

**THE DEMOCRATIC POTENTIALS OF INTERACTIVE INFORMATION
TECHNOLOGIES UNDER DISCUSSION – PROBLEMS, VIEWPOINTS, AND
PERSPECTIVES**

by

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A. Introduction

In more and more areas of society, communication and cooperation procedures are being carried out by IT-networks. Even politics have not been spared by this development, although it's in the beginnings here. This work wants to illuminate the perspectives of modern democracy under information-technical change with reference to appropriate empirical and theoretical knowledge. Apart from the introduction and the conclusion, it consists of three parts. In the first step, the main arguments of the controvert discussion, which had taken place in the last years concerning the democratic potential of interactive information technology, will be traced. The following thoughts represent an attempt to identify a mediate position between the different sides, which may develop into a new paradigm based more on pragmatic calculation than on theoretical approach. The third step brings up the question whether the existing practice of examining the developmental potential of democracy in the electronic age mainly in the triangle formed by politics, media public, and population, is still up-to-date under socio-technical circumstances of a digital information society.

B. Basic terms and facts

To be able to deal systematically with the question after the democratic potentials of interactive information technologies beyond the normal empirical-descriptive examination, it is necessary to clarify these terms first.

I. Interactive information technologies

Information can be classified as signals which have meaning and communicate to their environment in various forms: to machines as bits and bytes for example, to humans as data, text, graphics, motion pictures and language respectively as a combination of these presentation forms.

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Four characteristics are generally named as “performance features” of the new information technologies: first, the possibility of a comfortable and affordable access to public and private communication, second, the possibility of dual communication or interactivity, third, the possibility of multimedia or the ability to continuously process, save and transfer data, text, language, motion and still pictures by means of both mass and personal communication, and fourth, the possibility of globality or the ability to establish communication on a cross-border level without delay. In addition, the aspects of high dynamics, the loss of the temporal link between cause and effect and the possibility to communicate confidentially and authoritatively within open networks could be mentioned as further characteristics. The development of asymmetric cryptography has created conditions for the realization of not only commercial applications as digital business-to-business cooperation or business-to-consumer cooperation, but for electronically arranged political acting up to electronic elections as well (see Winkel 2000b: 24 f.).

At present, the internet is the main object of examination, regardless of political, economic or social information-technological innovations are concerned. The internet is not a net in the physical or communicational sense but an open virtual network based on a common transmission protocol. Internet applications are email, websites, information services, newsgroups and chatgroups. Email is mainly, but not exclusively, used for one-to-one communication, websites are primarily used for the self-portrayal to a spread audience, and the usage of information services provides not only knowledge for many different reasons but also applications like software. A newsgroups can be described as an electronic file box or digital bulletin board for many-to-many communication, whereas chatgroups represent electronic communication in real time. The central features and strengths of the internet are the so-called hyperlinks, which connect all parts of the network, and less the performance in communication procedures and services. This is the key for advancing to a stage of hitherto not known interactivity and multimedia.

The term “information society” is often used to mark the enormous social implications of the informational-technical change and the enormous information flood created thereby (more to the different interpretations of this term at Kleinsteuber 1997 and Winkel 2000a: 205 f.). It is not only used in a very blurred manner but is also ideologically controversial like no other term. Many of the interpretations that play a role in the contemporary discussion can be traced back to two ideal types, actually either to the mainly humanist or to the predominantly economical characterized understanding of information society. In the humanist approach, the transition of the modern society into the stage of information society is especially marked by the fact that with the change of information technology, the “information explosion” in scientific areas is followed by an “information explosion” in daily life and that principally every member of society can profit from this. The economic interpretation understands the information society as a development stage of the modern or post-modern age, where the resource “information”, along with information technology as means of supply, appears as equal to the classic means of production labour, land, and capital, and provides new opportunities for the preservation and the increase of societal welfare due to the reorganization of economy and labour. From this viewpoint, which dominates in economical and political centres of power, the resource “informa-

tion” and the instruments of information technology appear so to speak as trumps in the competition of economical locations.

