

Civil Society, New Media and Participation in Germany

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Abstract. This paper discusses the relation between eParticipation and civil society in Germany using a theoretical framework based on three arenas of political communication: the traditional political system, the mass-media system, and the civil society public space. Currently in Germany the traditional political system prevails and funds research about representative oriented eParticipation activities. Informal and direct democracy oriented eParticipation research and development activities are left to foundations or civil society organizations and activists.

1 Civil Society and eParticipation – perspectives on the concepts

There are many definitions of civil society due to the political perspectives of those who write/decide what it is (from the analytical point of view) or what it should be (from the normative point of view). Wikipedia states, that “there are myriad definitions of civil society” (Wikipedia civil society, 2008). They present the definition of the London School of Economics and Political Science (LSE). From the political science point of view the LSE sees civil society as a “concept located strategically at the cross-section of important strands of intellectual developments of the social sciences” (LSE: What is civil society, 2008). There are lots of definitions describing this concept from various perspectives depending on the normative political background. A widely used definition of this concept 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” (LSE: What is civil society, 2008)

This rich picture presents the different concepts which underlie the term of civil society in general. In Germany 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” (Bertelsmann Foundation, 2003, p. 9). 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 into society and help society cohere. The key to integration is participation” (Bertelsmann Foundation, 2003, p. 9). 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 concept of civil society is related to the vision of the social sphere. The social sphere consists of communication and communicative actions between actors (humans and groups) beyond the family and the state. It is a communication space where different kinds of media play the role as intermediate between different actors. In former times it was dominated by the direct face-to-face communication on a market (market metaphor) now new media come into play and augment the former communication formats by new formats enabled through the Internet or mass media. Different new names exist like Network Society (Schuler & Day, 2004) which has to be shaped according to the visions of a civil society: “By working together in a collaborative and cooperative manner, by sharing experiences and knowledge through discussions that legitimize actions, and through communicative action that enables citizens to engage in shaping local community initiatives and enterprises, great strides can be made social

advances can be made locally that impact at the global level” (Schuler & Day, 2004 p. viii). This idea of a civil sphere follows the model of discourse-oriented civil democracy of Habermas. Different other visions correlate with the vision mentioned above: eDemocracy, eGovernment, eVoting etc. They describe concepts and initiatives to use ICT to foster effectiveness and efficiency of administration and government as well as the empowerment of citizens actively taking part in political affairs. One view of these concepts and initiatives present Ann Macintosh and Angus Whyte in presenting a working definition of “eParticipation as the use of ICTs to support information provision and ‘top down’ engagement, i.e. government-led initiatives, or ‘ground up’ efforts to empower citizens, civil society organizations and other democratically constituted groups to gain the support of their elected representatives. Effective information provision is often seen as a corollary of effective engagement and empowerment.” (Macintosh & Whyte, 2006, p. 2). In this working definition the addressees of the eParticipation activities of the citizen are their elected representatives.

The direct democratic view is an additional perspective than addressing the representatives and taking part indirectly via the representatives in political decisions (*pars capere*). Here ICT’s are used as means to mobilize protest and publish different alternative opinions, aims and solutions than the existing political and mass media systems provide. This can be done by established civil society groups like Oxfam, Green Peace or Attac or by initiating political protest (organizing individuals into groups, publication of activities and positions) by singles or groups (Metzges, 2007). These two concepts of participation, the representative democracy concept and the direct democracy concept, have been discussed since the seventies when participation in decision making in Germany was introduced and organized by the government as the driving force (v. Alemann, 1975). Participation was codified (city planning, urban development, traffic planning etc.) and since then called “formal participation” because the means, procedures, actors and roles were prescribed by formal code. Besides this formal participation codified by the political system, informal participation existed in the political practice. Well known were the campaigning and protest against the university education system and the construction of nuclear power plants in Germany in the seventies of last century. These protest actions were directed on one side towards the representative political system and the mass media system and on the other side as well towards interested citizens and organizations. At this time first thoughts were published to use computers and networks as means to publish the opinion of the citizen in contrast to the dominant voices of the established political system and established mass media system to establish a counter-public beyond the traditional mass-media. For instance, Krauch (1972) wrote a path-breaking book about how to implement a computer democracy in 1972.

The formal and informal participation activities in the 1970s and 1980s 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 like online-petition, online-dialogue, citizen wikis and blogs, social bookmarking, web campaigning etc. But the gap between formal and informal participation and representative oriented versus direct democracy oriented participation is still valid. In Germany the political system prevails and funds research about representative oriented eParticipation activities. Informal and direct democracy oriented eParticipation research and development activities are left to foundations or civil society organizations and activists.

