

# Civil Society and eParticipation in Germany

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**Abstract:** The use of eParticipation by civil society actors is rapidly evolving. New socio-technical tools, devices, applications, services, networks enable a revitalization or foster new forms of social and political actions. Currently the civil society movements adopt and shape them to better organize, inform, communicate, and disseminate their (counter-) public and the traditional political system and mass-media system.

## 1. Civil Society and eParticipation – perspectives on the concepts

A widely used definition of the concept ‘civil society’ is illustrative: “Civil society refers to the arena of un-coerced collective action around shared interests, purposes and values. In theory, its institutional forms are distinct from those of the state, family and market, though in practice, the boundaries between state, civil society, family and market are often complex, blurred and negotiated. Civil society commonly embraces a diversity of spaces, actors and institutional forms, varying in their degree of formality, autonomy and power. Civil societies are often populated by organizations such as registered charities, development non-governmental organizations, community groups, women's organizations, faith-based organizations, professional associations, trades unions, self-help groups, social movements, business associations, coalitions and advocacy group” [1]. An assumption is that the primary characteristics of current democratic societies are fragmentation, diversity, identity and individualism. This leads to the question what keeps the society together. One prominent answer is that “democratic societies must rely on people with community-oriented skills, who trust one another and who take an interest both in one another and in the welfare of the community” [2]. A common background of motives and attitudes of the citizen oriented to the common good is necessary: civic-mindedness which encourages civic actions. These civic actions open up the social space of a civil society. “Mutual interest and trust, together with shared goals and a variety of resources, result in commitment and involvement. People must have a sense that they have something at stake; they must become involved in social life in order to be integrated in society and help society cohere. The key to integration is participation” [2]. This understanding of civil society with participation as the key action – using new or old media – is based on shared values, communication and actions. Following this understanding (e)participation equals (e)communication.

The formal and informal participation activities in several European countries in the 1970s and 80s produced several new formats of participation like future

workshops, mediation, citizen forum, public hearings, round-table etc. These face-to-face formats required the local presence of the active citizen. The event of ITC's changed this dramatically. The role of time and space changed and these formats were adjusted to the new possibilities the ICT's opened up. Additionally new formats of eParticipation were invented and currently experienced practically such as online-petition, online-dialogue, citizen wikis, political blogs, social bookmarking, web campaigning, candidate watch etc. which currently are discussed under the notion Web 2.0, Social Software or Societyware. In order to perform their control function concerning governmental and economical actions as well as their function to appear for the citizens and their need to coordinate their internal activities, civil society actors are dependent upon modern information and communication media. The Internet and the use of computers as digital media opened up new chances the monopolistic mass-media could not provide: the poly-directional interaction over networks from person to person or person to public. Netcasting became the addition to broadcasting [3]. Several social and political potentials for the empowerment of the individual or groups of citizen were seen: more and better access and use of information, material and immaterial resources, transparency, accountability, responsiveness, opinion building, coalition building and collective actions. These social and political actions are enabled by new network services, content services and data services which are rapidly evolving. Web 2.0 applications require the user as producer: the "produser" who generates content for the WEB. The creative adoption and use of new mobile devices, applications, services and networks by civil society movements transforms traditional forms of participation to new forms of eParticipation by civil society movements. Some applications beyond eMail and asynchronous download are: Citizen portals and community networks; City Wikis; Blogs forming a blogosphere; Podcasts and videocasts; Societyware and social software; Collaborative platforms and forums; Web campaigning; Online petitions; Social bookmarking; Candidate watch; Flashmobs; etc.