II. Democratic process and political public

According to wide-spread comprehension, three analytical dimensions can be distinguished when characterizing democratic policy, namely institutional, regarding the content, and procedural. If the last dimension is moved into foreground, you can further distinguish three ideal types of stages of the democratic decision making process, which are settled partly in pre-governmental areas: first, the stage of problem perception, at which political information and impulse are received, second, the stage of discourse, where different societal interests are being expressed and components of the political agenda are being established, and third, the stage of the political decision, which takes place in modern democracies predominantly with the inclusion of instruments of representation. Not only stability of the democratic institutions is a prerequisite for the functioning of the democratic process, but also the existence of an adequate civic culture – something that Benjamin Barber accurately expresses in his metaphor of the “strong democracy” (Barber 1994).

Democratic policy is not thinkable without a public communication sphere. This has above all two functions: on the one hand it shall enable the positioning of societal interests into areas of governmental decision making, and on the other hand it shall bring more transparency to societal problems and reveal political processes and balances of power. In this context, three different levels of public can be distinguished: the “encounter public”, the “assembly public” and the “mass media public” (see Gerhards/Neidhard 1990). In modern societies the mass media public, especially the television public, has established itself as the fundamental form of general public. This raises the question, whether and to what extent the interactive information technologies are in the situation to challenge the position of the conventional mass media and especially the leading media, television.

C. The controversy about the democratic potential of network communication

Naturally, there is a controversial discussion about the perspective of democracy in the electronic age. The three analytical categories introduced by Hubertus Buchstein (see Buchstein 1996, but also Winkel 1999b: 27 ff.) provide a solution for understanding this controversy: according to it, there is the optimists’ camp, assuming that information technological innovations generally promote a tendency of participation due to the specific characteristics of network communication; second, there is a camp of neutralists, supporting the idea that these innovations are ambivalent for the democratic system and therefore can be made productive in the political sense only with a directed policy, and third, a pessimists’ or skeptics’ camp, where the optimist position is diametrically opposed by the view that the political usage of networks is limited by their technical abilities alone. At the same time, pessimists point out socio-economic asymmetries that would counter any participational utilization of the new technology. Esther Dyson (see Dyson 1997), Alvin Toffler (see Toffler 1993) and Howard Rheingold (see Rheingold 1991/1993) can be classified among others to the optimistic position, Benjamin Barber (see

Barber 1995), Claus Leggewie (see Leggewie 1998) and Herbert Kubicek (see Kubicek 1998) to the neutralist position, and to the pessimistic position Phil Agre (see Agre 1997) and last but not least also Hubertus Buchstein (see Buchstein 1996).

I. The optimistic position

The optimists support the claim that the spreading of interactive information technology will automatically lead to an improvement of modern democracy with reference to the ability of network communication to provide citizens with comfortable, unfiltered, affordable and universal access to political information and occurrences (more to the optimistic position at Winkel 1999b: 28 ff.). The appropriate advantages can be seen on every level of the democratic decision making process – from the taking of impulse and information, over the discourse up to the final decision: On the first level, access to programs, planning documents, reports, records, and other political and official documents is made easier by the new technologies, on the second level, they provide manifold opportunities for citizens, civil societies, and other social groups to communicate with each other and with politicians, to replace conventional election procedures with virtual ones and to allow the practice of decisions through direct democratic methods where appropriate. In addition, contact between population and bureaucracy could be carried out on the basis of interactive information technology to save distance, time, and expenses.

Nevertheless, members of the optimistic camp occasionally derive different conclusions and recommendations from the described situation. With this in mind, there are three sub-variants of “net-optimism” that go beyond the main categories of Buchstein: market orientation, orientation onto the civil society, and the representation-centered type (more at Winkel 1999b: 28 ff.).

The market oriented sub-variant (see Dyson 1997), which corresponds in many points with the economic understanding of information society, comes to the conclusion to leave network communication largely to its own resources and therefore to economic competition: If state intervention is kept at a minimum and the evolving vacuum is left to be filled by market forces, then the net would develop not only its economical but also political potentials best.

As do advocates of market orientated net-optimism, supporters of the civil society sub-variant (see Rheingold 1993) plea for the state to renounce intervention to a large extent to shape the network. The difference between the two groups is however, that the later think of civil forces to fill the spaces instead of economic ones.