Three positions of the analysis of eParticipation co-exist in Germany:

1. For the political practice political practitioners and empirical researchers do not divide any more between participative and e-participative formats of participation. They are interested in the mobilization effects of the different formats which evolved into a multichannel participation: face-to-face, mass-media and digitally assisted formats co-exist (Kubicek et al., 2007). In these empirical analyses a reconstruction which format shows better results in giving citizen a voice is an open research question.
2. Political scientists look at effects or potentials of participation in general and not at the effects or potentials of special participation formats like eParticipation (Leggewie & Bieber, 2003). They are interested in the media use in the civil society or the political system and thus do not distinguish between communicative actions and eParticipation. A conservative stream questions eParticipation in general: is it eroding the representative system, how much participation needs a democracy, which new risks emerge etc.
3. The third group is more or less technology driven. It consists of consultants or computer scientists more interested in practical real-life experiments than in hermeneutic analysis. They often try a technology push approach to experience the tools and effects of eParticipation in real cases. Famous projects practice eParticipation e.g. to provide proposals from citizens to the municipal government how to spend the budget of a city. But in the cyber budget projects again you find the hybrid formats of authentic face-to-face participation and mediated eParticipation: face-to-face, mass-media and eParticipation are entwined and not separated (Stiftung Mitarbeit, 2007).

2 Civil society (Bürgerschaftliches Engagement) in Germany – the state of the art

The best overview over civil society (in German = Bürgerschaftliches Engagement) in Germany gives a survey from 1999 published 2000 (Rosenblatt, 2000). This study was sponsored by the Federal Ministry of Family, Seniors, Women and Youth. It shows that 34% of the citizens are active in at least one domain of civil society. The majority of these activities are related to the individual life style: sports, leisure and social contacts. The domains are shown in figure 1:

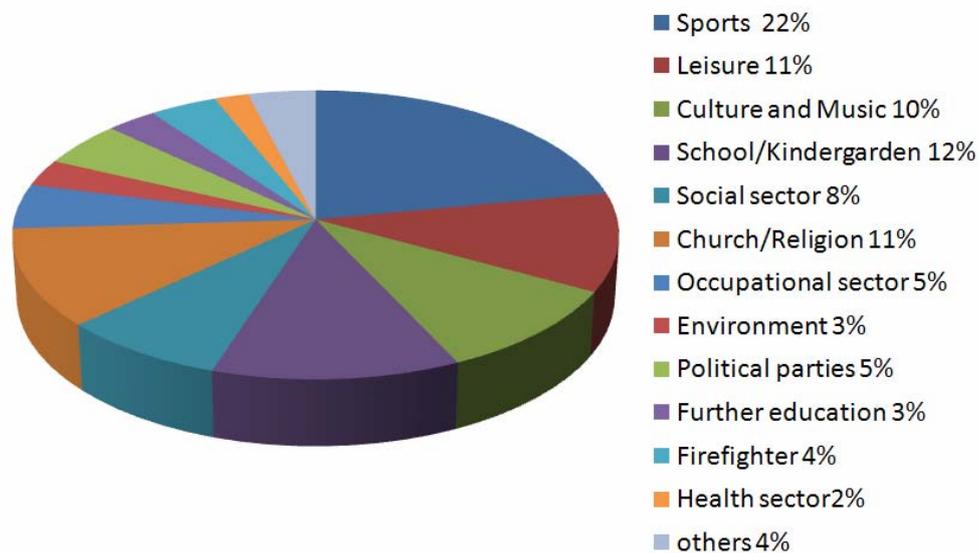


Figure 1: Political social engagement

There are several organization formats used by the different communities. The most preferred format is the club. In 2001 over 544.000 clubs were registered in Germany (Vereinstatistik, 2001) and an estimated number of 500.000 clubs existed additionally to this number (without legal obligations). This shows that the dominant organization format is the club and the dominant sector is sport. A survey on behalf of the German Bundestag on Civil Society shows the different sectors of the existing clubs in figure 2:

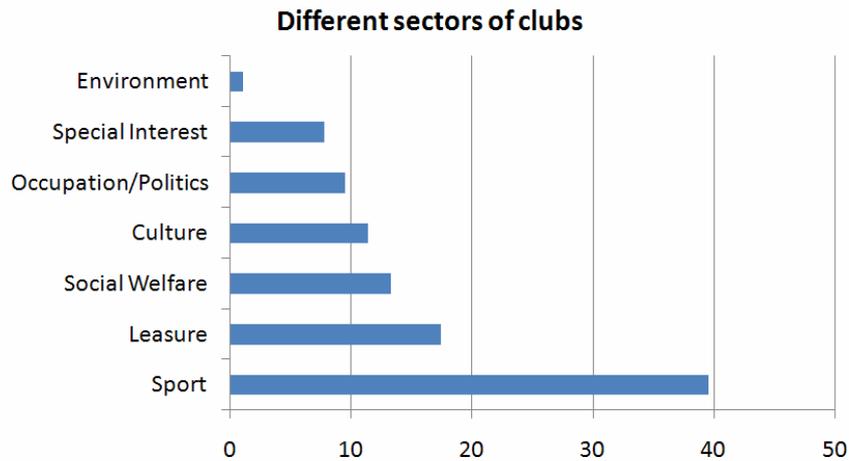


Figure 2: Different sectors of clubs

It is surprising that only one percent of the clubs are active in the environment protection. An explanation for this can be that most of the environmental activities have short term goals and are single point activities like protecting a certain habitat against road construction or reducing the amount of traffic noise. After reaching this goal the activity stops. Other sectors have longer lifecycles like the engagement in sports or religious groups. This draws the attention to another important factor of civic engagement: their lifecycle and sustainability. A survey done in the field of non-profit organizations from 2001 shows that one quarter of the existing organizations was founded just 2 years ago between 1998 and 1999. This shows that civic engagement in a civil society needs sustainable organization format with legal rules and financial support to guarantee a certain degree of sustainability. Two groups are underrepresented: women and youth. Besides the religious and social sectors only one third of the engaged citizens are women. An explanation could be that many women still follow the classical guiding vision of the engagement in “Church, Children, Kitchen” and often because of the existing division of labor between man and women do not have sufficient time for civic engagement. Younger people are engaged in the sports sector but lack motivation to engage in the other ones. New concepts are necessary to cope with these problems. To empower civic engagement the German parliament founded a Study Commission which reported to the German Parliament and the public in a Study Commission’s Report in June 2002. A subcommittee was founded to foster civic engagement. This became a permanent governmental activity for fostering civil society activities.

3 Analytical framework: Arenas of political communication

In European countries we live in media societies: political and societal systems are intertwined and observe themselves and the other system by public opinion which is the publicized opinion. Using the metaphor of the mirror public opinion presents current information about the self and the other for reflection and adaptation (Luhmann, 2000). Public opinion is dominated by mass media like TV, radio, print press which broadcast opinions to the public with the help of journalists. Mass media had a monopoly in defining the different contents of public opinion. Because of the sad experiences with the radio during the Nazi regime used as propaganda instrument several approaches were undertaken in Germany to weaken this de facto information monopoly by adding additional information formats (like citizen radio; campus radio etc.). Laws exist to control the content of the concurrent private and public German radio and TV systems. Private TV and radio in Germany is to be seen as a public task and have to fulfill prescribed information requirements which are controlled by non-governmental and non-profit institutions (e.g. Landesanstalt für Medien Nordrhein-Westfalen LFM). The mass-media system prevails and is the dominant factor: it holds and defines the mirror for government, administration and citizen.

Since 1930 the wish from Berthold Brecht exists that everybody should be at the same time sender (producer) and listener (user) of radio programs. 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 was the addition to broadcasting (Bonchek, 1996). Several social and political potentials for the empowerment of the individual or groups of citizen were seen: better information, transparency, accountability, responsiveness, opinion building, coalition building and collective actions. Computers as media networked over the Internet created a technology which is recombinant, interactive and underspecified so that it can be further developed, implemented and changed according to the social learning process of the users.

To better understand the role of empowerment of the citizen through communication means we apply ideas and concepts of Jürgen Habermas. Habermas' normative goals are rationalization, democratization and humanization of societies based on communicative competence and un-coerced rational discourse (Habermas, 1981). This concept of a political system requires an activist public sphere, where matters of common interest and political issues can be discussed, and the force of public opinion can influence the decision-making process (Wikipedia Habermas, 2008). It focuses on the communication and communicative actions. Habermas sees three arenas of political communication:

1. In the center of the political system are the institutionalized discourses and negotiations (modes and formats of communication) between government, administration, parliaments and courts. These “old” formats are well-known to all actors. The discourses are regulated by law, norms and regulations and well established and build a stable fundament for a society.
2. In the periphery of the political system the media system publishes opinions, disseminates to audiences, polls opinions, thus create public opinions. Actors are politicians, lobbyists and civil society actors. They mediate the political communication in weak publics and partial publics built around special purposes and values.
3. In the civil society every-day talks in episodic publics take place. Actors are individuals, groups, associations, associational networks and social movements which are part of the civil society. They construct the public sphere. The communication within these publics is not political but social communication like in many blogs today. This communication becomes political when it enters the periphery of the political system and the mass media gives it a voice. It becomes political as well if it enters the institutionalized discourses of the centre of the political system as well e.g. in public planning processes or environmental hearings.

