



GERMAN PARTIES AND WEB 2.0 – A WAY TO DELIBERATIVE POLITICS

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Abstract:

This paper – according to different case studies – examines how German Parties used Web 2.0 for their campaigns and if they provide channels for a new deliberative democracy.

PRELIMINARY REMARKS

The political “spring” in the Middle East, worldwide protests against the power of the financial markets, and the *ad hoc* success of the Pirate Party in the recent Berlin state election – as different and difficult to compare as these events are, discussions of all of them have focused on a “new” medium of communication – Web 2.0. The daily press, like earlier academic conferences, have debated the extent to which social media, wikis or Twitter might be capable of initiating a new, participatory democratic movement, and to which extent these media were and are themselves a part of this supposed movement and restructuring of the public sphere, as has often been stated (Shirky 2008, Li/Bernoff 2008).

Looking at antecedents of these worldwide developments, Barack Obama’s election to the U.S. presidency in 2008 can be seen as pioneering in many regards. The Democrats’ election campaign and the methods they used to generate votes can be regarded as turning points in political and media history. The new generation of the internet, Web 2.0, gave its users new ways of communicating that were used by establishment politics – particularly for election campaigns – for the first time on a grand scale by Obama in 2008. These new communication methods’ key to success lay in their ability to offer their recipients a direct feedback channel where they could express their opinions directly and immediately. This new way of shaping politics gave rise to hopes that it would seem have not or not yet come to complete fruition. The initial success of Obama’s new Web 2.0 strategy created a stir far beyond the United States, Germany included (Elter 2010b). Some even saw the new offerings of Web 2.0 as heralding a new architecture of political communication (Pannen 2010).

Thus it is not surprising that, since the federal election of 2009 at the very latest, all German parties have developed their own Web 2.0 strategy in an attempt to copy Obama’s success. It became clear that this had not worked in the 2009 federal election, in which fewer citizens cast their votes than in the 2005 election. Most German parties had taken the American campaign as their model and tried to adapt it to the German context. But this precisely is the reason for their failure (Elter 2010a, 21f.). The fundamental differences that render an adequate comparison between American and German election campaigns impossible became particularly evident in the parties’ Web 2.0 strategies. Therefore, the often-repeated Americanisation theory (Dörner 2001, Meyer 2001) does not apply here. The candidates were too different, the party systems were too different, and the potential target groups were too different. And the reasons for the German electorate’s generally lukewarm response to political Web 2.0 campaigns are equally diverse (Abold 2005).

OBJECT OF STUDY AND STRUCTURAL DATA

As all German parties had established a presence on the internet and on Web 2.0 following the federal election of 2009 and were using all of these different channels, the present study aims to examine how this trend developed in subsequent years on the state parliamentary level. Web 2.0 communication is analysed using two case studies, the 2010 state election in North Rhine-Westphalia (NRW) and the 2011 city-state election in Hamburg (HH). For the purposes of this study, the parties’ homepages, the social networking sites Facebook, Studi VZ and Mein VZ, the microblogging site Twitter and the video-sharing site YouTube were defined as Web 2.0. The output channels Twitter and Facebook were subjected to a combined quantitative and qualitative analysis with regard to dialogic communication patterns. In the case of NRW, the homepages of the state associations were also evaluated. The average German voter in particular, whose experience of Web 2.0 can be classed as low, will first use the official homepage of a party to orient him- or herself and not go directly to social networks. In general, observable trends in general internet usage in Germany are stable. These trends affect mainly the sociodemographic factors of age, gender and education. 87 percent of men use the internet, but only 67 percent of women. The internet still remains a medium of those population groups with a higher level of formal education. In 2011, 39 percent of those leaving secondary school with only a basic level of qualifications used the net, as opposed to 94 percent of university graduates. When using the internet for political content, the focus of this study, clear differences between age groups are evident. While 65 percent of under 35s use the internet to find out the news and political content, this is true for only 55 percent of over 35s and 30 percent of over 59s (all data from the second quarter of 2011, research group Wahlen – Forschungsgruppe Wahlen 2011). It should be added here that this data was gathered for general internet usage, not usage of Web 2.0 specifically. Neither was any distinction made between news and political information. If this is taken into consideration, an even clearer picture of the typical Web 2.0 user researching political content would probably emerge: male, with a high level of formal education and young (no older than 35). This user behaviour alone is in contradiction of democratic structures. Rather, one could speak of Web 2.0 being used by a media elite or digital avant-garde. The usage of these new technical channels of communication requires a comparatively high level of prior knowledge and thus rather reinforces the “digital divide” than enables representation and participation relevant to the whole of society. Only within the digital “elite” is participation promoted and a new political discourse initiated (Wolling, Seifert, Emmer 2010). As observations on Germany so far show that most German parties continue to prefer homepages of the 1.0 generation, the examination of homepages was not continued explicitly for Hamburg following the NRW case study. The communication service Twitter, on the market since 2006, caused a sensation during the U.S. election campaign of 2008 and was used by the German parties as a standard channel from 2009 onwards. Finally, the new social networks and communities (referred to jointly as social media) were the primary focus of the parties’ Web 2.0 activity. The underlying thought was to reach out to the target group of potential first-time voters and younger voters. In Germany, these networks are particularly successful among younger people (target group of up to 30 years of age). The networks Mein VZ and Studi VZ are aimed at an even younger audience (up to 25 years old). These networks are also considered part of the so-called Web 2.0. In the present study, both official accounts and profiles as well as those verified by cross-checking the respective state associations counted as a “party”. Only the parties voted into parliament were examined. Other parties were not taken into account - with the exception of the Pirate Party, that could be ascribed a particular affinity to Web 2.0 on account of its programmatic line and its party manifesto. As parties’ political communication is particularly concentrated around the elections, it was decided to take the week prior to the election – generally called the “hot phase” – as the fixed period of investigation. During this phase, the voting decisions of undecided and swing voters can still be influenced. The period of investigation was extended to a month for the Hamburg senate election in order to observe changes before and after the election.