Concerning the structure of networks as well as the structure of the information society, they propose a model of a global “deliberative democracy”, which should act either as supplementary or in competition to representative democracy. Along with the increasing development of networks, interests that are still not represented could thus find access to the political agenda (see also Benhabib 1994 and Katz 1995).

The members of the third sub-variant of net-optimism believe in the improvement of the democratic representation through the technical improvement of transparency (understood as the degree of comprehensibility and clarity of structures and processes) and of responsiveness

(understood as the degree of feedback between representatives and the represented) (see Snider 1994). From such a viewpoint, innovations in information technology appear as something beneficial for modern democracy for two reasons: first, because the extended possibilities of access to politically relevant information improves both the knowledge of the represented concerning societal problems and the representatives' behaviour, and second, because newsgroups, chatgroups, and especially emails open new methods to confront representatives with the demands of the represented in the sense of a "communicational democracy" (see Wittkämper 1988).

The variant of net-optimism that has dominated in professional politics and in the economy for some time now is the market orientated type. Accordingly, former US vice-president Al Gore praises network communication with euphoria but rather blurred as a metaphor for democracy, and perceives a new "Athenian age" in its consolidation. Meanwhile, Bill Gates underlines the possibilities to carry out elections with the help of networks, along with the political chances interactive information technology offers.

II. The neutralist position

The high expectations, raised by politicians and leaders in economy on both sides of the Atlantic, are being opposed, however, in many areas by disillusioning experiences. Such opposition had been demonstrated already by the initiators of the Public Electronic Network in Santa Monica, one of the first attempts trying to use the democratic potentials of information technology productively on a local basis (see Siegele 1996). Not only the advantages, but also the disadvantages which differ in virtual and conventional processes of discussion and participation were clearly revealed here: the network community showed signs of decay, absurd and unreasonable ideas reached a level of importance in discussion groups they never would have reached elsewhere, virtual discourses ended up in like-minded individuals confirming each others' prejudices, different opinions were countered with vile insults, and it became obvious that virtual discussion groups need much more time to come to an agreement than conventional ones.

These and other questionable phenomena are the reasons for "net-neutralists" as Benjamin Barber, Claus Leggewie, or Herbert Kubicek to evaluate the consequences of information technology innovations with more criticism than net-optimists as Esther Dyson, Alvin Toffler, or Howard Rheingold (more to the neutralist position at Winkel 1999b: 31 ff.). They think of network communication as a technology that could both strengthen or weaken the democratic substance of modern societies. From this viewpoint, it is essential to ensure a maximization of the advantages with the disadvantages being minimized at the same time by appropriate policies and measures.

For the advocates of the ambivalence thesis, like the net-optimists, chances to improve the political participation through networks are existent on all levels of the democratic process. They too, stress the numerous opportunities the new technology is able to offer for the public administrations reform and the increase of its efficiency. However, the range of possible damages and mistakes members of this camp are concerned about, is of the same extent.

One of the frequently mentioned objections is the danger of a new social segmentation: The existing bias in knowledge and means of access – which are prerequisites for the usage of information technological systems – will lead to political discrimination, if not to political exclusion, of a large part of the population in case of an extensive shift of democratic functions to virtual networks. Empirical studies supporting this thesis prove that in the United States, many more white people own a personal computer than do black people or that the vast majority of World Wide Web users are male, white, and located in North America and Western Europe.

Another frequent objection reminds of the metaphor of the “transparent citizen”: Because of the traceability of virtual discourses and because the communication processes within networks leave electronic tracks, it is possible for national authorities and economic elites to create and exploit communication/personal profiles, and subsequently to identify, discipline and discriminate users with unwelcome political views. On the other hand, a development is conceivable with users securing their communications using modern cryptography, where the expression of opinions will be increasingly anonymous or hidden behind pseudonyms with consequences equally grave. Not only would the tendency towards growing verbal aggression be supported, but also the circulation of anticonstitutional and criminal contents encouraged, for example sexist or racist documents, or calls for violence against minorities.

