TAB

Armin Grunwald
Gerhard Banse
Christopher Coenen
Leonhard Hennen

Internet and Democracy

Summary

SUMMARY

The subject of the present study is the impacts of Internet communication on democracy and its cultural foundations. The approach to this diverse topic is shaped by the following questions:

> How is the Internet changing the technological possibilities for political information, communication and participation?
> What cultural changes induced by the Internet are evident with consequences for political communication?
> What visions and potential of the Internet for democracy and what related concerns have been and are being discussed in the academic literature, and how should these be evaluated today?
> How are institutions of the executive and parliament viewing and using Internet communication? How far is this contributing to achieving the democratic potential of the Internet?
> How are civil society actors using the Internet for political communication and what change is this leading to in the political public? How true is the idea of the Internet as a new form of political public (public on the net)?
> Where is there political need and opportunity for shaping this, specifically at the German Bundestag?

The Internet is accordingly investigated in the present study as a possible medium for supporting and strengthening democracy. In dealing with sceptical assessments and concerns on the one hand and high-flying visions and expectations on the other hand, the present report seeks realistic answers to the question of the Internet's impact on political communication and democratic culture.

Despite the fact that the Internet has de facto grown in political significance, the relevant debates on this – at least in terms of the general evaluation of political impacts – often mark time. In the academic mainstream, both »cyberoptimism« (which focuses on the potential) and »cyberpessimism« (which emphasises unwelcome side effects and possible risks of the trend) have lost ground. However, there is a downside to the new conservatism, reflected inter alia in the frequent and almost ritual emphasis of the »business as usual« aspect of political Internet use. The high-flying hopes and fears remain, but are seldom explicitly and critically debated now. As a result, they continue to hold influence, without being clearly visible as a normative background.

One advantage of the development in recent years, however, is the greater attention to empirical research into actual political forms of Internet utilisation, with increased focus on the central political actors. The present study reflects this trend, while also confronting further reaching theoretical questions about democracy. The state of development and potential of the Internet were taken into consideration in the process:

> First, considering earlier media technology developments, there is much in favour of the assumption that the specific Internet media structure has not emerged yet, in other words that much potential has yet to be realised and applications often dominate which mimic older media and non-media practices and are probably transitional phenomena.
> Second, the Internet has a range of aspects which justify the assumption of substantial quantitative leaps and even new qualities in media information and communication. Examples of this are the speed with which large amounts of information (text, images and sound) can be transmitted over long distances on the Internet, the emergence of entirely new possibilities for media communication, and the far reaching possibilities for visualising, storing and archiving communicative processes.

Based on the above, the line of argument in this report is:

> start from the normative paradigm of a deliberative democracy which is solidly justified by democratic theory and rooted in political discourse;
> look at the Internet's possible contributions for achieving these normative concepts;
> review the reality of political Internet communication and study if and how far this potential is already realised;
> identify promotional factors and also obstacles which have so far prevented implementation;
> use this as a basis for identifying political opportunities for action.

The aim is to contribute to a concrete evaluation of the current political use of the Internet without losing sight of the potential for innovation and possible risks in future.

TECHNOLOGICAL AND CULTURAL TRANSFORMATION

The Internet provides new opportunities for information, communication and participation. The Internet makes possible data transmission which

> is independent of distance (and so potentially globally usable for remote communication),
> cheap and easy to use,
> fastl (virtually with no loss of time), making possible online communication and interaction,
> decentrally organised,
> provides opportunities for everyone to add information, and
> makes orientation possible by means of links and search engines.

In contrast to traditional mass media with one-to-many communication and interpersonal communication (e.g. telephone), Internet communication opens up possibilities for interaction in such a way that anyone – including those who are only recipients in mass media communication – can supply content or information for a potentially global audience. The technological possibilities of the Internet mean that every user (a) can potentially be a distributor and (b) has the possibility of accessing directly information from other users/providers, creating access to information which is historically unparalleled in terms of quantity and quality.

With regard to Internet communication, it is necessary to distinguish between various services and applications. Besides those used to distribute information (e.g. newsletters), there are also discussion platforms (e.g. online forums and chat rooms). The services and applications differ in their potential for political communication, and the distinctions must be reflected in the way they are investigated and evaluated. It is, however, important to realise that, while bearing in mind the relevance of the Internet for political communication, only a relatively minor portion of Internet communications deal with political themes, as is the case with offline communication.