OBJECTIVES AND METHODOLOGY

The 2010 study intended to ascertain whether parties’ Web 2.0 strategies were still being pursued on the level of the federal states and state parties following the 2009 federal election. Thus the initial question must be which channels the parties used in which way. Above all, the



intention was to establish the extent to which a participatory approach to politics and voter involvement was promoted and extended by Web 2.0 strategies. For up till now, research has considered this collaborative concept and the theory of extending discourse to include different, new participants one of Web 2.0 communication's central elements (Münker 2009, Benkler 2006, Gladwell 2000, Howe 2008, Tapscott 2008). Thus these hypotheses need to be tested for the case of political parties, as firstly, parties in Germany are constitutionally defined as participating "in the formation of the political will of the people". Secondly, according to the logic inherent in their system, they have the strongest interest in immediately translating the participation of politically interested citizens into votes. The main focus and research interest of both this empirical study and the resulting discourse-theoretical deliberations was the quantification of the discourse conducted via Web 2.0 between parties, their frontrunners and the population. The methodology was selected accordingly: primarily, we are dealing with quantitative content analysis. In some categories however, an evaluation according to qualitative criteria subsequently was undertaken.

SELECTED FINDINGS AND CONCLUSION

While valid for the case of NRW, the general proposition that Web 2.0 communication does not create new dialogue and interaction requires moderation following the evaluation of the Hamburg study results. For while the hypothesis certainly holds as far as Twitter is concerned, a different picture emerges for Facebook. It should be noted here that neither Twitter nor the two other channels of communication had any significant impact on dialogue rates. Overall, these are sobering results for both NRW and Hamburg (in spite of the extension of the period of investigation). There can be no question of heightened participation or a redemocratisation of voters. Not only was the number of entries, posts and tweets so low in the case of some parties that it seems more apt to speak of non-communication than of communication. The poor response of potential voters and lack of dialogue also suggest that so far there is no new "party" democracy 2.0 to speak of in Germany. Only some individual parties – mainly the Green and Pirate Parties – had a notable offer used by interested individuals and sympathisers. The overall picture might be different when it comes to non-governmental organizations or opponent grassroots-groups – but this was not the focus of this examination. Whether or not a conclusive answer is gained to the question of whether using new media also heightens dialogue with voters will depend of the results of the further state elections during 2011. Results so far suggest that regional variables dependent on events and distribution channels will become apparent. The study's current results show that no direct connection between the intensity of Web 2.0 communication output and the response it generates can be drawn. Similarly, no increase in interaction or promotion of dialogue is evident. It would seem that there is no connection between the use of a communication channel and its effect. In this regard, hopes for a renaissance of deliberative democratic models or a virtual grassroots movement are premature – at least for Germany. Incidentally, studies from Switzerland reveal a similar picture, even though there are far more elements of direct democracy there than in Germany (Rademacher 2010). In my opinion, research to date has focused too exclusively on the technical possibilities of Web 2.0 and from these has extrapolated the theory of heightened participation. That this is an error has already been shown for Web 1.0 (Münker & Roesler 1997). With the exception of prominent individual cases (e.g. the Obama campaign, Arab Spring, Web 2.0 use by non-established political groups), there is no empirical proof that completely new conditions for political and voter discourse now exist – particularly in established representative democracies such as Germany (Schrape 2010). Studies to date have only included comparative elements to a limited extent (Koopmanns & Zimmermann 2010; Gerhards & Schäfer 2010), or have examined Web 2.0 according to other criteria and have not focused explicitly on political parties as agents (Zimmermann 2006). An international comparison would reveal whether Web 2.0 is associated with particular democratic systems or proves particularly popular in certain systems. These approaches, as well as systematic interdisciplinary collaboration between the disciplines of sociology and political, cultural, media and communication studies, as yet remain only research aims.

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