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Cyberdemocracy – An Issue for Civic Education

We live in an age of media democracies where television as the most important and most credible source for political information is increasingly completed by the internet. So-called cyberdemocracies are seen as an interactive form of political communication. The internet is able to inform citizens about political issues as well as to stimulate discussions on politics and to make possible a permanent participation of citizens in decision-making. The scientific debate primarily deals with the transformation of representative democracies into direct democratic systems. These new information and communication technologies (ICTs) are an option to achieve an immediate participation in the political process for nearly all members of society.

This is also based on Marshall McLuhans idea of a global village in which an increasing speed of the flow of information results in a tendency of politics to leave representation and delegation and to support the political influence of the society as a whole. In futuristic scenarios the traditional model of representatives who indirectly convert the political interests of their electorate in parliamentary institutions could be completed or even replaced by "online voting", "deliberative polling" "virtual town hall meetings" etc..

However cyberdemocracy splits politics and science in polarizing camps of believers and sceptics. In an optimistic view a transformation of the current "democracy of observers" ("Zuseherdemokratie" as defined by the German political scientist Claus Leggewie) to a "democracy of participants" is predicted. Possible positive consequences of ICTs for political communication are:

- Unlike "old media" (newspapers, radio, television etc.) neither limits of time and space nor of variety, efficiency and capacity.
- (Additional) offers of state institutions for public information and participation (*government online*).
- An improvement of public opinion formation without discrimination.
- More interactivity in communication between political elites and citizens (between the government and those who are governed respectively) instead of a few-to-many communication in a one-step-flow.
- More possibilities for interest articulation because this interactivity also works between parties or interest groups on the one hand and citizens on the other (*advocacy online*).
- At least in theory a rising political participation by online voting, online referenda, online polling etc..
- A significant reduction of financial costs for information and communication.

But threatening consequences of ICTs are among others:

- Quantity of information instead of quality ("How much information can a citizen bear?" is one problem, infotainment instead of serious information another).
- „Speed kills“ – emotions will replace rational choice.
- Possibilities for abuse and manipulation.
- A violation of fundamental rights for the civil society.

- A digital divide of "user" and "loser" („information haves/information rich“ und „information have-nots/information poor“)
- “An intranet but not an internet” - political incapacitation by the transfer of decision competence to expert systems.
- Social incompetence and isolation because of non-personnel communication.
- A loss of quality and more aggressiveness as part of our communication.

In any case civic education has to re-act on the modernization of political communication by ICTs. As we know especially younger citizens are daily users of ICTs but also a growing number of political information for senior citizens is transmitted online. In the near future an essential part of what we know about politics - and also of what we only think to know - will be from online sources. That is why programs of civic education have to support positive developments in a cyberdemocracy and to offer protection against its dangers. This means to create a special media competence for ICTs including not only technical know-how but also

- Abilities to understand the structure and function of ICTs used as a political tool as well as a critical consciousness of its influences on society.
- Abilities for the critical analysis of online information on politics.
- Abilities for an efficient search for information and for choice.
- Abilities for ICTs use as an expression of personal opinions, and to actively design politics as well as to “make” media instead of a passive consumption.
- Abilities for social participation in real life in addition to virtual activity.
- The development of an ethical basic agreement on the political use of ICTs.

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