New technological forms of communication do not automatically result in cultural changes. It takes not only technological innovations but also sociocultural ones to initiate cultural change in the sense of new interpersonal and collective models of communication and action. The key social and cultural interrelationships are based less on its technological properties than on the fact that people are making it an area of everyday social interaction, both »conquering« and adjusting to it, leading to the emergence of new models of social communication and action.

It is accordingly impossible to separate net-based communication as a technological innovation from other aspects of cultural development. The evolution of modern lifestyles in the industrialised nations to »postmodern« forms that are

much more diverse, and are due not just to the appearance of new technological artefacts. This is much more a complex mix of numerous social, political and technological factors which promotes (or hinders) cultural changes. Net-based communication is just one thread in the complex fabric of a culture. There are, however, signs of social and cultural transformation with significant involvement of net-based communication, e.g. in trends towards increasing individualisation, the multiplication of cultural identity offers and the cultural globalisation processes. These processes involve interactions between homogenising trends (e.g. in terms of linguistic diversity), new links between local and global contexts (»glocalisation«), attempts to create post-traditional, transnational communication communities (e.g. in the sector of NGOs, net cultures and youth cultures) and new forms of social division at national and global level (digital divide). These developments are part of the context for the political use of the Internet, and are accordingly addressed at various points in the present study.

It is predictable that the Internet will contribute to further internal diversification in society, with new communication and information channels evolving. Net-based communication enables individuals and groups to get together for on specific occasions in order to achieve shared goals that they consider to be significant. New cultural models are emerging in the tension between individualisation and fragmentation on one side and community formation and shared theme-specific activities on the other side. Net-based communication make »remote presence« or »virtual presence« possible in many concurrent fields of action, but also pose new challenges to Internet users. It introduces a new dilemma at the individual level, as citizens have to decide even more often which activities to pursue, in order to support desired political goals.

Another problem emerging for the design of net-based communication and its dissemination is how far interpersonal communications which leave an electronic trail can be regarded as confidential communication. Mechanisms or filters need to be developed which are able to establish confidence in the messages sent and received. Greater attention needs to be paid to the moment of selection and monitoring of communication and information services when considering cultural practices of Internet communication.

INTERNET AND DEMOCRACY - TRENDS IN ACADEMIC DEBATE

As an interactive medium, the Internet opens up new fundamentally possibilities for communication and is accordingly relevant for the theory of democracy. This

particularly applies to the formation of audiences and opposing audiences and the possibilities for political information, deliberation and participation.

Academic analysis has clearly focused on the positive potential of Internet use for the political culture. Given the unsatisfactory developments in western democracies (such as political apathy, voter fatigue and problems with legitimation of the representative model of democracy in societies which are increasingly losing their hierarchical structures) Internet use seemed to many to be the natural approach to the problem. New interactive possibilities for communication, deliberation and participation were seen as an opportunity to revive democracy.

Subsequent analysis and the crisis in the Internet economy, however, initiated a more sober phase. The technological determinism holding that the availability of new technology would be enough by itself to establish new forms of political culture has proved one-dimensional and naïve. First, it became clear that the Internet creates new problems, specifically relating to access and to the extensive demands on users' media competence. Second, the potential of the Internet is not self-actuating. Technology cannot solve the problems of democracy, but technology can be used by societal actors to solve these problems. Internet technology must be actively internalised socially and culturally in order to develop its potential.

Current concepts are influenced by the reassessment of the role of the Internet in and for democracy. From the sobering phase of re-evaluation they are emerging on the track of identifiable changes in political communication, and emphasise the possibility of intensifying communication both among members of the public and between members of the public and the political system, without expecting this to solve the major problems of democracy. They rely on medium and long term trends towards greater social interaction, responsiveness and deliberation, including possibilities offered by the net for communication and supplying information.

In the transnational sector, developments are emerging which justify speaking of Internet's transnational potential for democracy. In Europe, for example, there are extensive networking activities and online deliberation, at least among segments of the public and certain elites. The Internet is also being used by NGOs and societal movements with transnational orientation, primarily to mobilise protests or other activities for specific occasions (e.g. world summits) and co-ordinate themes or initiate international solidarisation campaigns. Civil society actors are among the pioneers in this area, and state and high-level democratic actors are accordingly under pressure to joint these segments of the public. Even

though it is too soon to speak of a comprehensive European public – let alone a global one – there are still clear signs that for specific themes and among specific groups (i.e. segments of the public) the Internet is already having considerable consequences for political communication.

