To Implement or Not to Implement?
Participatory Online Communication in Swiss Cities

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Social media platforms and other digital interactive media hold great potential for political communication. This study explores perceptions about this potential and the motivations to adopt participatory tools and assesses both motivations and challenges that local administrations face in the process of technology adoption for political communication. Switzerland is a critical case for local communication, because, on the one hand, media structures, media usage patterns, political culture, and legal regulations make it likely to find high levels of participatory online communication. On the other hand, the formalized participation opportunities of direct democracy may undermine the potential of online participation. Our analysis, based on interviews and document analysis, addresses the implementation of participatory online communication from the theoretical perspectives of rational choice and neoinstitutionalism. We found diffuse rather than specific motivations, role conflicts, frictions between informal online participation and formal decision-making processes, and low demand and resonance from citizens to be important challenges to the implementation of online participation.

Keywords: participation, social media, local democracy, Switzerland

Introduction

Social media platforms and other digital interactive media hold great potential for political communication. We address this potential from the perspective of e-participation, as a focus distinct from e-government and e-voting. E-participation addresses the inclusion of citizens and the larger population into political processes by providing information, engaging them in dialogue, and offering interactive tools for their political participation. Our study explores perceptions of local administrations about this potential. Based on the results of a previous quantitative study that assessed the amount and types of participatory

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online tools that have been implemented at the local level in Switzerland, this article asks why city administrations implement or abstain from participatory online communication, assessing their motivations and challenges in the process of technology adoption for political communication. The focus is not on explaining cross-city variation but on the perceptions that city administrations hold about potentials and challenges of participatory online communication.

Although early studies on e-participation have elaborated on the inherent potential to revitalize democracy and citizen involvement, most recent empirical studies have concluded with more sobering results, rejecting the idea that technology can solve social or political problems (e.g., Åstrøm & Grönlund, 2012; Bonsón, Torres, Royo, & Flores, 2012). Coleman (2012) has pointed to this technodeterministic misunderstanding of online communication: "The imagined push-button citizen is a teleological being who, given the right e-tools, will gravitate toward a general will founded on truth. The Internet, in this sense, is a mechanism for creating a citizenry that knows itself" (p. 385). Quantitative studies that compare participatory online communication in various cities and countries have found more broadcasting than interaction and a general "under-exploitation" (Cardenal, 2011, p. 83) of potentially participatory communication channels, not only at the local level but more generally for political parties, politicians, MPs, or governments (e.g., Gustafsson, 2012; Jungherr, 2014; Klinger, 2013). These findings are not only interesting from the perspective of e-participation but for political communication in general. They touch on the key question posed by Natalie Fenton (2012) about whether social media "do no more than serve ego-centred needs and reflect practices structured around the self" (p. 142) or whether participatory online communication can contribute to making representative democracy more direct and interactive.

Potentially participatory channels are no longer new, and our media systems are no longer structured along a dichotomy of online/off-line media; rather, they have integrated into hybrid media systems (Chadwick, 2013). Under these preconditions, websites, social media, social sharing, mobile apps, wikis, and discussion forums have become regular elements of the media landscape that citizens navigate. At the same time, journalistic mass media remain key intermediaries (Jarren, 2008), so that mass communication and mass self-communication now "coexist, interact and complement each other" (Castells, 2009, p. 55). Against this background, our study investigates the motivations of local administrations to implement or not to implement participatory online communication. In this context, we understand the communication of city administrations as

> the role, practice, aims and achievements of communication as it takes place in and on behalf of public institution(s) whose primary end is executive in the service of a political rationale, and that are constituted on the basis of the people's indirect or direct consent and charged to enact their will. (Canel & Sanders, 2013, p. 3)

Literature on participatory online communication and social media adoption in political communication largely centers on patterns of implementation, but much less often on why these media are implemented or not. Lassen and Brown's (2010) study on members of the U.S. Congress illustrates the difficulties of assessing motivations via quantitatively predicting adoption. Mergel and Brettschneider (2013) argue that diffusion theories implicitly assume "that exposure to the idea is sufficient to make them want to adopt" (p. 390), but that social media adoption in government organizations is more

complicated and follows a three-step process from informal experimentation to institutionalization. Studies often refer to an improvement of communication with citizens and voters as a main motive and the "need to continuously gather, monitor, analyze, summarize, and visualize politically relevant information from online social media" (Stieglitz & Dang-Xuan, 2013, p. 1278). Other scholars refer to social media adoption as a mere simulation of modernity (Sarcinelli, 2014), arguing that, even when no clear incentives catalyze adoption, organizations will adopt in order to present their being up to date.