A further danger emphasized by members of the neutralist camp is the loss of political orientation and capability of political acting as a result of an information flood on the individual level that is unmasterable: Political participation would need particular requirements for citizens to function properly. It is true that political participation requires the power of political judgment, and that the latter in turn requires a minimum of political interest and political knowledge. Absolutely wrong, however, is the often made assumption that the amount of knowledge increases in proportion to the amount of available information. It is rather likely that an abundance of information, just as a lack of information, will lead to misinformation and political confusion on the individual level. Outside the network, the society has numerous mechanisms to filter and to select information that enable individuals to distinguish between important and unimportant, reasonable and unreasonable, and reliable and unreliable. In the political area, selection is generally made by acquaintances who are known to be competent, representatives of parties which are favoured, and radio shows that have the reputation of being trustworthy. In the virtual world of the net there is a lack of appropriate filters and mechanisms of selection. For this reason, the user is exposed to an incalculable information flood which leads to a loss of political orientation and can permanently disturb both the ability and the willingness to act. In the worst case, populist and irrational trends could profit from this.

Furthermore, there are objections that the immense spreading, complexity, and heterogeneity of network communication would favour the differentiation of sub-cultures. The last consequence could be the erosion of the public sphere and the questioning of the constitutional requirements of democratic politics.

The advocates of the ambivalence thesis perceive the danger that participation potentials concerning information technology innovations could be submerged by the advancing commercialization of the net. A good example for such a development can be observed in all areas of

mass media. Television in the United States is exemplary for the disastrous consequences for democratic culture by commercialized mass media. To the same extent as the corporations' activities expand to the net, the character of this medium is changing – with the result that political information is suppressed by trivial information and that the communicating citizens are estranged from each other and suffer of uniformity. Even with a successful establishment of networks in the public sphere and accessibility for a majority of the population, the growing commercialization would change this sphere of political discourse into a space where users are reduced to their role as consumers and exposed to the “worst imperatives of McWorld” (Barber 1995: 270).

A logical consequence of this scenario are the recommendations given by advocates of the neutralist position for limiting the risks and taking advantage of the chances of information technology for the democratic system and democratic culture, centered in the demand for restricting commercialization. They are strictly against a one-sided economic organization of the net and support a model of mixed organization, implying a mixed solution between market, power, and society. Accordingly, the economic organization of the net should be enhanced by the civil and governmental elements of regulation.

The advocates of the ambivalence thesis see in promoting of such a structure – which is indispensable for a reasonable and responsible usage with risks and chances of information technology innovations by democratic systems - one of the central tasks for governments on the threshold of the new millennium. Governments have to start with regulations, sponsorship-programs, the promotion of non-commercial applications, and the support of non-commercial user groups, and lastly being a mediator who sets quality standards and brings together content and requirement of information in order to be able to meet this challenge.

The question whether there is a need for further measures to utilize the potentials of network communication for the development of modern democracy and to free it from the entanglement of commercialization, disintegration, and fragmentation is being evaluated differently by different advocates of the ambivalence thesis. They all agree to the necessity of confronting the danger of political marginalization with infrastructure measures, which will eventually lead to an increasing net accessibility and media competence of all sections of the population. One of the key measures in this context is the integration of schools to the network communication.

The danger of identification and the disciplining of communication users whose political views is not in accordance with leaders in politics, bureaucracy, and economics, could be prevented by electronic cryptography that ensures confidentiality. Different measures are being discussed, like governmental and civil control and the introduction of a “netiquette” as an ethical codex of behaviour, to banish sexist, racist, and violence promoting contents from the net.

The danger of political disorientation resulting from being flooded by unfiltered information could be countered by establishing appropriate mechanisms of selection in the net. Several measures are being considered: the creation of a system of “meta-media” such as program guides, bibliographies, electronic magazines, and virtual discussion forums which are looked after by publishers. Institutions of this kind should substantially help to prevent irrational and

populist trends from intruding the net and counter the danger of societal disintegration by maintaining collective attentiveness and continuance of common knowledge.