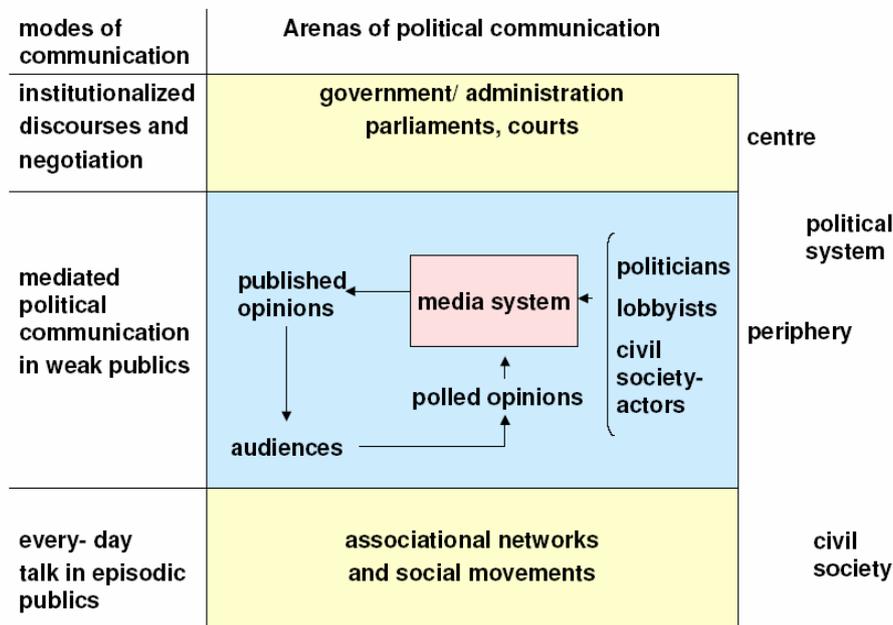


Figure 3: Modes and arenas of political communication according to Habermas

The three arenas of political communication are intertwined (see figure 3). The civil society communicative actions become public and political when they are

observed and adopted into the modes of communication of the political system. For example, the content of a blog about wearing a veil can be seen as a personal diary and reactions on this as aesthetical discourse. If it is published in a newspaper and discussed under the topic of political correctness it becomes part of a political pragmatic discourse. We are interested to look at the civil society arena with its abundance of trials and practical experiences to establish and use new formats of communication and participation.

3.1 Action and research fields

Reinermann und v. Lucke (2002) show (see figure 4) the different actors which do have the option of networked interactions based on new digital media. This figure can be used to initiate research and development of communicative effects for a civil society. The blue triangle is the current Bermuda-triangle of research and funding by public or private authorities as well as national and international organizations. It shows where the money goes in: mostly in government to government implementation and research especially under the goal of internal efficiency and efficacy (IEE). A more balanced funding is critically claimed in Germany under the metaphor “balanced eGovernment” which should include the participation of citizen as well.

Interactive Groups define Subdomains of eGovernment and eDemocracy				
	Citizens	Government & Administration	Second Sector Businesses	Third Sector NPO / NGO
Citizens	C 2 C	C 2 G	C 2 B	C 2 N
Government & Administration	G 2 C	 G 2 G I E E	G 2 B	G 2 N
Second Sector Businesses	B 2 C	B 2 G	B 2 B	B 2 N
Third Sector NPO / NGO	N 2 C	N 2 G	N 2 B	N 2 N

Figure 4: Actors and domains of eGovernment and eDemocracy

For civil society research the blue arrows show the relation between the actors. The most important research field is in the relation of C2C and in the intertwinement / connectivity to other actors seen from the perspective of the citizen (first) and from the Non-Governmental Organizations or Non-Profit-Organization (second).

4 Overview about eParticipation activities

In Germany several overviews exist about e-Participation and participation activities on different levels. The most recent study about e-Participation is from January 2008: “e-Participation – Electronic participation of citizen and economy at the eGovernment” from Albrecht et al. (2008) funded by the German Federal Ministry of the Interior. Another study which discusses the current status is: E-Participation: Participation Projects in the Internet by Stiftung Mitarbeit (2007). The current legal and political status on local and regional level presents Kost (2005): Direct Democracy in German Bundesländer. Besides this several other research papers exist like MA-theses or conference contributions which explore the current participation activities (e.g. Alexandridis, 2005; Mambrey, 2006). We use this information to identify the current trends and activities in referring to the Habermas’ framework of the three political communication arenas of the political system, mass media and civil society.