Direct Democracy and Online Participation at the Local Level

Swiss citizens are accustomed to regularly practicing political participation in mandatory or optional referenda and popular initiatives at both the national and local or regional levels (e.g., Blais, 2014; Kriesi & Trechsel, 2008). Social capital and social trust are relatively high (Freitag, 2001), and "Switzerland uses forms of direct democracy to a larger extent than does any other mature democracy" (Sustainable Governance Indicators, 2014, p. 28). Buetzer (2011) has argued that, while the implementation of direct democratic elements has recently become fashionable in many Western democracies, these elements have been an integral part of formal decision making in Switzerland for more than a century.

This is particularly the case at the local level (Ladner & Bühlmann, 2007). For instance, in the city of Zurich, citizens vote several times per year on initiatives or referenda, and all municipal expenses over 20 million Swiss francs, and annually recurring expenses over 1 million Swiss francs must be voted on (mandatory referendum, Gemeindeordnung, Art. 10). Swiss cities hold tax autonomy, and they own the right to naturalization. In everyday life, citizens are directly affected through policy fields such as education, health, traffic, and spatial planning, which in Switzerland are largely the responsibilities of municipalities. Citizens are closer to policy and decision makers at the local level and have a stronger commitment to the local political agenda (Mabileau, Moyser, Parry, & Quantin, 1989). At the same time, cities and municipalities are experimenting with different forms of consultation and dialogue, while federal and cantonal institutions remain more reluctant (Baumgartner & Zogg, 2010; Peart & Ramos Diaz, 2007). For instance, in 2011, the city of Zurich launched a three-day online deliberation process on five local policy topics (Klinger & Russmann, 2014).

In a quantitative study, we found that 72% of all Swiss cities offer at least one participatory element[2] on their website, and about one-third of all cities have not utilized participatory online communication in any way. Furthermore, even when cities have employed social media, discussion forums, chats, video channels with comment functionality, wikis, and the like, they rarely used them for citizen participation, but rather as generic channels for general feedback. About 97% of the participatory channels offered by Swiss cities could not be linked to some stage in the policy cycle, because they were

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[2] Participatory elements refer to online tools that enable citizens to actively retrieve information, engage in dialogue with city administrations and city governments, debate and take part in political processes. Thus, tools that focus on e-government, effective administration (e.g., submitting online forms, online tax declarations, etc.) are not participatory elements as we understand them.

not used for citizen consultations or co-decision making, although Åstrom and Grönlund (2012) have shown that participation tends to be highest when cities implement online participation in later stages of the policy cycle.

The research question that these quantitative results raise is why city administrations chose to implement or to abstain from social media and other platforms. It also raises the question of why the cities that did implement such tools are reluctant to use them for political participation. In other words, why are administrations so skeptical about participatory online communication? This relates to city administrations' expectations, motivations, and perceptions of problems and can best be addressed with a qualitative research design.

The Swiss Context

Switzerland can be seen as a critical case (Flyvbjerg, 2006) in this field, because, on the one hand, media structures, media usage patterns, political culture, and legal regulations make it likely to find high levels of participatory online communication here. One could argue that, if city governments do not see multiple reasons to implement such tools in a country with long traditions of direct democracy, broad access to high-speed Internet, an affluent population, and (varying local) legal regulations that oblige administrations to communicate via dialogue, then perhaps our expectations of participatory online communication are disproportional or wrong. Switzerland has a highly developed Internet infrastructure and in 2012 had the highest proportion of high-speed Internet subscribers in OECD countries.[3] The Swiss population is fairly media savvy, with more than 85% Internet users, and 58% of Internet users active in social media networks.[4]

On the other hand, the particular political culture and direct democratic traditions in Switzerland might hamper participatory online communication. There are also legal constraints to administrations' communication that distinguish governments and administrations from other political actors. Although they are obliged to inform members of the public, administrations must not engage in persuasive communication, such as promoting ideas or fostering the acceptance of projects. The topics that administrations may cover in their communication must remain within their legal spectrum of activity, such as information about their services to the public, information in cases of crisis, official campaigns for the public good (such as health or environment), and information in the context of their formal tasks, such as spatial planning (Jarren, 2005). Pasquier (2013) mentions four central communicative functions of Swiss administrations: providing information, explaining political output, defending values and promoting responsible behavior, and guaranteeing dialogue between institutions and citizens. In this regard, the legal preconditions for public communication by city administrations are very different from those of political communication by parties or politicians, and even differ from public communication of governments. Such legal constraints can be complemented by additional regulations at the local level and self-regulatory

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[3] The OECD average was 26.3%, and the Swiss average was 39.7% (December 2012; see http://www.bfs.admin.ch/bfs/portal/de/index/themen/16/04/key/approche_globale.indicator.30107.301.html.