POLITICAL INSTITUTIONS AND INTERNET PUBLIC

Politics has opened up to the Internet public and Internet culture in the last few years and is also responding to the call by members of the public who see the Internet as a means of simple and direct communication (also in the political sphere). Promotional measures, networking personal web content with that of nonstatal actors, participation in online discussions, personal experimenting with different online discussion formats and the increasing provision of information on the Internet are all ways in which politics is now playing an important role in the net community. In addition, a wide range of activities are emerging within the Internet culture and by politically active members of the public to strengthen and expand digital democracy. The central factor for further development will accordingly be the way that the logic, culture and timetable of politics can be reconciled with the expectations (often rooted in the net culture) of a public which is strongly interested in communication and participation. Neither political cultures nor net cultures nor the culture of citizens' involvement in general are rigid structures. In all probability, the Internet's increasing penetration into many areas of life will be sufficient by itself to diminish the importance of existing incompatibilities and areas of friction.

Even now the Internet is being widely used for communication between politics and the public, and routines have developed at various points. In the past few years there has been an increase in activities for e-participation and online discussion at the international and EU level as well. There is programmatic consensus that the Internet can play an important role in strengthening representative democracy. Even so, it is still fair to describe this as an experimental phase. However, some cautious assessments of current practice are possible.

> Particularly well developed (outside Germany) is the use of online surveys in the context of hearings.
> Online discussion formats (forums, chat rooms, weblogs with comment functions etc) are extensively used, and the level of content and objectivity of the discussion are frequently high.
> Particularly promising are themes which are of special interest to experts and particularly well informed members of the public, or those where specific po-

pulation groups are particularly affected by policy-making.

> Compared the number of users of the classic mass media, the number of users of state online discussion services are low. However, the potential is not yet exhausted and the number of users might be increased by better advertizing. At present it is not possible to use the results of discussions and (in most cases) of surveys for the purpose of popular legitimation, primarily because of a relatively low number of participants.

Despite a great deal of favourable experience with political online discussion services (in terms of the officially proclaimed goals), the politics of this area of digital democracy displays inconsequentiality and a need for improvement, at least in Germany and at EU level. It is, for example, striking that many of the online discussion services do not consistently meet the quality criteria and recommendations developed by the OECD, the German Federal Government and other relevant actors.

The communicative potential of the Internet does not automatically result in greater involvement by users. However, the Internet facilitates communication between the state and the public, and can accordingly assist the formation of political opinion and the responsiveness of the institutions of representative democracy to the demands and expectations of society. Appropriate concepts for the services also lead to new possibilities for access to the political process by social groups which are relatively disadvantaged in this respect (e.g. young persons, people with little time or media competence, and those needing anonymity because of their vulnerability).

In terms of a deliberative »digital democracy« in which politics becomes more transparent, efficient and responsive through net-based information and involvement of the public, it is desirable to support those structures and processes which make possible increased public involvement and contribute to a vital political and cultural net community. Parliaments can play an important role in this through their own web sites and in designing policy on digital democracy.

INTERNET COMMUNITY AND CIVIL SOCIETY

The question how political communication takes place as public communication on the Internet was also studied in the present report from the three following aspects.

> From the point of view of citizens as Internet users, how far do new potentials

> arise for forming political opinions, political articulation and accessing the political public?
> How do NGOs and social movements use the Internet for their purposes, and what is the importance of creating Internet (counter) communities?
> What can be said about the importance of the Internet for the political public with a view to specific policy debates (using the examples of copyright and genetically modified foods)?

The communication and information options available to the individual user seem to justify viewing the Internet as a space for political communication with its own features differing from mass media communication – although this still says little about the far-reaching hypothesis of mobilisation and political activation of citizens via the net. However, the Internet is opening up new possibilities for political communication, and these are also being utilised by politically interested users. Examples include the wide range of options for calling up information directly from various societal actors, and also the additional possibilities, compared to the mass media, of expressing personal views on the Internet, ranging up to the beginnings of lay journalism on the net. There are also cases where users succeed in influencing the agenda of the mass media, e.g. through weblogs. Using the potential of the net as a space for political communication (both as recipient and as author) does, however, require not only competence in handling the Internet but also political knowledge and commitment. Primarily, it is those who have long been politically active and knowledgeable who are able to exploit this potential.

