compared to the pre-electronic age in which mass media, official parties and politicians were dominant.

In general, the interrelation between democracy and information is quite obvious. What is true for professional politicians – viz. that only information-based decisions are rational and will be accepted by the people, in contrast to decisions made on a charismatic or non-transparent basis – is also true for the people of a state: Only well-informed citizens will act consciously and responsibly as members of a democratic state, although the right to vote is not bound to a certain degree of active information behavior. To care about being well-informed is not a legal but a moral obligation in modern societies. Modern societies can be judged according to the degree to which they provide everyone with access to the information resources which are in principle available. Therefore the right of (free) access

to available information resources has been explicitly anchored in many modern constitutions. Free access does not necessarily mean cost-free access to all resources, but it does mean access to those resources through which a basic information supply („informationelle Grundversorgung") can be achieved. The long-lasting debate whether information can be considered a public or a private good is therefore also a debate about political participation and the chances of direct democracy. With the spread of electronic communication services the right to access information can be extended to the right to communicate, that means to have reading and writing rights and have access to electronic communication forums as platforms for the exchange of individual statements and positions. Not only information competence but also communication competence in all (professional, political, and private) environments is needed in the information society, which, given its democratic basis, will be a communication society.

4 Electronic communication forums

The main disadvantage of mass media such as newspapers, journals or traditional TV is considered to be absence of feedback and interaction. „Letters to the editor" and „phone-ins" are only very limited means of creating a media public in which the public itself or its individual members can actively participate. The limitations on feedback and interaction are mainly created by the technological restrictions on producing and distributing information in the media. Today with the advent of modern information and communication technologies and the growing usage of Internet services, these limitations are beginning to disappear and will likely be overcome in the near future. It is foreseeable that in a few years almost everyone will be able not only to „read" information, that means to access information, but also to have the right to „write" information in the open Internet „sky". This combination of reading and writing information will create a new form of public and will inevitably modify the existing forms of mass media [Thompson 1995]. Consequently, there will be a change in the forms of representative democracy, which was, and still is, mainly based on information and on better access to the media in order to distribute the information which is considered to be politically relevant or correct. These information and media privileges will gradually disappear. This does not mean that the now-existing forms of creating a public and public opinion will disappear. But what will disappear is the existing media monopoly. It may be that large parts of the population will continue to practice a passive (receptive) information behavior rather than an active (reading and writing) one, but the alternative is available and more and more active citizens will take advantage of it.

Usenet newsgroups, email services, list servers, bulletin boards and chat boards were the early communication platforms on the Internet. Today, with the dominance of Web technology, more and more web-based communication forums with user-friendly, graphical and hypertext-based interfaces are being created which are attractive to a broader public, in principle to everyone. It was the early communication tools available only to a minority of net users, primarily in academic environments, which created the early Internet image of a basic-democratic communication form and where the concept of the netizen – some one who considers himself a member of the global information society rather than belonging to a single state - was created. Jon Katz, one of the leading columnists in HotWired, Wired's online network, coined the terms *netizen* and *digital nation* and speaks rather optimistically about the way the „Net" will change our democratic attitude [Katz 1997, 58]:

> „It may very well become a central forum for informed and civil civic debate, a medium in which individuals are reconnected to one another and the democratic

process they share. It is also a vehicle for transmitting rational thought and truth instead of the paralyzing dogmas that have so disfigured our political process."

Today, with the take-over of the „Net" by commerce and the general public, the majority of Internet users take a more pragmatic view of the potential of network communication. Only very few still believe that the medium will cause a radical change in our political system. But, as already mentioned, it is likely that the distributive monopoly of mass media for the creation of public opinion will gradually be transformed into a form of interactive and self-initiated media. And this, at least in the long run, may have consequences for the political system as a whole [Deibert 1997]. The transformation of the media will be characterized by the following:

- The media professionals will no longer have a monopoly on public opinion; they will no longer be the main content producers in the media world.

- The production role of the media may change into a monitoring role, namely to organize, stimulate, and summarize the forums' discussions.

- Information will no longer be distributed unilaterally but will be interactively produced and used.

- Mass communication products will gradually be replaced by individual (tailored) „newspapers" and individualized TV programs.

- Media products will develop into open products. They will thus be real-time products which are not stable but are open to the permanent process of commenting, adding new contributions, and linking to other resources.

