Politics and Social Software: Recommendations for Inclusive ICTs

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Abstract
The emergence of social software and the new perception of the Internet promise to enable decentralized actions, a range of possibilities to share and exchange information open and free of charge, to collaborate equally, and to foster intercultural understanding and participation. These new possibilities have the potential to lay the foundation for a new way of political participation and social movements to emerge, but there are also limits because of existing social structures and increasing commercialisation of the Internet. In this paper we discuss theoretical concepts that we currently state as characteristics of political activism and the Internet in general, and of social software in particular: [1] the foundation for community building, [2] the interrelation of the real and the virtual space, [3] digital divide and social inequalities, and [4] the influence of globalisation. The Internet provides the foundation for communities to emerge and to shape society, for both societal benefits, e.g. empowerment of citizens, ecological conservation, democratisation and participation, as well as negative consequences, e.g. social inequalities, imbalanced power structures, and digital divides. Based on these four concepts we outline recommendations for inclusive Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs), i.e. possibilities social software theoretically offers for social movements, political activism, and participation.

Key Words: Cooperation, Cyberspace, Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs), Social Inclusion.

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1. Introduction

New technological applications, often subsumed under terms like social software and Web 2.0, and increasing computer literacy brought about a new generation of skilled web users that actively contribute to innumerable communities, blogs, and wikis. As *produsers* they generate content by aggregating, mashing-up, (re-)interpreting and distributing information. Users are able, motivated and willing to participate in the creation of content, sharing information and knowledge and making it available to others. Social software in particular promises to enable decentralised actions, a range of possibilities to share and exchange information open and often free of charge, to collaborate equally and to foster intercultural understanding and participation. The

Internet is claimed to change politics, not only from a governmental and parliamentarian perspective but also on the individual level.

These new possibilities have the potential to lay the foundation for new ways of political participation and social movements to emerge. ICTs provide the infrastructure for diverse groups or people to engage in a common cause within weak-tie networks. Some claim that a virtual public sphere emerges by political online interaction and that online communities provide opportunities for participation and engagement. Blogs, wikis and social networking sites provide a technological basis for grassroots action to coordinate and for activists to communicate. The Internet can support the organisation of topic-oriented pressure groups, protest organisations and ideological movements outside the mainstream. Participation, discussion, the active role of users, organisational and social benefits by using the global infrastructure for creating networks are important elements for political activism.

Communities that emerge in cyberspace can enhance political activities, but there are certain disadvantages as well, that are inherent in the technology. Political leaders, commercial global players and international institutions have an enormous influence on the structure and the design of the web as infrastructure, the commodification of information goods and web services, on power relations and content. The outcome, the political orientation, and the methods for online political activism and participation are dependent on users, developers, and producers of social software. Although the Internet can potentially connect people all over the world, limitation in Internet access, lack in computer skills and literacy make the political forum it offers less inclusive - not only, but especially in the developing world. Cultural differences can lead to misinterpretations when political mobilisation enters a global arena through digital social networks.[1] An increasing number of people is currently participating in weblogs, social networking sites, wikis, and open source software. At the same time political participation is decreasing in many western democracies.

In the following we critically assess this contradiction based on theoretical concepts that we currently state as characteristics of political activism and ICTs, in particular of social software: [1] the foundation for community building, [2] the interrelation of the real and the virtual space, [3] digital divide and social inequalities, and [4] the influence of globalisation. Based on these concepts we develop guidelines to enhance political engagement and grassroots activism that lead to a more inclusive society. This requires cooperation among citizens, their willingness, and possibilities for participation.