4.1 Arena 1: Institutionalized discourses in the center of the political system

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 and are content with the representative democracy today (Forschungsgruppe Wahlen 2004, p. 107). Although civil society plays an important role for this arena (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 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 (Volksinitiativen Verfassung NRW Art. 67 a), 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 politically empower the citizen.

This unbalanced way of fostering eGovernment by the political system provoked the critique of an important foundation which claimed to strengthen eParticipation as well. In written contributions of politicians and administration to support the vision of a citizen-oriented community as a means to strengthen democracy usually well-known formats and channels of participation are mentioned but eParticipation is often excluded. There are hints (funding of research studies on eInclusion 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 (Umsetzungsplan, 2007) speak a different language: they aim at new E-Identity-concepts, at a safe communications infrastructure and at citizen portals. E-Participation is currently not within the focus of the political system. It is not a driving force promoting eParticipation and by this fosters political reforms.

4.2 Arena 2: The mediated political communication by the mass media system

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 lifestyle of many e.g. "We are the Net: how the new Internet will change the society" (Spiegel Spezial, 2007). 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 on local level Kubicek et al. (2007) 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 (Bürgerhaushalt Berlin Lichtenberg, 2008). E-Participation usually exists as one

format connected to other formats of citizen participation like face-to-face meetings, hearings, discussion fora 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 called “Stadtmenschen” (“cityzen”) (e.g. 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 lifestyle 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.

4.3 Arena 3: Every-day talks in episodic publics: the civil society

Currently in Germany we can distinct between three groups dealing with eParticipation:

1. One group refers explicitly on political eParticipation and acts as political missionaries pro 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.
2. 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 successful eParticipation. Their platforms are scientific workshops, conferences and proceedings or books.
3. The third group consists of citizens using digital devices and platforms (blogs, chat, fora, news groups, community networks, 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 (2004). 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 (Holler et al., 2008). 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 fora, 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.

5 Conclusions

From the political science's point of view it is too early to conclude about the relationship between civil society and eParticipation. Currently we face a rapid speed of innovation of devices, communication formats and services and the much slower adoption and use by customer groups which again causes new requirements and the reshaping of devices and services. It is unclear which of the often technically pushed applications will be adopted and embedded in the political culture of a country. It is unclear which social and political conventions, norms and rules will be developed during the long term practical use and thus will offer a sustainable new format of political action. In Germany often constitutional law hinders the adoption of new technologies and the emergence of new practices (e.g. eVoting). Moreover, because of past political experiences in Germany politicians and political scientists especially are reluctant to experiment with direct approaches of democracy and prefer representative procedures based on "old" institutions. In academia, sociologists and media scientists are interested in experiencing new ways of communication and action. Political scientists often are institution oriented and do not empirically experiment new formats in practice but ask about the risks for democracy and effects on the stability of the political system. At the moment in mainstream research, eParticipation usually is seen positively as a means for empowering the citizen and negatively as a risk for the representative system. The belief exists that more eParticipation causes more democracy which is far too simple: we have to understand and monitor the ongoing changes and by publishing or experimenting trying to shape tools, techniques, applications and conventions. There are critical considerations as well which see a new event of fraud, control, identity theft, fragmentation, segmentation and new hegemonic discourses due to new elites or pressure groups in our political system (Offe, 2003). A critical non-biased discussion of eParticipation has to be on the agenda of workshops and conferences. At the

moment the promotion of eParticipation and discussion of practical experiences and requirements prevail.

Coming back to Habermas' framework of the three arenas of political communication: which actor will be the driving force for eParticipation in Germany? In my opinion, the institutional discourses in the center of the political system will be augmented by new citizen-oriented eParticipation applications on local (municipal level) like citizen budgets or referenda for or against a single event. The mass media system will publish focal points identified in social or political blogs, podcasts and other social platforms and thus give these voices a wider reach, an indirect form of eParticipation. The most interesting changes are expected in the civil society arena of communication and action. Following the thesis that the Internet empowers those groups already politically active and being aware of the limited resources of individuals to act politically, associational forces will become more active players in the communication arena and thus will impact political decision making and its outcome. In my opinion, the (socio-technical) empowerment of the single user on macro-political level or even EC-level probably is a myth. This empowerment may work on the micro-political level of local politics but on macro-political level associations are much better equipped to monitor, campaign or act in favor of their purposes and values (Leggewie & Bieber, 2003).

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