Research into the current importance of net communication for civil society groups shows that net-based communication is obviously important for the organisation of transnational protests and solidarisation in particular. There are, however, also studies on the online presence of important NGOs, including those with transnational activities, which show that content is relatively conventional and little use is being made of the interactive potential inherent to the technology. There is also a lack of consensus on the impact of net-based communication on internal organisational structures. For relatively loose-knit diversified networks, net-based communication seems to be an essential condition of their good functioning. The internal communication structures in relatively hierarchical NGOs are unlikely to change as a result of increased use of the possibilities of net-based communication. The possibility of gathering information and disseminating it to members and the interested public through web sites or mailing lists seems to be crucial for the work and self-expression of civil society groups. There are also efforts to use the net to create an alternative opponing public sphere.

The two empirical studies on the structure and content of political debate on the Internet carried out in the project (on the topics of copyright and genetically modified foods) show that there is a great deal of information on these political themes on the net, whereas the visibility of the content of the state and of political parties is often relatively low. The volume of the information available makes it virtually impossible for the simple user to get a personal overview of the range of arguments and opinions that exist.

The study on genetically modified foods in particular supports the assumption that the Internet enables a broader range of actors to express themselves to a broader audience than is the case with the mass media. Although »strong« and well organised actors dominate, even actors who have virtually no access to the mass media public have a chance of being noticed on the Internet. In comparison to the print media, there is also a greater international or transnational dimension apparent in Internet communication.

The present study reached contradictory conclusions on the quality of the discussions on the net. Although the study on the theme of copyright showed that users were well informed, and although most users particularly appreciate the interactive possibilities of the net and exchanges with other users in online discussions, it criticised the poor quality of the discussion in the existing online forums. Clearly, the relevant thematic forums are dominated by users critical of copyright who bolster their own positions, often in an emotional way, and they themselves feel that this form of self-referencing communication is unsatisfactory.

As far as the quality of the argument in texts easily located on the Internet via search engines is concerned, the debate on genetically modified foods showed no significant difference from the treatment of the theme in the print media. The range of types and formats of text is greater in the Internet, and the range of arguments on the issue of genetically modified foods is at least not narrower than in print media reporting. Texts which – following journalistic standards – weigh the pros and cons are comparatively unimportant (although the classic journalistic formats dominate). By contrast, there were relatively often authentic statements on the issue – opinions, documents etc from the actors themselves, rather than reports about these opinions. This makes the Internet a medium for self-expression and declaratory statements, rather than journalistic reporting. It is likely that net-based communication makes it easier than passive reception of mass media reporting to register or even seek out only a specific segment of the range of public opinion.

The example of copyright provides evidence of the existence of separate political segments of the public on the Internet which are largely independent of mass media communication. The possibility of improved presentation and articulation for civil society initiatives and the interactive possibilities of the internet can contribute towards the formation of interest groups and in part to the political mobilisation of such communities.

CONCLUSIONS AND OPTIONS FOR ACTION

After a period of far reaching and partly euphoric hypotheses about the significance of the Internet as a space for political communication, it has become fashionable to dismiss net communication as politically meaningless noise. Also the results of the present study fail to support far reaching notions of the net as a new democratic form of political public. However, they as well fail to support the idea of the political insignificance of the Internet. Admittedly, there is no sign of fundamental change in the sense of totally new structures of the public sphere, and even less dramatic predictions were obviously wrong, at least in terms of the pace of the development. However, there are signs of a change in the cultural basis of democratic societies and the political public, in the civil society use of the Internet and in the field of state online discussion services which show that the special features of net-based communication are already having an impact and raising new questions. The integration of the Internet into political life – rapid in some cases, slow in others – is indeed proceeding in a way which is neither smooth nor unobtrusive at many points. Cultural and political practices in Internet use have yet to establish themselves, and many forms of use seem provisional, unfinished or inappropriate to the Internet. However, net-based communication has established itself as an integral part of the political process with new possibilities for citizens' information and participation and for communication between political actors and the net public. Far reaching goals have been established in national and international political programmes.

Changes in the political public identified in the present study as induced by net-based communication indicate the following general challenges to parliament, government and administration.