2. Cybercommunities and Politics

The heterarchical, decentralised and likewise open architecture of the Internet provides the necessary precondition for virtual communities and

hence for participation, new social movements and grassroots activism to emerge. Cyberspace can be defined as a space that enables social movements[2], i.e. grassroots democracy, and political participation. Common history, knowledge, and practices foster the strength of a community. The web enhances networking of people from different backgrounds, histories and experiences to share interests and aspirations.[3] The Internet provides space to articulate group identity, e.g. sharing a political cause.[4] Social software provides the possibility for political action and participation, although commercial structures are inherent in most websites and create hierarchies in favour of some participants and, on the contrary, repressive for others. Online communities share different ideas, political causes, symbols, imaginary, and ideologies, which are dependent on the physical actors who discuss, exchange ideas, and participate by using digital ways of political expression.

3. Between Real and Virtual

Social software has already changed the way we perceive, design, and (re-)use information and communication technologies. We state that cyberspace is not a sphere of its own, distinct from real life, but an expression of social structures that are to some extent transferred to the virtual space, and vice versa. Hence cyberspace is a social space, because it is created, shaped and (re-)designed by technicians, constructors, engineers. Designing and structuring cyberspace is a social act and cyberspace is a product of human action and creativity. We have to estimate the role of the engineers who created the websites and those who want to make profit out of them and therefore do not enhance political engagement in the first place. Both, users as well as the design of social software, have an impact on defining the ideological colouring of digitally networked politics. The use of social software for political protest or participation is dependent on ideologies, as well as cultural and political contexts of its users and developers. Klar argues that:

> new communication technologies, decentrally employed, could just as easily lead to a cultural revolution in which the citizens take their problems into their own hands, defining and designing their needs, products and lifeforms for themselves.[5]

This vision is still present in discussions about political activism in the virtual space. However, disadvantages in societal structures are transferred to the virtual space and influence online participation and political engagement. There are two extreme perspectives in terms of power relations: ICTs can help to increase control over users and privacy diminishes; at the same time, social software is associated with a more powerful role of users and increasing self-determination regarding content. This leads to an enforcement of

collaborative democratic possibilities. These perspectives are based on two contrary policy making approaches. On the one hand a top-down approach, which is characterised by mental disappropriation, loss of control, and surveillance, on the other hand a bottom-up approach, which enables self-determined life-styles, participation and protection of personal rights.

Decentralized organisation of the Internet allows the emergence of direct-democratic grassroots communities that challenge the centralisation of power; hence a participatory society can be established. At the same time ICTs and social software foster the rise of totalitarian forms of surveillance and control. ICTs have the potential to strengthen both, participation and surveillance. These are two tendencies that contradict each other, but both affect society. The inherent democratic potential of ICTs is often not realised because of asymmetrical distribution of power and resources in the real world.

4. Digital Inequalities

Social patterns existing in real space, including social inequalities, have an impact on cyberspace communities. We assume that political activism via social software is in many cases initiated by an elite, representing their interests, and not necessarily those of the citizens. Those excluded from cyberspace thus depend on real-space-elites. As Graham argues the so-called *information revolution* is carried out by "literate and language related" societies and is therefore a product of an elitist part of the world's population that does not include financially and educationally backward groups[6].Participation, social movements, collective intelligence, collaborative knowledge production, citizen journalism, user generated content, etc. are new qualities of social software, but inequalities in social class, education, skills, and lack in capabilities influence the way technology is used and political engagement is perceived.[7]

Information and knowledge are central forces and became a strategic economic resource. The Internet enables reproduction and free global distribution of information. Information can be stored on physical carriers, it is a non-rival and intangible good. With the help of intellectual property rights information is artificially transformed into a scarce resource. A monopoly for selling and licensing information is established in favour of the information-owner. Due to commodification of information and increasing commercialisation of the Internet initial hopes of creating a free cyberspace away from social power structures, traditional hierarchies and inequalities were replaced by profit-oriented realism. Increasing commercialisation of the Internet led to its control by an elite, that is able to restrict or enhance political protest and networks of critical voices across the world. Imbalanced power relations, as well as lack of cultural, economic, and social capital can marginalize people from the political potential of social software. As Lessig argues the Internet was created as a global space, although controlled and regulated under the

influence of commerce[8]. The Internet itself is neither regulated nor controllable, but a combination of hardware, software, and code, that can enhance freedom or be an instrument of control.