[4] See http://www.bfs.admin.ch/bfs/portal/de/index/themen/16/04/key/approche_globale.indicator.30106.301.html and http://www.mediachange.ch/media//pdf/publications/Anwendungen_Nutzung_2013.pdf.

limitations established in local social media guidelines. The city of Zurich, for instance, prohibited its employees from using Facebook from 2008 to 2012 (Stäuble, 2012). In this perspective, one could also see Swiss cities as extreme cases (Flyvbjerg, 2006), because the national context of political structures, media system, and political culture provides both strong incentives for and against the implementation of participatory online communication.

Theoretical Framework

Many studies in political communication that focus on the implementation of interactive media have found that, if implemented at all, interactive media have not fully reached their participatory potential. Looking beyond single-case studies of pilot projects, Scott (2006) found that U.S. cities have mostly used potentially participatory online media for one-way distribution of information. Holzer, Manoharan, Shick, and Towers (2009) supported this finding in another broader quantitative assessment of 100 U.S. municipalities, noting a "lack of support for such online citizen participation practices among municipalities" (p. 71). In a more recent study, Mossberger, Wu, and Crawford (2013) found that, despite a strong quantitative increase in the implementation of participatory online communication in U.S cities, one-way push strategies are still dominant. However, these empirical findings do not explain why this is so. Our analysis seeks to contribute to this debate from a European perspective.

It is still unclear why political and administrative actors only reluctantly adopt social media platforms and, when they do, use it mainly for one-directional broadcasting. Furthermore, the studies on this topic have focused on political parties or candidates and their use of social media in electoral campaigns (e.g., Cardenal, 2011; Enli & Skogerbø, 2013; Graham, Broersma, Hazelhoff, & van 't Haar, 2013) but not on public administrations and governments. The question that needs to be investigated is whether nonadaptation and one-way, nonparticipatory implementation are a result of misunderstanding the new medium (actors do not know what to do), a lack of resources (actors know what to do but cannot implement this), internal constraints (actors know what to do, but other actors or institutions prevent them from doing this), or strategic reasons (actors know what to do but choose to not do it). Lassen and Brown (2010) concluded that mere structural indicators cannot explain nonadaptation and that it is difficult to discern individual motivation patterns for Twitter use (among U.S. Congress members). Furthermore, their "most intriguing result" (p. 432) is that electoral considerations played only a marginal role. In this analysis, we address the implementation of (or abstention from) participatory online communication from the theoretical perspectives of rational choice and neoinstitutionalism.

The Rational Choice Perspective: What Are the Benefits?

Rational choice theory suggests that individual actors anticipate the outcome of their decisions, calculating preferences and constraints to maximize benefits and minimize costs. The concept has been criticized for its obsession with individual actors, the presumption of objective preferences, the limited knowledge of actors, and other aspects (e.g., Green & Shapiro, 1994). Studies concerning the Web presence of political candidates (Bimber & Davis, 2003; Stromer-Galley, 2000), the Web campaigns of political parties (Margolis, Resnick, & Tu, 1997) and the Web presence of governmental actors (Margolis &

Resnick, 2000) have argued that an imbalance exists between costs and benefits of political online communication.

Although countless studies have explored whether and how political and administrative actors use the Internet, few have focused on their incentives (or lack thereof) to engage in online political communication. The reason for this is that many studies were based on normative assumptions about the Internet's mobilizing potential rather than on the motivations and rationales of political or administrative behavior. Interesting in this regard is Cardenal's (2011) research on the "paradox of party behaviour" (p. 83) online. She argues that political parties "under-exploited" the mobilizing potential of online communication, because "new technology for political mobilization has uncertain benefits . . . while it has very certain costs, both communicational and organizational" (Cardenal, 2011, p. 84). Since political actors have mediatized in order to cater to the demands of mass media (in Switzerland, Donges & Jarren, 2014; elsewhere, Strömbäck & van Aelst, 2013), the costs involved in maintaining additional intermediation channels online and being active in social media platforms may challenge the budget for traditional political communication, while the benefits remain unclear.

