



Technologies of Freedom?

Internet and Democracy

16 May 2008: Session I

Institut für Kommunikationswissenschaften
Universität Bonn





What's coming up

1. organizational matters
2. outline of course
3. background
4. presentation topics



admin

- dates:
 - Fri, 20 June: 4-8pm
 - Sat, 21 June: 10am-6pm
 - Fri, 11 July: 4-8pm
 - Sat, 12 July: 10am-6pm
- course requirements
 - 15min presentation
 - for graded certificate: 20-25 page essay
- literature and slides: <http://ecampus.uni-bonn.de>
- my email: tobias.escher@oii.ox.ac.uk



What do YOU want?

- your expectations

- your experiences



What we are actually going to do 😊

- issues broadly related to formal political process
- look at what understanding of democracy is assumed
- explore how the networked public sphere is different from the traditional public sphere and which opportunities arise from this
- learn about the state of the art in eParticipation and eDemocracy
- talk to some practitioners
- look at empirical studies to assess whether or not it actually makes a difference
- cover key concepts and authors in the area of Internet & Politics
- (apply a comparative perspective of Germany, the UK and the US)



... and what not

- Web 2.0 or user-generated content per se
- online campaigning (for this see “Political Communication and the Media”)
- non-democratic systems
- global digital divide
- Internet governance, cyberlaw, regulation
- Free / Open Source Software
- peer-production (questions of governance etc)



key questions

- How is the Internet different from previous technologies?
- How can we research and measure effects?
- Who are and who should be the main actors for advancing democracy?
- Is it more pluralistic or are echo-chambers created?
- Is it more inclusive?
- Is government more accountable?
- Does it lead to better outcomes (e.g. policies, satisfaction, representation)?
- What are the problems associated with eDemocracy?
- What are the differences across countries?
- Does more information lead to more democracy? / Do better informed people take more action?



Disclaimer: determinism

*„While the printing press was without doubt the foundation of modern democracy, the response to the flood of publishing that it brought forth has been consorship as often as press freedom“
(Sola Pool, 1983)*

- we are not talking about technological determinism (although some do...)
- also not socio-determinism
- rather: technological affordances

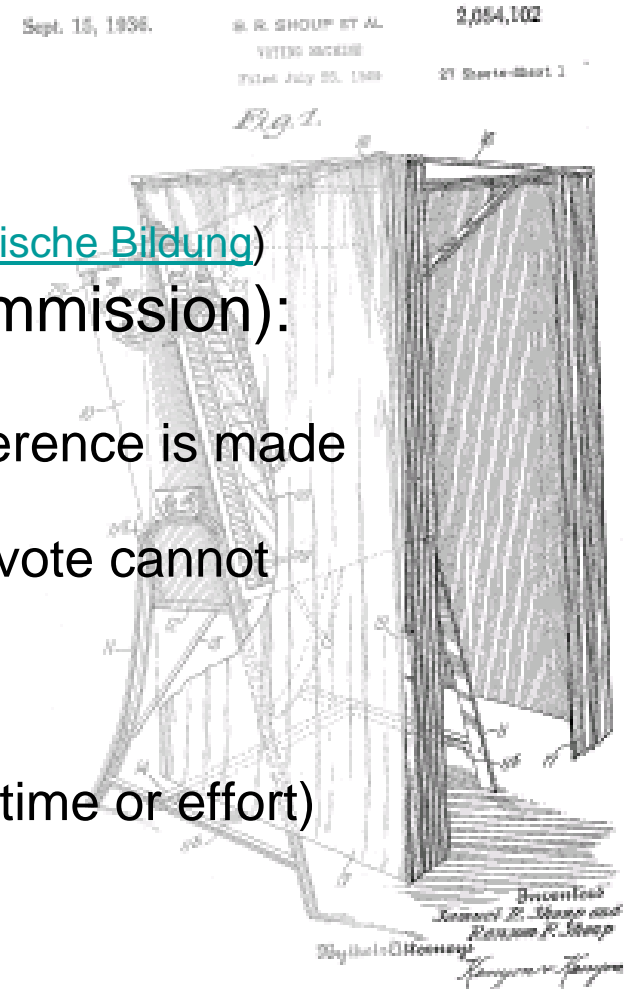
*“A good deal of what matters for civic engagement is not information technology per se, but rather the information conveyed by it.”
Bimber (2000)*

- Bimber (2000) “framework”
 - not “effect of the Internet in general” but rather “for what kind of activities is it used”
 - not only in isolation as most civic engagement is multi-channel



Why bother?