5. A Global Virtual Sphere

The global architecture of the virtual sphere is not restricted to local, e.g. national or geographical boundaries. Via the Internet local political concerns can be transformed into transnational issues and gain attention from people all over the world. Although global information distribution was possible by mass media as well, world-wide visibility has increased through the Internet's possibilities for global networking. Political actions, causes and decision-making processes on a local scale, or in a particular part of this world, can trespass national boundaries and rapidly acquire worldwide attention and support.

Information technologies and, related to them, changes in communication structures are among the deep drivers of globalisation. At the same time the expanding logic of capitalism and development of global market goods and services, worldwide distribution of information, new global division of labour driven by multinational corporations, the growth of migration and the movement of people foster global interconnectedness.[9] There is a difficult relationship between the "global as the principle source of domination and the local as the principal source of resistance and emancipation."[10] Local, national and global interaction is necessary for political activism and awareness by a global community. Social software provides the potential to connect people from across the globe with common interests, but with different cultural and national backgrounds. Consequently "political narratives that govern communication between elites and following different parts of the world"[11] would need a careful translation from one context to another. People act in local contexts, hence mobile, transboundary political practice is possible not only through institutional global spaces, but through powerful imaginaries, languages, and symbols that inspire global action.

The outcome of these technical properties depends on the users and their perception of a particular political problem, worldview or ideology and their ability of using the technologies. According to Giddens local action becomes action from a distance with impacts beyond national boundaries. Globalisation is characterised by intensification of international social relationships by the specifics of network structures and their interdependencies and interactions with people who are not restricted to space and time.[12]

Although the Internet in general and social software in particular provide possibilities to enhance political engagement on a global scale, cultural misinterpretations, social inequalities, as well as commodification of information and web services hinder global grassroots politics.

6. Conclusion and Recommendations for Inclusive ICTs

Learning from theoretical concepts we conclude that ICTs provide the foundation for communities to emerge and to shape society, for both societal benefits, e.g. empowerment of citizens, democratisation and participation, as well as negative consequences, e.g. social inequalities, imbalanced power-structures, digital divides. Based on the four concepts mentioned above we outline recommendations for inclusive Information and Communication Technologies from a social science perspective with a normative approach. We emphasise on the possibilities social software theoretically offers for social movements, political activism and participation to emerge.

[1] Community building in cyberspace requires an open, participatory framework. Following Jenkins we can define a participatory culture by following characteristics: "relatively low barriers to artistic expression and civic engagement", "strong support for creating and sharing one's creations with others", "some type of informal mentorship whereby what is known by the most experienced is passed along to novices", "members believe that their contributions matter ", "members feel some degree of social connection with one another."[13] Birdsall describes a development from "build it and they will come" to "they will come and build it" focusing on the changing role of content consumption to content production by users, what underlines the concept of a participatory culture as an individual- and society-centred communication process.[14] To foster community building in cyberspace, technology design as well as social and political contexts, have to leave space for grassroots democracy, and political participation to overcome the heteronomy of contemporary politics and to move towards a more participatory virtual culture.

[2] Societal structures and political concepts are transferred from the real world into the virtual space. Since cyberspace is a social space, the real and the virtual cannot be seen independently from each other. This also includes the design process. Technology design is a social act and technicians should be understood in their social role as experts, hackers, laymen, and common users that adapt to their technical needs. Constructing technology is per se a social act. Hence people have the ability to shape technologies. At the same time technologies influence society, they are both, enabling and constraining. The architecture of technology is designed by an elite and by private companies that usually do not consider grassroots activism as a desired goal. Very often people tend to arrange themselves with technologies, rather than changing or adapting them. By including users in the design process, users' needs for political participation and grassroots democracy can be considered as a valuable design guideline.