This discussion links to three aspects of rationality distinguished by Habermas (2009) based on Max Weber: instrumental rationality (the rational solution of technical challenges), strategic rationality (consistent decisions between choices with given preferences), and normative rationality. Concerning the latter, the actions of individuals or organizations are not primarily oriented toward a specific objective, but guided by specific principles or norms. In this view, the decision whether to implement online participation would rely less on specific goals (such as reaching certain segments of the city population) and more on perceptions about the appropriateness of implementing such tools (such as whether city administrations should facilitate public debate). Durkheim offers an interesting perspective here; he describes how actors convert a (perceived) external force into an internal motivational force. He asks:

> How actors who are free in their decisions bind themselves to norms at all, that is, let themselves be obligated by norms to realize the corresponding values. However gentle it may be, the force of normative claims will be experienced by actors as externally imposed coercion, unless they make it their own as moral force, that is, unless they convert this force into their own motivations. (as cited in Allen, 2012, p. 362)

From this perspective, we derive a first hypothesis:

H1:   *The decision to implement or abstain from participatory online communication is largely driven by rational consideration of expected costs and benefits.*

The Neoinstitutional Perspective: What Are the Others Doing?

Another possible reason for implementing participatory online communication but not using it for participation can be derived from a neoinstitutional perspective. According to the concept of isomorphism, increasing interchanges between organizations (associated with increasing amounts of information that need to be processed) establish an organizational field (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983), leading to a subsequent

homogenization of organizational structures and practices. Isomorphism can be coercive (by laws), normative, or mimetic. Despite neoinstitutionalism's rejection of the basic notions of rational choice decisions, mimetic isomorphism can be found in uncertain situations:

> Particularly in situations of high uncertainty, where the preconditions of action (Handlungsbedingungen) seem ambiguous and unclear, and adequate methods for problem solving are lacking, organizations can be expected to follow models that have either already been implemented by successful organizations or that are propagated as "best-practices" by consultants. (Schiller-Merkens, 2008, p. 58, translation by the authors)

It remains unclear, even in academic debate, which benefits city governments (or politicians) can reliably expect from online participation and dialogue. Therefore, we can safely assume that communication practitioners in city governments face an uncertain situation when deciding on the role and strategy of implementing social media platforms for government and administration communication. According to isomorphism, organizations, then, tend to rely on co-orientation and imitation by monitoring similar organizations' structures and practices. From this, we derived a second hypothesis:

H2:   *The decision to implement or abstain from participatory online communication is largely relational and driven by the observed behavior of other city administrations.*

Method

To shed light on the motivations, dynamics, and organizational patterns behind participatory online communication, we conducted semistructured face-to-face interviews with municipal secretaries in selected Swiss cities. Qualitative interviews have proven useful in studies with similar research questions on governments (and other political actors) and their use of new online communication tools (e.g., Chadwick, 2011; Karpf, 2012; Kreiss, 2011; Mossberger, Wu, & Crawford, 2013).

City administrations are heterogeneous organizations with many units. The focus here is on the communication of the city administration that is directed at the city population, excluding all platforms for tourists, city marketing, attracting investors, and the like. For this study, we interviewed the municipal secretaries, who are the heads of the chancellery, the key administrative department of local governments. They function as the primary link between political governments and the operational administration (departments). Municipal secretaries are the administrative superiors of the communication heads. They are informed and make strategic decisions about all communicative actions in the city administration. Because of their expertise and knowledge concerning past, current, and future affairs of their city, municipal secretaries often are favored contacts in academic research on local administration and government in the Swiss context (e.g., Ladner, 2008). In some larger cities, both the municipal secretary and the city's central communication official took part in the interview. The interviews were conducted in-person at the offices of the municipal secretaries during summer 2013. The interviews lasted between 20 minutes and one hour.

The sampling of the cities for the interviews was based on a previous part of this research project, in which we had quantitatively determined the intensity of participatory online communication in all Swiss cities. To build a sample answering our research question about why cities adopt or abstain, we decided to focus on cities with very high levels of implementation and cities with no participatory online communication. Due to research resources, we targeted 21 cities—with an option to extend this sample should data saturation not be attained.

Table 1. Sample of Cities (in Order by Group and Population Size).

	City	Population	Language region
Cities with dialogue forums (all)	Basel	163,216	German
	Luzern	77,491	German
	St. Gallen	72,959	German
	Rapperswil-Jona	26,212	German
	Wetzikon	22,118	German
	Baden[a]	17,929	German
	Thalwil[a]	17,213	German
	Cham	14,808	German
	Wohlen[a]	14,443	German
	Horw[a]	13,444	German
	Lenzburg	8,296	German
Cities with highest number of participatory elements	Zurich	372,857	German
	Geneva	187,470	French
	Bern	124,381	German
	Winterthur	101,308	German
	Onex	17,642	French
Cities without participatory elements (*N* = 45)	Bulle	18,947	French
	Bellinzona	17,373	Italian
	Ebikon	12,116	German
	Chiasso	7,737	Italian
	La Neuveville	3,495	French

[a] City (municipal secretary) opted not to take part in the study.