- voter turnout:
 - US: ~50% (Bimber, 2003)
 - UK: 60% in 2001 (Ballinger, 2006)
 - Germany: 78% in 2005 ([Bundeszentrale für politische Bildung](#))
- reasons (according to UK Electoral Commission):
 - apathy (a lack of interest in politics);
 - disillusion with politics (the idea that no difference is made whichever party wins the election);
 - lack of impact (the idea that an individual's vote cannot make a difference);
 - alienation ('politics is not for us');
 - lack of knowledge of politics;
 - inconvenience (voting consumes too much time or effort)





A crisis of traditional democracy (?)

- *“There is widespread concern that the public has lost faith in the performance of the core institutions of representative government, and it is hoped that more open and transparent government and more efficient service delivery could help restore that trust.”*
(Norris, 2001)
- *„While some aspects of civic life such as voting, party identification, and national sentiments have eroded in many nations, other activities such as joining causes, protesting unpopular policies, and forming new regional and global communities appear to be on the rise [...]*
Political and academic debates question whether changing patterns of participation and identification pose alarming threats to the legitimacy of democratic governments, or whether they are simply routine, even liberating, adjustments to new global social and economic conditions.“
(Bennett and Entman: 2001:1)



Cyberutopians



A Declaration of the Independence of Cyberspace (1996) by John Perry Barlow

Governments of the Industrial World, you weary giants of flesh and steel, I come from Cyberspace, the new home of Mind. On behalf of the future, I ask you of the past to leave us alone. You are not welcome among us. You have no sovereignty where we gather. [...]

We have no elected government, nor are we likely to have one, so I address you with no greater authority than that with which liberty itself always speaks. I declare the global social space we are building to be naturally independent of the tyrannies you seek to impose on us. [...]

Our identities have no bodies, so, unlike you, we cannot obtain order by physical coercion. We believe that from ethics, enlightened self-interest, and the commonweal, our governance will emerge.



This is not new!

- 1830s: [with the rise of the popular press] *“a new majority must be consulted, the sentiments and desires of poorer men than at present must be addressed; and thus a new influence of opinion would be brought to bear on our social relations and our legislative enactments”* (Coleman, 2007:363, after Burke and Briggs 2001)
- 1930s: Roosevelt’s fireside chats (the Golden Age of Radio)
- 1960s: *“stimulated by the promises surrounding two-way interactive cable TV systems, proponents saw the convergence of computing and telecommunications as offering a technological fix to the many pragmatic constraints on more direct participation in governance.”* (Dutton 1992:505)



source: [Wikipedia](#)



A brave new world due to ICTs ...

“The Internet offers a potential for direct democracy so profound that it may well transform not only our system of politics but also our very form of government.” (Dick Morris, 2001)

- more information / transparency / first-hand information
- easier and cheaper access to public sphere / visibility
- arena of free speech
- segmentation / pluralistic / communities of interest
- active recipient / consumer & producer at once
- horizontal / no gatekeeping / unmediated communication
- direct link between public and representatives / direct democracy / accountability
- interactivity
- more communication amongst public
- peer-production / co-production
- bottom-up organisation
- free from space and time constraints
- transnational public sphere



... or not?

“In the mid-1990s the media were filled with talk about ‘electronic democracy’, an idea that now seems quaint and antiquated in the e-commerce stampede” (Douglas Schuler In: Jenkins and Thorburn: 2003)

- information overload
- fragmentation of attention and discourse / echo-chambers / individualism
- traditional divides continue to dominate (e.g. digital divide)
- polarization (e.g. flaming)
- continuing dominance of mass media
- problems of misinformation and trust
- „Cult of the Amateur“ / „what I had for lunch“
- privacy, surveillance, censorship
- content bias (e.g. tech-heavy)



interest is there ...