Electronic communication forums are likely to be an appropriate platform for these new open media products. Mass media as the dominant means of distribution of the past (and still of the present) will gradually be replaced by interactive, flexible and open media products, produced, displayed, and used through electronic communication forums. Information will mainly be based on communication. Electronic communication forums - rather than the mass media - can be considered the appropriate means in the information society to create a public. As value-added effects of electronic communication forums the following deserve mention:

- Electronic communication forums allow exchange of information between people who are not likely to meet in real life. Electronic communication forums bring people together with different background, different professional experience and different life styles. The forum statement only is what counts, not the reputation.

- Electronic communication forums are designed for interaction. Each statement is subject to comment, each position is subject to modification.

- Electronic communication forums, organized according to hypertext principles, allow flexible navigation in heterogeneous information material and can thus develop into a platform of knowledge with respect to the topic of the forum. Statements and comments in a forum can thus rely on a growing web of information, unlimited in size and in principle open to all knowledge available on the information markets.

- Electronic communication forums, in a Web-based technical environment, are normally organized in an asynchronous mode (although synchronous chat techniques or tele-conferencing facilities are being used more and more for forum purposes as well). Asynchronous communication allows quasi real-time reactions to the forums' statements but also allows delayed reactions after a period of information gathering or, simply, thinking.

- Electronic communication forums, compared with the high costs for real conferences with participants from all over the world, are a cheap technology, once the technical equipment is available.

- Electronic communication forums, in particular when data-base supported, allow flexible adaptation to different user's needs/expectations, e.g. dialogue behavior, and to different pre-established parameters such as access and editing rights.

As mentioned above: what newspapers and television were for the development of democratic behavior and attitudes, namely creators of public opinion, will become the role. of non-distributive but interactive communication forums. The main question with respect to the potential of forums to build a new form of public is whether this will be one general public or an ensemble of many isolated atomized „publics". Typically the same accusation has been made with respect to hypertext value-added services in the Internet in general: the accusation of atomizing and decontextualizing knowledge. It is true that electronic forums in general assemble only a very small number of people, small with respect to active participation in individual forums and small with respect to the number of the total population. But the hypertextification of knowledge is a prerequisite for the new contextualisation of knowledge in open hypertexts as they develop in the global network of web sites. Therefore, a similar development in open electronic communication forums can be expected. So far forums do not take advantage of the open environment they inhabit. They act for themselves and take only very limited notice of the activities of other forums. The different forums which have been established as the federal election in Germany approaches do not interact with each other. A first step towards open communication forums has been taken by the information science department of the University of Constance. We have established a meta-forum which permits discussion of election topics directly, but also provides information about other publicly available election forums and allows direct access to them. The real potential of electronic communication forums for creating new forms of public and for creating relevant forms of direct democracy undoubtedly lies in the development of forums as open interrelated forums.

We do not want to overemphasize the influence of information and communication on political decision-making processes. It is well known that exchange of information is not the only requirement for establishing a consensus or a majority, but it is a very important prerequisite. Therefore communication forums cannot be considered a new wonder drug in the pursuit of democracy but they can be a very helpful device, if controlled carefully and used methodologically.

5 Electronic communication forums in the context of the 1998 federal election in Germany

There are many ways electronic communication forums can be used in politics and a broad variety of providers organize the platforms for them. It is not the case that completely new players thereby dominate the political arena. Of course there are new institutions and new initiatives with the know-how to establish electronic forums: e.g. civil right movements, alternative groups, non-governmental organizations (NGO), private organizations, electronic market providers and single individuals. But the old players – the political institutions, the parties and, of course, the traditional media – are becoming more and more involved in electronic forums, too. Almost every political institution, every party and every major media organization (newspaper, radio and TV) in countries like Germany have their own Web site, and they often organize forums to permit target group participation or as an efficient and low-cost marketing tool to attract visitors to the site. We

give a few example of institutions in Germany which provide political information and often a discussion platform for the public:

- The President of the Republic (Bundespräsident)[2]

- The Parliament (Deutscher Bundestag)[3]

- The Government (Bundesregierung)[4]

- The Chancellor's office (Bundeskanzleramt)[5]

- All federal states (Bundesstaaten)[6]

- The government media news agency (Bundespresseamt)[7]

- Federal Office for the protection of the constitution (Bundesamt für den Verfassungsschutz)[8]

- Federal labor office (Bundesarbeitsgericht)[9]

The political parties have their own Web sites, in general with electronic communication forums. These forums are usually moderated, but they also give participants the possibility to introduce new discussion topics:

- CDU, the conservative party[10]

- CSU, the conservative sister party, in Bavaria only[11]

- SPD, the social-democratic party[12]

- Green Party (Buendnis 90/Die Gruenen), the environmental party in Germany[13]

- FDP, the liberal party[14]

- PDS, the successor of the former East-German communist party (SED)[15]

Many political services and interest groups also offer Web information and forums, such as:

- POLITIK-NEWS.COM[16]

- Intrasat Deutschland[17]

- Nadir[18]

- Crossnet[19]

- Greenpeace[20]

- Politik Forum Deutschland (PFD)[21]

- Research institutes such as the Institute for Applied Knowledge Processing (FAW), Ulm[22]

- Electronic markets places such as the Electronic Mall Bodensee[23].

- Cities, unions, most journals, newspapers, radio and TV stations provides

The federal election in Germany in September 1998 will be the first major election to be covered by electronic communication forums. Most political parties (mentioned above), state offices, trade unions, churches, interest groups, non-governmental organizations, media institutions, and many private initiatives have set up special election forums. We give a few examples of such special-purpose forums:

- Rot- grüne Online-Wählerinitiative (to support a coalition between the Green party and the Social-democratic party)[24]

- A city initiative from a sub-city of Berlin - RUDOW IM NETZ
- SPIEGEL ONLINE – special forum for the election[25]
- Political Initiative VISION[26]
- WAHLEN DE - Forum of private enterprises (SystemDesign and HSL Information & Kommunikation)[27]
- Landeszentrale für politische Bildung in Düsseldorf - WAHLEN 98[28]
- Independent organization:Wahlkampf98[29]
- Media initiative (DIE ZEIT and DER TAGESSPIEGEL) Wahlstreet[30]

The forums are mainly organized according to the „thread" paradigm known from the early USENET newsgroups. Once a new topic is raised, the comments and comments on the comments build a thread of discussion. Experience shows that it is very difficult to keep track of complex threads. Therefore intensive embedding is rather unusual. It is still a challenge for forum design and monitoring to stimulate and to adequately display real interaction between people's statements. It seems absolutely necessary that there be a moderator or a topic chair (or however such a communication jockey should be called) who gives some guidance to the discussion. The „lost in space" syndrome, well known in the hypertext world, easily repeats itself as the „lost in forum's space" syndrome. Orientation problems, in particular if one cannot follow the discussion continuously, still need to be solved. Therefore more powerful visualization techniques are needed for the representation of a complex and highly interrelated discussion. These must go beyond the linear representation of embedded threads. Experiments with 3D, virtual reality forums are needed.

In order to live up to te aim of being a means for the construction of a rational public opinion communication forums need to establish rich knowledge bases about the topics of the forum. These bases can be constructed by the forum's monitoring team and/or can be built up gradually by the forum's participants themselves. The hypertext methodology underlying the Web forum's architecture allows intensive linking to the forum's external resources and expertise. In addition, the participants of the forum need to be provided with powerful search and navigation tools in order to productively access the forum's knowledge bases and the external link information.

6 The relevance of electronic communication forums for direct democracy

At the time of writing this article (June 1998), the federal election is still to come (9/98) and the communication forums established especially for this major event have not yet entered the hot pre-election phase.Therefore we can only provide a preliminary assessment of the possible consequences. In particular we cannot evaluate the influence of this new public on the result of the election.

Active, reading and writing Internet usage is still the privilege of a minority and a special demographic part of the population (well-educated, above-average income, approximately 30 years old, and predominantly male). Therefore any direct influence on the election may be very limited or it may be considerably biased due to the skewed representativity of the forums' participants. An example for this bias is provided in the election forum of „wahlen.de", which includes a poll on perspective voting. According to the electronic votes on June 23rd of 1998 (still 3 months before the real election) only 4,58% are in favour of the CDU (which is at the moment the main government party), whereas 23,6% are for the

Green party. Both these figures are highly unrealistic. This demonstrates quite clearly the demographic bias in the electronic medium.

What is more important at the moment, however, is that we are beginning to experiment with new forms of creating a public and public opinion. This may not lead to a „new" media democracy, comparable to the „old" TV democracy, but it may lead to a new kind of direct democracy. This new form of direct democracy will not replace the indirect representative forms of democracy but it may create a value-added effect, namely broader public awareness and participative responsibility for the whole society. As media theoreticans following McLuhan have pointed out, the medium not only influences the message but also the structure of the whole system of which it is a part [Deibert 1997; Thompson 1995]. The medium, in this case the electronic communication forums, in particular when organized according to open system principles which allow forums to be interrelated, is the environment in which the whole system may gradually change.