> The Internet will become increasingly important for political actors as a medium of political communication (presentation, mobilisation) and for users as a source of political information.
> While the mass media audience will not lose its importance, a range of political processes will take place on the Internet (political information, formation of

opinions, deliberation, agenda setting, organisation and mobilisation) and will impact the mass media audience in the form of themes, debates and political campaigns.

> The formation of »virtual« political communication communities (following political interests, attitudes, themes, world views) is facilitated by the Internet. This not only increases the diversity of political communication but also the fragmentation of the public.

> The demands of a politically interested and well informed public in terms of access to political information, the transparency of political processes and also participation in decisions through the Internet will grow.

> For user groups with little competence in handling the possibilities for political communication and information on the net (due to socioeconomic status, education, age), the Internet may remain inaccessible as a source of political information and participation.

> The public nature of the Internet has the negative side effect of a lack of quality assurance entities. Evaluation of the reliability and solidity of the wide diversity of information and sources available on the Internet and a corresponding selection process could be a problem not only for the group of users just mentioned.

From the point of view of a vital and deliberative democracy with citizens who are as active and well informed as possible, it is desirable to promote and support the structures and processes which make possible new forms of political popular involvement. At the same time, negative trends (digital divide, fragmentation, lack of standard for information, antidemocratic activities etc) should be countered, as far as the government and parliament are able to.

For parliament in particular there is the prospect of improving its Internet presence, linking with Internet content of civil society and making greater us of the interactive technological potential, creating possibilities for playing its role as a forum for political debate and the interface between the public and the political system in the age of political Internet communication.

The present study has identified four areas for action arising for politics from the current and emerging development of Internet based communication.

> The long discussed issue of the digital divide is still topical. Besides ensuring Internet access for groups which have so far been without such access for economic or social reasons, it is at least as important to counter a digital divide due (for sociostructural or cultural reasons) to differing individual capabilities to use the enormous potential of the Internet as a medium of political information and communication. Direct access to first hand information, expanded possi-

bilities to express political views and exchange opinions with others – these are central contributions of Internet communication to promoting an informed democratic public. However, making use of this potential requires a considerable degree of media competence and knowledge. Besides the general promotion of political education and media competence it is also important to promote group-specific political internet content, particularly to include the interests and concerns of population groups who are otherwise excluded from political communication on the Internet or are effectively inactive in this respect.

> Access to the public as a »spokesperson« is facilitated by the Internet. Nevertheless, there is no democratic equality in the opportunities to be noticed in the variety of Internet content. Commercialisation and mass media conversion of political communication on the net and the emergence of segments of the public are developments which threaten to limit the diversity, transparency and social significance of Internet communication. Supporting the Internet presence of weakly organised groups and neglected themes along with promotion and provision of web portals as nodes and signposts for political communication are possible means for promoting political diversity on the Internet.

> In the political public, mass media filters do not relieve internet users of the responsibility for selecting the meaningful, relevant and substantial content from the available flood of information. While this distinguishes the autonomy of the politically interested Internet user, it also creates a problem of quality assurance which could e.g. be addressed by expanding the online information provided by the public law media providers. Another contribution towards quality assurance in political communication on the net is promoting specific political Internet projects, such as services antagouising extremism and racism. In addition, there is the possibility of increased efforts to certify Internet content or agreement on codes of conduct aimed at promoting the quality of political information and communication and giving users orientation guides in searching for information on the Internet.

> One direct approach to influencing the political Internet audience for government and parliament arises out of the content and technical design of their web presence. Besides ensuring comprehensive provision of political information which makes political opinion-forming and decision-making processes transparent for the citizen this is the use of the Internet's interactive possibilities for direct communication between the state and public. Corresponding services (online forums, chat rooms etc) are widely offered by governments and parliaments in Europe. Experience with the quality of exchanges in these forums between representatives and those represented and the expanded participation of the public in political deliberations is generally good. Experience to date does, however, indicate two conditions which are often ignored but are decisive

for the success of online services by the state. First, the services should be conceived, equipped and supported to counter avoidable disappointment on the part of the citizen. The necessary measures to this end differ from case to case – however, central features are a clearly set purpose for discussions, transparency in terms of the participation of politicians and the use of results, moderation appropriate to the discussions and measures for advertising and addressing target groups. Finally, further development of state services for digital democracy is not the task of just one actor. Consensus between the relevant political forces and cooperation between the different actors play a decisive role in success in this area. This is a challenge which politics generally faces, and should be jointly tackled by politics as a whole.

TAB