The existence of these internet tools encourages the thesis, that "the Internet has certainly reactivated the grass-roots of an egalitarian public of writers and readers" [4]. Civil society seems to benefit from the Internet in many respects: The World Wide Web provides new chances of establishing a public participation and constitution, in which all topics and players, that remain unheard in the established public arenas and the mass media, get a chance to enunciate them and come forward with proposals. Because of the comparatively low start-up and operation costs even informal initiative groups, which hardly ever appeared in public because of limited staff appropriations and capital, get a possibility to find out if and in which way there is interest in their topics. Because of the interactivity and their non-hierarchic, global structures, Internet applications make advantage to the networked structures and decentralized information and communication means of most of the facilities in civil society. The prospects of electronic networking can be used to turn the enhancement and further development of media technologies and exploration of participation-oriented forms of usage into a project of civil society. This way, the change itself turns into a matter of engagement in civil society. Scientists assume [ 5] that not only impulses for a more flexible and global networking in economy, policy, and culture emanate from the new electronic media, but that they create the precondition for a new relevance of civil society. It is expected that with using new media, players

within the civil society like NGOs are provided with a platform: This platform enables them to organize themselves more efficiently, so that they are able to keep up with political and economic networking and to perform a control function towards governmental systems and worldwide operating trusts [6].

## **2. eParticipation, civil society and political communication**

In Germany several overviews exist about e-Participation and participation activities on different levels [7; 8]. The current legal and political status at local and regional level presents Kost [9]. Moreover, several other research papers exist like MA-theses which explore the current participation activities [10] as well as workshops and conferences [11]. We use this information to identify the current trends and activities.

At federal and state level there are several initiatives by the German Bundestag (and its' Study Commission's reports) towards promoting civic activities and to further develop a civil society overall. In the beginning of this century the former German Chancellor Schröder created the guiding vision "empowering state" as focus of these activities. Since then different advisor groups and a subcommittee on civil society of the German Bundestag discuss related questions and induce changes to support the civil society activities of the citizen e.g. through tax reduction, insurances, volunteering initiatives for younger citizen and the like. This is due to the fact that civic activists are more engaged in elections and political affairs than non-activists. Over 77% of these activists are content with the representative democracy today [12]. Although civil society plays an important role for the center of the political system new formats of citizen participation are not considered yet. The political system relies on the existing representative formats. It reluctantly experiments with few digital formats of eParticipation like ePetitioning or weekly video podcasts of the chancellor Merkel. Federal government is not a driving force in modernizing the political system and more or less informs about the legal and political possibilities to practice direct forms of participation like initiatives of the citizen, petitions and referenda. E-Government is first of all seen as a guiding vision to raise the level of efficiency and efficacy of the administrative institutions, secondly to change the relation between government, administration and the economic sector (new integrated processes) but less than a vision to empower the citizen. This unbalanced way of fostering eGovernment by the political system provoked the critique of a respected foundation which claimed to strengthen e-Participation as well. In contributions of politicians and administration to support the vision of a citizen-oriented community as a means to strengthen democracy all formats and channels of participation are mentioned and eParticipation often excluded. There are hints (funding of research studies on e-Inclusion and eParticipation by the Federal Minister of the Interior) that eParticipation will play at least a minor role in the future but the current activity plans of the German government [13] speak a different language: they aim at new E-Identity-concepts, at a safe communications infrastructure and at citizen portals. E-Participation is not within

the focus of the political system. It is not a driving force promoting eParticipation and thus do not induce change.