With the aim to have a broad variety of cities (and therefore a broad variety of perceptions about implementation) in the sample, we included cities from all three language regions in Switzerland, assuming that cultural differences may reflect why they adopt or abstain. Because city size correlated with implementation in our quantitative analysis, we also selected cities with different populations. Swiss cities are rather small in international comparison, with a mean population of 23,000. Zurich is by far the largest city in Switzerland. We included all 11 cities with dialogue forums. Four of the cities with dialogue forums declined to give an interview and could not be substituted, because all cities with dialogue forums were already part of the sample. As a second group, we added the five cities with the highest number of participatory elements on their websites. Because our research question centers also on reasons why cities abstain, it was important to include nonadopters in the sample. This is based on our assumption that abstention cannot per se be understood as "not yet," but may result from a rational decision or institutional constraints. Five cities with no participatory online communication were randomly selected from 45 cases, taking into account population size and language regions. This resulted in a sample of 21 cities, of which 17 participated in the study. Although 17 interviews may seem a small number, the ongoing transcriptions and analyses of interviews indicated data saturation—that is, more interviews would have led to more repetition but not new information (Mason, 2010).

After the interviews, we asked the interviewees to provide us with available documents, such as strategy papers, social media guidelines, and minutes of government meetings. We used these documents to perform a qualitative content analysis. All interviews were fully transcribed and translated into German.

Results

We derived four main results from our interviews; in short, they are as follows: First, the analysis of the interviews revealed diffuse motivation patterns in city governments for implementing participatory elements. Second, the municipal secretaries stressed the relatively low demand of such tools on the part of citizens and, therefore, the limited reach of participatory online communication. Third, they indicated that they are aware of the friction between the more informal online engagement that is fostered by these instruments and the formalized policy making in city governments. Fourth, the resources for initiating, maintaining, and elaborating participatory online communication were considered crucial. Interestingly, the opinions about participatory online communication did not vary much between cities that adopted such tools and cities that abstained. Even in the cities with dialogue forums, social media platforms, and so on, municipal secretaries as the key administrative officials were largely skeptical about their potential for political participation. The following sections detail these main findings and our hypotheses.

Incentives

One of the main reasons that city governments offer participatory online communication is to keep up with a changing online communication landscape. More specific incentives that were mentioned did not primarily relate to the goal of seeking political participation in general, but rather to achieving specific strategic objectives.

Among the cities with online dialogue forums and/or many other participatory tools, we found fairly diffuse motivation patterns—for instance, being part of social networks. The interviewees perceived the adoption of social media and other online tools as a basic requirement of modern city administration, and they felt obliged to implement them. Anchor examples are: "The idea was to keep up with it as much as possible so as to not miss the boat" (personal interview, June 27, 2013), and "As an innovative, modern city you have to [use social media]" (personal interview, June 27, 2013). These diffuse motivations refer to internalized, generalized norms and a perceived pressure to comply with them.

Specific incentives, on the contrary, referred to strategic objectives. A frequently mentioned reason was to reach new target groups through online communication, such as younger cohorts. This is related to the perception that younger citizens tend to stay informed via online channels rather than the traditional press. Therefore, municipal secretaries hope to complement the ailing local print media by implementing online channels to inform and communicate with members of the public. At the same time, traditional media are still seen as the primary information channels for Swiss city administrations. Interviewees also addressed direct dialogue and feedback as a resource of legitimation. They believed that participatory elements could support identity management and enable faster responses from citizens to the city government's actions or decisions. Although the direct feedback function is considered a means of online communication, fostering political participation was not the cities' main objective; the idea of direct and unfiltered information distribution was more important.

In cities that abstained from participatory online communication, municipal secretaries also perceived social media as modern but did not see this as an incentive to use them for administration communication:

> It is now fashionable to tweet. And Facebook is used to disclose all kinds of things, on purpose. The risk is that these tools are not being used correctly when sending information to citizens. I do not think that Twitter and Facebook exist to inform citizens. They can be used for other things. There could be different, more useful tools. (personal interview, September 4, 2013)

Cities without participatory online communication emphasized that they did not see many specific incentives to use such tools. In this regard, their abstention was more guided by a strategic rationality than a normative rationality. Nonimplementation was, in most cases, explained by lacking resources and knowledge as well as framing social media as modern but not useful for communicating with citizens.

Another key finding regarding motivation is that the decision to offer participatory online communication is largely driven by administrative staff. The initial effort to implement tools such as social network sites, blogs, or microblogs often stems from a few staff members or even an individual employee—for instance, an IT manager or a communication head. In most cases, the initiative to implement participatory elements was not a political decision from the city's legislative or executive body. On the other hand, some cities' municipalities had made the political decision to restrict their administrative staff's use of social media for some time. Such social media limitations on the administration staff were critically discussed in the local press (Stäuble, 2012).

