

Modern Life
Philosophy and Religion
Politics and History
► Civil Society and Democratic Culture
German-German History
Germany and National Socialism
State and Politics
Migration and Integration
1968 – A turning-point
Panorama
Background
Links
Language
The Environment
Economy and Social Matters

Civil Society and Democratic Culture in Germany

More Democratic Thanks to the Internet? Assessments by Thorsten Quandt



YouTube, Wikipedia, blogs: thanks to the Internet anyone can speak his mind, share his knowledge and become a star overnight. The communications expert Thorsten Quandt of the University of Hohenheim explains what this means for democracy and society.

Professor Quandt, opponents of Stuttgart 21, the new building of the Stuttgart central train station, use Facebook and Twitter for their protests. What influence do the new media have on politics?

The protesters against Stuttgart 21 use Facebook and Twitter to coordinate their actions and stay one step ahead of the police. Whether political discussions on the Net influence the political sphere, where decisions are taken and implemented, is another question. Their influence shouldn't be overestimate.

Similarly, as to debates on the Net, we should always ask about the credibility and the implementation of the sometimes anonymous information exchanged. Some things are simply verbal banter that isn't implemented. In this respect the significance of Web 2.0 has often been exaggerated. In the United States people predicted a radical change in democracy. I haven't noticed it yet.



Exchange confined to groups

Has social life in general become more democratic through greater individual participation in the media?



The question is whether this is really participation. Participation doesn't mean merely that things are talked about, but rather that they are implemented and that decisions are taken part in. That's not always the case. There is even the counter thesis that discussions on the Internet bring about a fall in

participation and codetermination. On this view, the Net is a playground where people merely argue about things – and that prevents the development of real engagement.

An example of this is the last presidential election in Germany. On Facebook and Twitter there was a movement to support the candidature of Joachim Gauck with public appearances – with very modest results in reality. The Net doesn't invariably lead to more democracy and genuine participation beyond mere discussion. It can be merely a kind of sounding board, where people feel comfortable within a specific group with its own political opinions. If conservatives talk only with conservatives and leftist with leftists, that doesn't lead to democratic exchange.

What do we really know?

Heading: Wikipedia. Previously, the production of knowledge was reserved to professionals; today everyone can produce content with the help of media. What effect does this have on the quality of knowledge?

In broad segments of society, the amount of knowledge has increased because it has become much easier to access knowledge resources. Before Wikipedia, information was much harder to get hold of. But this improved availability also harbours dangers for the quality of knowledge.



Precisely at the universities we notice that simplified access to purportedly expert knowledge has misled people in breaking off their research much sooner than before. They rely on Wikipedia, tell themselves that the information will be okay and don't check it against other sources. This isn't unproblematic in the field of scholarship, where it's a matter of rigorously thinking facts through.

The concept of communication will change

In social networks such as Facebook, you can find many friends. Does this in fact improve communication between people?



There are two views: one says that you can meet people through social networks. You can cultivate relationships and build up your own network of friends. The other says that, by spending so much time on the Internet cultivating contacts which don't necessarily have any correspondence in reality, you lack

the time in everyday life for real friendships.

Those are two ultimately contradictory points of view. It sounds paradoxical, but I think they are both right. It's really a question of perspective. Currently, we understand by inter-personal communication primarily face-to-face communication. This understanding comes from earlier times and will change.

How?

The term "virtual world" will make increasingly less sense. I assume that Web 2.0 and all the new technologies that are to come will at some point become a natural part of our everyday life. Then we'll no longer ask whether we're moving in a virtual or in a real reality. Then the Internet will be simply a means of communication, like the telephone. In telephoning, too, the contact person is not actually in the room but only virtually present.

Today we can already note an extreme difference between generations. For the "digital natives", who grew up with digital technologies, there is no longer a virtual and a genuine reality that stand opposite one another. For them, the new media are a part of their real lives and they have a natural way of dealing with them. The older generation, on the other hand, still mainly feels threatened.

"Only what is socially meaningful prevails"

With "augmented reality", the mobile Internet enables the expansion of perception: for example, when you focus a cell phone camera on a building and the display shows explanatory information from the Web. Doesn't this expose our awareness to manipulation?

The very first pioneers of hypertext and computer networks wanted to connect bodies of knowledge and so expand human consciousness. They thought that in this way man would achieve a higher level of evolution. Today we see this much more sceptically. But that too is a question of perspective. Some applications of augmented reality are useful. We'll integrate these into our everyday life. Others are pointless and won't threaten us for the simple reason that we won't use them.



Only what is socially meaningful in the long term will prevail in the market. This doesn't mean that companies won't continue to try to push something through in the market and that there will be some senseless developments. But in the long-term, media that lack a social meaning for the users can't survive. So for the time being I don't see a threat.

Problems can arise, however, if data security and protection of privacy aren't guaranteed. Or if companies try to influence our everyday life. Augmented reality is still largely science fiction, but at some point we'll have to address these questions.

Dominik Reinle has a degree in sociology and is a freelance journalist who has written for various publications, including West German Broadcasting. He is based in Cologne.

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