III. The pessimistic position

Skeptics of the net, such as Hubertus Buchstein and Phil Agre, are more cautious because of technical characteristics when it comes to the potentials of telecommunication that could improve the democratic system (more to the pessimistic position at Winkel 1999b: 38 ff.). According to them, even the establishment of selection authorities could not prevent the public from disintegrating through network communication because these selection authorities would themselves belong to the forces of cultural differentiation that cause the disintegration. To support this thesis, they refer to experiences made with electronic newspapers: Such a newspaper is not being read as a conventional one that encourages the reader to pick up information not interesting to him or her at first glance but via mouse click, searching for special topics. Anything beyond this scope remains lost as well as the ability to perceive the environment which is essential for creating a collective social consciousness. In this scenario, there is place for either political orientation in the net that prevents citizens from retreating from politics and putting a stop to irrational and populist trends, or the maintenance of a public sphere at cost of political disorientation and all of the consequences involved – but not both. The main problem concerning selection authorities that opposes the utilization of information technology potentials for improving the democratic system becomes obvious now: Considered under democratic aspects, their technical abilities turn the networks into a world full of bad alternatives in which one mistake can only be prevented by accepting another one.

Beyond that, the net-pessimists point at specific socio-economic conditions for the development of network communication in order to unmask neutralist conceptions for political utilization of the information-technological change as mere illusion. The neutralist demand for the provision of general net accessibility could be never fulfilled due to disparities within and between societies. The highly developed countries already lack sufficient participation preconditions for the entire population which is especially valid for technical knowledge, capability to speak English, finances, and technical internet access. The problem of access gets even worse when considering the inter-societal dimension. In large parts of the world, the infrastructure required for network communication is missing, not only data cables with high capacities but also telephone lines.

With this in mind, the pessimists urge to utmost caution in utilizing technical innovations for political processes. They want to restrict interactive information technology mainly to civil areas of society and warn in advance of transferring substantial parts of the democratic process to networks. The opposition in the pessimists' camp is especially strong against any innovation that could be used to replace the conventional democratic decision making process with “plebiscite push-button-voting” (Buchstein 1996: 604). At this point, the net-pessimists meet with representation centered net-optimists.

D. The new perspective of a pragmatic neutralism

The question whether the optimists', the neutralists', or the pessimists' arguments should be valued most, can not be answered here. Another aspect seems more interesting anyway: Although the scientific controversy about democratic potentials of interactive information technology, where first the optimistic, then the neutralist, and lastly the pessimistic position has dominated, is still undecided as to whether the project of modernity has failed or not towards the end of the 20th century, the different camps are moving closer (see Winkel 1999a). This conviction can be described best as a modified type of neutralism that has evolved more out of pragmatic calculation than theoretic reflection and which lately has repeatedly played an important role. The assumption that information technology innovations bear equally a constructive and a destructive potential for modern democracy and that the possibility principally exists to benefit from the appropriate chances and to limit the risks, is changing from being a scientific premise to a construction of calculated optimism. The logic of this construction can be summed up by the author: Should it become evident one day that the net-optimists were right, then all measures taken would have been unnecessary. Should the same happen for the net-pessimists' position, then all measures taken would have been futile. However, both can be accepted easily instead of realizing one day that because of a radically optimistic or pessimistic evaluation, important decisions have been omitted.

A turn for pragmatic neutralism is in accordance with a keen consciousness for the fact that the virtual world of network communication does not represent an isolated space, but a space stepping up to the conventional spaces of societal interaction and therefore to the conventional forms of political public. Such a view allows us to think about joining the different types of communication that act as a basis for political public. Thus, specific advantages could be used and specific disadvantages could be minimized by making use of the political possibilities of socio-technical change. Not only political problems that result from the encounter public, the assembly public, and the mass media public could be defused, but also problems resulting from the characteristics of interactive information technology overall. Those problems have in many respects turned cyberspace into a world of bad alternatives and have started being a menace for democratic standards achieved by modern society. Conventional mass media and especially non-private broadcasting could be used, with the new applications attached, where common perception and orientation is required. And under circumstances where inter-human contact with its entire socio-emotional range is required, general public would be the solution, while the new technical instruments continue to support conventional interactions. Such a solution demands new thinking in many respects: Not individual communication media or services would be the main object of concern anymore, but the political contents and the communication needs of all participants.