7 Literature

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[1] The classic example of a direct democracy with features such as referendums, initiatives and recalls is Switzerland, where citzens participate directly in legislative and executive decisions (cf. http://www.stacher.ch/chlibre/Referenz.html#Demokratie). Direct democracy in Switzerland is not a generic or default right, but is subject to restrictions laid down by the constitution. For instance, constitutional changes can only be initiated by the population when at least 100.000 citizens sign such an initiative; 50.000 signatures are necessary for other legal issues.

[2] http://www.bundespraesident.de

[3] Extensive information about the members of parliament, mailing lists, inhouse on-line data banks, status information on legislative processes; there a special forum for the public with changing topics every 6 weeks, introduced by political experts from the different parties: http://www.bundestag.de; http://www.bundestag.de/forum/index.htm

[4] http://www.bundesregierung.de

[5] http://www.bundesregierung.de/inland/kanzler/bundeskanzleramt.html

[6] Baden-Wuerttemberg: government: http://www.baden-wuerttemberg.de; parliament: http://www.mannheim.de/landtag/landtag.html; Bayern: government: http://www.bayern.de/Politik; parliament: http://www.bayern.landtag.de; Berlin: government: http://www.berlin.de/root/index_graphics_german; parliament: http://www.parlament-berlin.de/parlamentb.nsf/(plainhtml)/; Brandenburg: government: http://www.brandenburg.de/landesr.htm; Bremen: government: http://www.bremen.de; Hamburg: government: http://www.hamburg.de; parliament: http://www.hamburg.de/StadtPol/Brgschft/welcome.htm; Hessen: government: http://www.hessen.de/Regierung/homepage.htm; Mecklenburg-Vorpommern: government: http://www.mv-regierung.de/stk/index.html; Niedersachsen: government:

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7 http://www.government.de/inland/bpa/pm/pm.html

8 The office displays all kind of information about the constitution, reports on protection and violation of the constitution, access to its on-line library, a scientology hotline, games, political entertainment, links to other political institutions http://www.verfassungsschutz.de

9 http://www.bundesarbeitsgericht.de

[10] Everyone can participate in the CDU forum, no password is necessary, party information is indicated as such, the forum is moderated, there is a synchronous unmoderated chat board; http://www.cdu.de/bpt/forum/message.html

[11] Each topic in this forum is introduced by a party editorial statement; http://www.csu.bayern.landtag.de/forum/forum.htm.

[12] The SPD forum is moderated, a password is required; intensive and politicially relevant discussion, for instance on the party's election program; http://www.spd.de/klartext/index.htm.

[13] There are more than 100 topics in The Gruene forum which are intensively discussed; http://www.gruene.de/index2.htm.

[14] The FDP forum is moderated, provides extended background information; anyone can open a new discussion thread which is deleted after a certain amount of time if there are no new comments, party information is indicated as such; http://www.liberale.de/ora-bin/dk.ListeDkGr.

[15] http://pds-online.de

[16] http://www.smi-gmbh.de/Politik-News/default.htm

[17] http://intrasat.de/politik/deutschland/index.html

[18] http://www.nadir.org

[19] Crossnet is designed to further political consensus among all political groups; http://crossnet.ch/x.cgi

[20] http://www.greenpeace.de/GP_SYSTEM/CWHK44EW.HTM

[21] The PFD forum is party-independent and aims to further communication between citizens and politicians; anyone can open a new topic thread, links to relevant information can be introduced; online-TEDS for political topics are possible; they do not claim to be representative but give some indication of political relevance; simultaneous chat takes places every day starting from 9 p.m.; http://www.politik-forum.de

[22] The FAW forum is a rather elaborated but also complicated to handle forum that aims at establishng interactive tele discourses (following the IBIS approach; IBIS=issue-based information system); http://www.faw.uni-ulm.de/diskurse/welcome.html.

[23] http://www.emb.net

[24] http://home.t-online.de/home/i.langner

[25] http://www.spiegel.de

[26] http://www.geocities.com/CapitolHill/Senate/2526

[27] http://www.wahlen.de

[28] http://www.lzpb.nrw.de/wahlen

[29] http://www.wahlkampf98.de

[30] http://www.wahlstreet.de