- *representative telephone survey for the German Ministry of Interior (BMI), N=1.031*
- *key findings*
 - *“ein ausgeprägtes Interesse an Partizipationsmöglichkeiten im Internet”*
 - *drei Viertel der Wahlberechtigten interessieren sich zumindest etwas für Politik.*
 - *Ein Viertel der Bevölkerung hat sich bereits im Internet über politische Angelegenheiten informiert oder beteiligt.*
 - *13% - immerhin rund 10 Millionen Menschen - können sich vorstellen, im Internet an Diskussionen über ein bundespolitisches Thema mitzuwirken.*

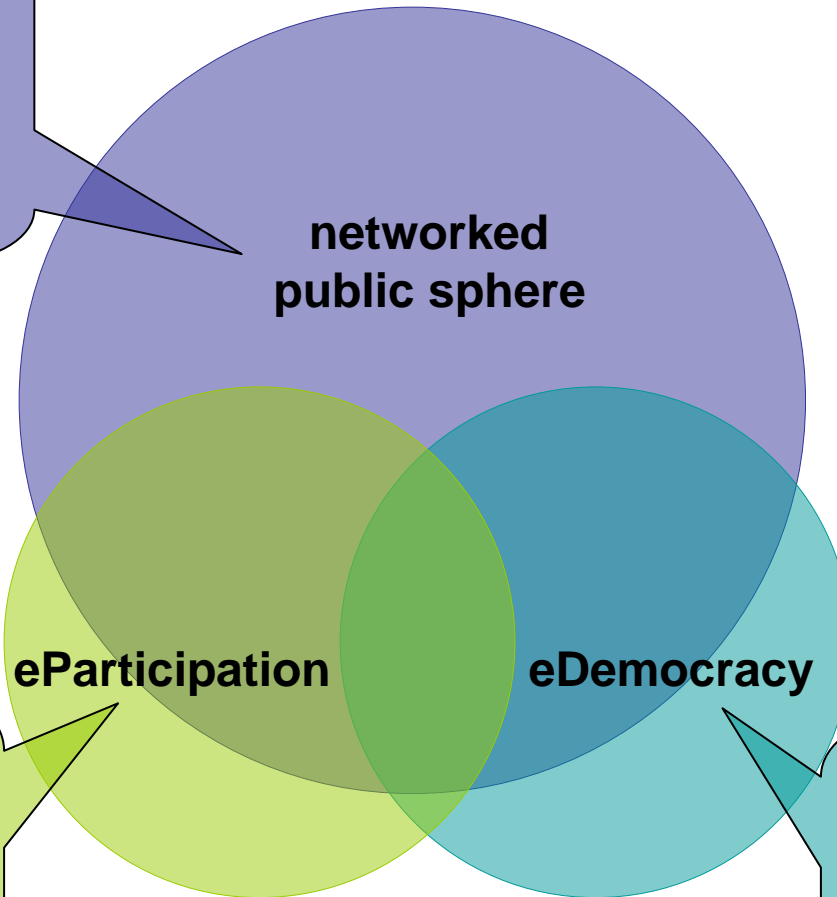
see Albrecht, S., N. Kohlrausch, et al. (2008). E-Partizipation – Elektronische Beteiligung von Bevölkerung und Wirtschaft am E-Government, Studie im Auftrag des Bundesministeriums des Innern, Ref. IT 1.



course structure

characteristics of this new public sphere

basis for all other efforts;
e.g. citizen journalism via
blogs etc.



government-initiated efforts

focus on influencing
decisions
(„Interessenvertretung“)
e.g. online deliberations
& petitions

bottom-up efforts

diversity of actors; focus
often on information &
mobilisation;
e.g. mash-ups and
transparency sites



course outline (draft)

Fri, 20 June
4-8pm

democracy foundations

networked public sphere

[videoconf] Markus Bechedahl (netzpolitik.org)

characteristics of the networked public sphere

pluralistic discussion vs. echo chambers

counter public vs. old elites and dominance of mainstream

points of control in cyberspace

empirical findings about political interest and participation

eParticipation

Oliver Märker (Zebralog)

eParticipation formats

eGovernment vs. eParticipation

online petitions

evaluating eParticipation

Fri, 11 July
4-8pm

Markus Klima (Binary Objects)

eDemocracy

[videoconf] Tom Steinberg (mySociety)

[videoconf] Gregor Hackmack (Abgeordnetenwatch)

the power of information

social software and its political potential

the community question

Sat, 12 July
10am-6pm




presentations

- format
 - 15mins presentation, use slides
 - 15mins discussion (don't worry about the language!)
 - handout would be nice
- feel free to propose topics of your own
- guest speakers
 - introduction by lecturer
 - we'll collect 10 questions prior to interview on eCampus



Good Bye!

Questions now?  Just ask!

Questions later?  email tobias.escher@oii.ox.ac.uk

Have a nice weekend!



references

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