> For a while, we found ourselves in a strange situation in which, internally, the city administration was banned from accessing Facebook [at work]. The employee ban was imposed in 2008, so that they could not log in to Facebook. In 2011, the city started a Facebook group, but we, the employees, could not even have a look at what was going on there. (personal interview, June 10, 2013)

Our quantitative study had shown a correlation between city size and the implementation of participatory online communication—and this is also reflected in the perceptions of municipal secretaries. Some abstaining cities follow a wait-and-see strategy, postponing the implementation until they can learn from the experiences of other (larger) cities:

> In the discussion with the city council [it was said]: We are small, let's leave it to the larger cities to rack their brains about it. And in four to five years we will assess our situation. We will see what experiences the larger cities have made and draw our conclusions from it. (personal interview, August 28, 2013)

Demand

When city governments offer participatory online tools, it is often not for the sake of enhancing citizen participation and dialogue. City administrators perceive only low demand and poor resonance from citizens and do not believe that they can reach mass audiences and a general public online. In this view, online communication causes problems of representativeness and exclusion.

Interviewees rarely experienced any sort of direct request from citizens to engage in participatory online communication. They also did not receive indirect requests via political representatives in the city's legislative bodies. Obviously, there seems to be little or no demand for additional participation through online channels. Anchor examples are: "We have zero—zero—demand, and I mean it exactly as I say it" (personal interview, July 8, 2013), and "There is a strong demand . . . for more participation, but not via social media. There are no demands to be more active on those [platforms]" (personal interview, July 10, 2013). According to a representative survey conducted by one sample city,[5] only 4% of the population claimed to miss the city's presence on social media platforms. Although this is not representative of all the sample cities, it illustrates this reasoning. Cities that have implemented participatory elements have fairly low resonance and little interaction on the according channels.

Municipal secretaries in cities both with and without participatory online communication tools share the perception that they cannot reach a mass audience online. The press is still seen as the central channel to distribute and discuss city governments' information with a broader public, while online communication is only used to serve some of the approachable local publics. Municipal secretaries

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[5] This survey was conducted independently of our research project. It was initiated and financed by the city in 2013 (see https://www.ebikon.ch/politik/gemeinderat/bevoelkerungsbefragung-2013/#bevoelkerungsbefragung).

perceive a digital divide, especially regarding the nonuse of online channels by older cohorts. This somewhat contradicts a point mentioned above: An important motivation to implement participatory online tools is to reach new target groups, particularly younger people. However, in general, the municipal secretaries emphasized city governments' (and states') obligation to establish discourses with the broader public, not just with parts of it.

The low demand and limited reach may reflect the particular Swiss context and the perception of sufficient offers of participation and opportunities for citizens to engage in local politics.

> The physical and traditional opportunities are much more important than online participation. That is why we are not concerned if there is little online participation. . . . It is an important instrument, but not the most important one. (personal interview, August 20, 2013)

This message is also evident in a statement from the most active city administration in Switzerland, when it comes to online participation:

> It is a mix. That is the most important aspect. The online tools are smooth, and good and useful, but they remain complementary new tools in the mix—enabling many things, but also unfit for many other things. In some situations I just need the citizen assembly. Next week we have a public assembly. . . . We expect about one thousand citizens to attend. I cannot deal with this online, but need this event. It is a mix, and cities should be much braver about it. (personal interview, August 13, 2013)

Formal Constraints

Municipal secretaries in cities both with and without participatory online communication are skeptical of online participation because of conflicts with formal decision-making procedures, role conflicts, and frictions of implementation. The first problem addressed in this regard is the incompatibility of formally institutionalized decision making and the bottom-up (nonrepresentative) outcomes of deliberation processes.

> Well, you see, I can input all ideas, even wild ideas: ideas without any real chance; ideas that do not make sense. . . . We have to send it to the cantonal government later. And the canton may say: [in a sarcastic tone] "Hello?" I can literally imagine this scenario. (personal interview, July 8, 2013)

> When someone wants to start a popular initiative or something similar, he is not going to do it online. Because he particularly wants to avoid the risk of it not being legally binding in the end. (personal interview, August 13, 2013)

A second aspect of the skepticism about online participation was the city government's role in moderating or facilitating local public debate. Not all respondents agreed with this argument, but some

municipal secretaries generally noticed a role conflict and doubted that the state should supply and moderate platforms for public debates, because this is traditionally perceived to be one of the mass media's main functions.