The position and reactions of the mass media system to the eParticipation aims and concepts and the experiments are ambiguous. Mass media fears the competition of the Internet and at the same time uses the Internet as a selling point. Reporting about the options, experiments and experiences made in the Internet is an interesting topic especially for the younger generation of customers of mass media: these reports construct and shape the views about hype and life style of many. The different domains are advertisement, music and videos, gaming, dating, virtual worlds and currently the changing role of the user who became a “produser”= the user and producer at the same time. The political content is weak except privacy issues. Most of the mass media report critically about the current shift from private to public caused through new communication habits and communication formats of Web 2.0 applications. Reporting about eParticipation experiments is usually done locally in context with local actions where people are directly affected. Mass media on local level in urban areas compete with other media. Mass media is afraid to share the awareness of the users with other media and by that risk to lose the functions of goal-keeping (funneling interests) and opinion leadership (interpretation dominance). But eParticipation experiments on local level made clear: the support of mass media is a necessity to mobilize citizen to use eParticipation formats. In their final report about experiments with eParticipation at local level [14] show the importance of a media mix to mobilize and engage citizens in local affairs. Without this support eParticipation stays weak. This insight coincides with other experimental findings of citizen eParticipation, e.g. the experiments to produce a municipal cyber budget from a citizens’ point of view (Berlin-Lichtenberg ; Cologne). E-Participation usually exists as one format connected to other formats of citizen participation like face-to-face meetings, hearings, discussion forums in news papers accompanied by mass media informing the citizen. E-Participation experiments need this hybrid structure of multi-channel participation and awareness rising by mass media to be successful. Thus there is a tremendous effect of mass media on e-Participation as enabler mobilizing citizen. Mass media has the obligation to inform but it is at the same time an economic business. Several media moguls try to implement and run hybrid social platforms on local or regional levels which include city wikis, blogs, videos, chat, communities and other information, communication and transaction features supported by the Internet or other digital devices. Such hybrid social platform is “Stadtmenschen” = “cityzen” (e.g. [www.ksta.de/stadtmenschen](http://www.ksta.de/stadtmenschen)). They do not have a specific interest in eParticipation or foster eParticipation as a means in planning and decision-making. They are interested in interesting news to please (win and keep) customers. That is why entertainment and advertisement for life style products usually dominates. On the other hand such hybrid social platform can offer a strategic possibility to use it for eParticipation activities on local level.

Currently in Germany we can distinct between three groups dealing with eParticipation: One group refers explicitly on political eParticipation and acts as political missionaries for eParticipation: these are the foundations of the political parties, trade unions and other foundations of civil society associations: Hans-Böckler-Foundation; Heinrich-Böll-Foundation, Friedrich-Ebert-Foundation, Konrad-

Adenauer-Foundation etc. and non-governmental or non-profit organizations like the Bertelsmann-Foundation or Stiftung Mitarbeit. They publish their views on eParticipation and try to influence the political debate. They are busy in the field of political education. The other group consists of individual scientists and activists interested in experimenting and testing and thus empirical findings about certain tools and devices, organization formats, mobilization strategies, requirements and other contextual and situational factors for a successful eParticipation. Their platforms are scientific workshops, conferences and proceedings or books. The third group consists of citizens using digital devices and platforms (blogs; chat; forums; news groups; community networks, social bookmarking etc.) for their social every-day talk about a wide range of topics in their life. These social talks become political when the political system or mass media system become aware of the content, adopts the content and publishes and discuss it within their systems. If the connectivity of a single point between the civil society sphere and the mass media and political system is achieved a social chat turns to a political discussion. This is stated for the US by Drezner and Farrell [15]. Social blogs can gain political power by attracting journalists to transport focal points to awareness producing mass media systems with wider reach. In Germany researchers did not find empirical evidence which favors this hypothesis [16]. Can the episodic talks in civil society be a driving force to foster eParticipation? The current problems in Germany are the small amount of downloads compared to the outreach of the mass media, the rude style of discussions in blogs and forums, legal prosecutions of writers and the insecurity if a message is true or false. At the moment the effects of this new media formats on the political system and mass media are due to research.

### **3. Conclusions**

At the moment eParticipation happens in political niche arenas and does not have real impact or importance on political decision-making. Activists and researchers promote the field of eParticipation but the institutional political system hesitates. Thus no coherent strategies or public policies exist by political bodies at federal or state level. Public policies aim at eGovernment and include eParticipation as a minor objective of research and development. Since several years such projects are arbitrarily funded by public bodies often to please the demands of few politicians, scientists or activists. The results keep the discussion about innovating and renovating the political system alive. The eParticipation experiments practically show the options and risks of innovations of the political system in regard to better represent or empower the citizens but do not allow a generalization of the often somewhat sobering results. Currently the German federal government shows rising awareness for eParticipation but see it as integrated part of a representative eGovernment. Driving forces of innovating the political system towards eParticipation are activists and civil society movements simply using web 2.0 tools and techniques for their purposes: better organization, rising awareness and gaining power.

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