Apart from a participatory technology design approach real world context has to enhance participation, the emergence of bottom-up discussion and social movements. Cultural, political and societal contexts have to be considered. We argue that current intellectual property rights do not enhance

collaboration and participation, on contrary: "the entire universe of peer-produced information gains no benefit from strong intellectual property rights."[15] An interrelationship between open content, the assurance of privacy, and avoidance of surveillance technologies especially in countries with restrictive governments, are preconditions for political engagement of civil society by using social software.

[3] The so-called digital divide still excludes many people especially in the developing world to use social software for political engagement. Considering the enormous part of the population that is currently excluded from the Internet we argue that social software - if not supported by traditional media or opinion leaders - cannot be the adequate tool for grassroots democracy to emerge, especially in countries with enormous inequalities and restrictive regimes. Universal access is the precondition for using ICTs for grassroots democracy, although lack of skills, education, motivation, and capabilities lead to exclusion as well. Imbalances in economic, social, symbolic and cultural capital require an interdisciplinary approach to overcome inequalities in using social software for political engagement.

[4] Social software provides possibilities to enhance political engagement on a global scale, although cultural misinterpretations, social inequalities, and commodification of information and web services hinder global grassroots activism. The users, producers, and creators of social software can either enhance competition, or communication and collaboration in cyberspace. The potential of the technologies can be used in different ways and the future direction it takes depends upon its actors. Civil rights and political freedom cannot be guaranteed by a capitalist system that makes social actions possible only if they are adjusted to their ideologies. Commodification of web services and commercial interest hinder grassroots activism, which is not directed according to rules of the market, supporting economic benefits and capitalist ideas. Free and open source based social software hence can lead to more inclusive ICTs and support grassroots democracy.

Notes

[1] S Buckler & D Dolowitz, *Politics on the Internet*, Routledge, Milton Park, 2005, p. 4f.

[2] P Lévy, *Collective Intelligence: Mankind's Emerging World in Cyberspace*, Perseus Books, Cambridge, MA, 1997.

[3] G Bradley, *Social and Community Informatics. Humans on the Net*, Routledge, New York, 2006, p. 165.

[4] Y-Ch Kim & S J Ball-Rokeach, 'New Immigrants, the Internet, and Civic Society' in *Routledge Handbook of Internet Politics*, A Chadwick & Ph N Howards (eds), Routledge, London, New York, 2009, p. 279.

[5] M Klar, 'Globale Information: ein Projekt. Global Information: a Project', in *Die Zukunft des Raums. The Future of Space*, B Meurer (ed), Campus Verlag, Frankfurt, New York, 1994, p. 169.
[6] Ph Graham, 'Hypercapitalism', in *New Media & Society*, vol. 2, no. 2, 2000, p. 132.
[7] Ph Tichenor, G Donohue & C Olien, 'Mass Media Flow and Differential Growth in Knowledge', in *Public Opinion Quarterly*, vol. 34, 1970, pp. 159-170.
[8] L Lessig, *Code and Other Laws of Cyberspace: Version 2.0*, Basic, London, 2007.
[9] D Held & A McGrew, *Globalization/Anti-Globalization: Beyond the Great Divide*, Polity Press, Cambridge, Malden, 2007, p. 9.
[10] Held & McGrew, *Globalization/Anti-Globalization: Beyond the Great Divide*, p. 168.
[11] A Appadurai, 'Disjuncture and Difference in the Global Cultural Economy', in *Global Culture: Nationalism, Globalization, and Modernity*, M Featherstone (ed), Sage, London, 1990, p. 300.
[12] A Giddens, *The Consequences of Modernity*, Stanford University Press, Stanford, CA, 1990.
[13] H Jenkins, *Confronting the Challenges of Participatory Culture: Media Education for the 21st Century*, The MacArthur Foundation, Chicago, 2006, p. 7.
[14] W F Birdsall, 'Web 2.0 as a Social Movement', in *Webology*, vol. 4, no. 2, 2007.
[15] Benkler, *Coase's Penguin, or Linux and the Nature of the Firm*, p. 197.

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