> Will the state become a facilitator of public debate? Is it really smart for a city administration to say: "Let's open a platform for citizens to discuss?" (personal interview, July 10, 2013)

> You always need some sort of moderator, someone to set the agenda. In classic theory, the mass media do that. That is their function. They do nothing else but set the agenda and moderate public discourse. (personal interview, July 10, 2013)

A third aspect of the skepticism about online participation was that potentially enthusiastic citizens give inputs or frequently participate through a city's online communication channels. They may be frustrated if their deliberation outcomes are not or only partially implemented. People may have different expectations about how their city government will respond to their inputs on political or administrative topics. The central question here is how city governments and administrations will proceed with online contributions from citizens.

> The problem with such participation stories is that you must not start these projects if nothing is to happen afterward. With participation, it is important that something comes out of the engagement with people, on the basis of their participation. (personal interview, July 10, 2013)

> If we do not succeed, there is great potential for frustrations on both sides. On the side of participants, if the government, despite acknowledging its input, proceeds with its plans as they were set out from the start. (personal interview, June 27, 2013)

These doubts were voiced by the municipal secretaries of cities that had implemented discussion forums and many social media and other potentially participatory tools. Among cities that abstained, such arguments were less specific, but rather pointed at the perception that such tools were not useful for public administration in general.

Resources

Municipal secretaries consider personnel and financial resources to be crucial. In cities without participatory online tools, resources are a central argument against implementation; in cities with participatory communication, they become pivotal only in later stages of maintenance and diversification. At a certain point in this process, the balance between (un)certain costs and (un)certain benefits seems to shift. The question arising, then, is whether participatory elements really add value or simply produce costs, and whether previously installed online channels can be maintained after their pilot phase. Switching off participatory online communication may produce a more negative public echo than nonimplementation.

With regard to resources, interviewees again mentioned the aspect of city size. Larger cities are assumed to be able to spend more money and staff resources on online communication. Interestingly, this perception was expressed independently of the actual city size, even in the largest of abstaining cities in our sample.

> The first question was whether it is really necessary that a public administration confronts itself with the people on such a level. . . . I cannot imagine an issue about which everyone can discuss about anything. This is not our function. Another reason is that we are a small administration. Our city is small compared to other administrations . . . that are more developed. It would also require a large investment and someone to administer it. (personal interview, September 4, 2013)

In relation to costs and benefits, many interviewees again pointed out the lack of representativeness of online comments and the low public demand. Providing participatory elements for only a handful of people is considered hard to justify because such services are paid for by taxes. The staff resources necessary to maintain participatory online communication are a crucial argument, because many cities face budget cuts. An additional point here is that, in Switzerland, annual expenditures exceeding a certain amount need approval from parliament or the public (through a mandatory referendum). The resource argument is therefore always a political argument.

> There is a certain segment (of the population) that takes up the dialogue if we start one. We know certain users of Twitter and Facebook, it is always the same people. It cannot be this way: providing lots of capacities and resources for a dialogue with single individuals. Those costs cannot be justified. From the perspective of participation—there is no [other] country in the world where direct democracy is institutionalized on the local level to such an extent. (personal interview, July 10, 2013)

Explaining Administrations' Skepticism of Participatory Online Communication

The data from our interviews sustain the argument that "exploiting new technology for political mobilization has uncertain benefits . . . while it has very certain costs, both communicational and organizational" (Cardenal, 2011, p. 84). Interviewees in various cities emphasized the costs of the implementation of new online participatory elements. One needs additional staff to produce meaningful content and to give feedback to citizens. Some interviewees explicitly mentioned that additional staff would have to be employed to professionally maintain an online tool set, which would increase organizational costs. And, while these costs are evident, the benefits of new online participation channels are hard to predict:

> We believe that the necessary staff resources need to be supplied in order to properly maintain social media. This was one reason to stay away from (social media). But the main reason was: we do not see the added value or additional benefit, or find the added value or additional benefit to be relatively small. (personal interview, July 8, 2013)

City administrations are inclined to make initial investments to experiment with participatory online media, but they are also concerned about the unclear long-term cost-benefit ratio. Most cities that did not use social media, blogs, or forums made a conscious decision to abstain from such platforms because of the expected costs involved and the expectation of few benefits. In cities with dialogue forums and many participatory tools, implementation was often linked to a reversed "calculation": The rationale of being modern and not to miss the boat implies that they also assume (normative) costs of nonimplementation. Although cities without participatory online communication showed more strategic rationality (assessing the costs of implementation), cities that already have such tools often refer to a normative rationality (assessing the costs of nonimplementation). This information supports hypothesis 1: The decision to implement or abstain from participatory online communication is largely driven by rational consideration of expected costs and benefits.

Although the decision about whether to implement participatory online communication often can be traced to single individuals in the administration, it must be stressed that the institutional context is crucial for this reasoning. Online discussions about acute local issues are not on par with formalized, recurring, and legally binding exchanges between citizens and the administration. Also, research on political online communication has in many cases shown that social media, for instance, work well for individuals but less for institutions.

Swiss cities often monitor one another's behavior concerning participatory online communication and engage in institutionalized exchanges about the use of participatory elements and online communication in general. They have organized national conferences among municipal secretaries or communication heads to discuss social media usage in administrations. We also found many references to co-orientation. City administrations monitor the behavior and strategies of other city administrations, particularly in larger cities, and copy their guidelines. However, they often refer to problems of comparability, underlining strategic insecurities. Larger Swiss cities tend to monitor cities in other countries, because they do not find comparable cases and benchmarks in Switzerland.

> If you start something [new], you observe what others have already done. You compare. You assess who is more advanced. This is relevant for [us]. We observe how others implement concepts. If Lugano has implemented something, we scrutinize what exactly they have done. It does not mean that we only copy. But we observe. And when we find something, we say: This is how they did it, let's do it similarly. (personal interview, September 4, 2013)

This information supports hypothesis 2: The decision to implement or abstain from participatory online communication is largely relational and driven by the observed behavior of other city administrations. Interviewees mentioned co-orientation and considered it important. However, it was not a decisive factor in deciding whether to implement participatory online communication at all, but rather of how to implement it. Furthermore, the institutional context of administration communication is a key factor: Although the preferences of municipal secretaries may be in favor of or against participatory online tools, it is the institutional context that determines the constraints of implementation.

Discussion

We began this article by asking why city administrations implemented participatory online communication or why they opted not to implement. We found that both rational considerations of costs and benefits as well as relational and institutional aspects can explain implementation. Rational considerations took into account not only presumed costs but the unclear benefits and the expected costs of nonimplementation. In most cases, diffuse motivations referring to perceptions about modern administration were more important than tangible, specific motivations such as aiming at certain target groups or specific processes. From an institutional perspective, it was clear that city administrations monitor the decisions and behavior of other cities, particularly larger cities. Thus, the decisions about implementation are not only guided by the communicative needs and strategies of a city´s administration but are, to a great extent, relational.

We believe that the two aspects addressed in our hypotheses are interconnected. City administrations in Switzerland understand the specific characteristic of participatory online communication and that it works differently from mass media. This causes uncertainty about the cost-benefit ratio and raises questions about the compatibility of institutionalized forms of decision making with online participation. In this view, meaningful online participation is only possible if the online input from citizens can be processed in off-line formal decision making. On the demand side, online participation is not perceived as an instrument that meets a need. City administrations report that citizens do demand more participation, but not online, and that there is little resonance with the participatory elements they have implemented. This is expressed not only as skepticism from cities that abstain from online participation but a general perception: Even cities that have implemented online participation are unsure about its benefits, but they feel pressure to innovate, to perform modern administration.

The mechanism described by Durkheim, of actors converting an external structural force into an internal motivational force, may apply here: The decision to implement online participation tools may not only be linked to a rational, strategic weighing of costs and expected benefits but has become a reaction to the normative force of the factual. Our interviews revealed that the decision to implement online participation tools is often linked to engaged individuals or a small group of employees who—we could argue along with Durkheim—have internalized the norm that technologies which foster participation are part of contemporary administration and have converted it into their own motivations. This would also imply that nonimplementation increasingly requires justification, in the sense of Pascal's wager. The high levels of Internet access and media savvy in Switzerland drive this normative rationality.

Normative assumptions about the participatory potential of online communication do not necessarily unfold and thrive in a real-life setting. Despite the favorable preconditions, the Swiss political system with its many elements of direct democracy also undermines the potential of participatory online communication. Swiss citizens already have a broad variety of opportunities to participate at hand, particularly on the local level. Contrary to online participation, these institutionalized forms are already embedded into formal, legally binding local decision making. Thus, the reluctance of city administrations can be understood as a reflection of their situation between the normative rationality of supplying modern

tools for citizen participation and the constraints of the formalized context of administration communication and a broad availability of established direct participation.

As with all qualitative research designs, one must be careful of deriving general assumptions from these results. Switzerland certainly is a special case. However, we argue that it also is a critical case that illustrates some important limitations regarding the promises of online participation. Interactive and participatory online tools have the inherent potential to transform the communication of governments and administrations with their populations into a less unidirectional, less top-down form that may lead to dialogue and deliberation. However, whether this potential can unfold is not a story of technology, but one of political, legal, socioeconomic, and cultural contexts.

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