E. The necessity of an extension of the discourse perspective

The sociological discussion about the democratic potentials of interactive information technology concentrates not exclusively, but nevertheless to a considerable degree on the reflection of communication modifications. These can be observed in a triangle formed by politics,

population, and media. But when regarding the fact that cooperation relations in all social areas are increasingly transferred to electronic networks, we have to ask if it is time to include communication with equal weight, so it reflects its function as the elementary social operation. This would direct our attention to very fundamental problems like the political consequences of specialization¹ and globalization² of modern society.

Answers to these questions vary depending on different scientific disciplines. For instance, it may still be appropriate for communication science, *Publizistikwissenschaft* (that is, conceiving of itself in the original sense of the word as “public science”), perhaps also under changed conditions of the digitized information society to model the transformation of communication relations in socio-technical transformations primarily as structural changes of the public. This should at least be done when it enables us to successfully find appropriate responses to the problem of the dissolution of the public/private boundaries and to the various convergences within the technical area by developing new analytical categories. Whether this can, likewise, be applied to political science, may be doubted. Due to a research objective traditionally extended to the entire spectrum of political and politically relevant phenomena, with the entrance of democratic society into the electronic age, not only do the arenas of the political process change, but also the respective social problems and challenges the political process aims to control.

One can see, by way of example, the precarious developments referred to as “symbolic policy” in the professional world. In its negative connotation this term stands for politicians, who enter a strategic alliance with journalists – in order to market political topics “as artificial

¹ When explaining the relation of mechanization and differentiation, it makes sense to start with the term of autopoiesis, which is taken from functionalistic system theory (see esp. Luhmann 1987). Autopoiesis stands for the constant expansion of social subsystems, which follow different functional logics and therefore increasingly close themselves off from one another. Autopoietic developments lead to an ever more complex and unclear human existence that is shaped ever more strongly by paradoxes, because individuals are tied into the most different subsystems in their specific environments and are subjected to the conflicting imperatives of the respective functional logics. The scope and the rate of differentiation processes depend to a considerable degree on the dimensions of the spheres of communication, in which humans can meet, exchange ideas and organize themselves. Therefore, innovations in information technologies substantially trigger the propelling forces of autopoietic developments: While communication- and co-operation relations, which contradict individual preferences and therefore have a collectivizing effect, still are the rule within a small social unit like a village community, their significance is already smaller in a larger social unit such as an urban metropolis. They become an exception only in the virtual world of network communications, where interaction possibilities grow boundlessly, as it were (for further reading see Winkel 1999b: 14 ff.).

² Looking at it from a perspective of political economy, the globalization term serves to designate the constantly progressing process of the world-wide division of labour. If one regards social relations on a fundamental level as relations of exchange which are carried out in dimensions of matter, energy and information, then the close relationship of innovations in information technologies and of the globalization processes at the end of the twentieth century becomes clear: These interactions, which are essentially limited to exchanges of information such as software transfers or financial transactions are handled increasingly on a transnational and global level, and they depend on the world-wide propagation of digital networks (for further reading see Winkel 1999b: 16 ff.).

communication products” (see Sarcinelli 1987: 24) in the context of a “constant exchange of information against publicity” (see Tenscher 1998: 203), gaining effective public attention without, however, letting actual deeds follow their “terminological shells and productions” (see Holtz-Bacha 1997: 18), so that urgent social problems remain unresolved.

By focusing simply on the triangle formed by politics, population, and the media public, it seems the penetration of symbolic policy at the expense of material policy is essentially due to the harmful effects of format criteria and news value criteria of the hegemonic medium: television (for further reading see Staab 1990). The essence of such interpretations can be summarized as follows: In modern society, the television public forms the crucial base of the political process. Whatever escapes TV-adequate criteria of “visualization, production, ritualization, emotionalization” and “personalization” (see Tenscher 1998: 191), and which beside this doesn't comply with the requirements of “negativism” and “sensationalism” (see Sarcinelli 1997: 333), is hardly obtainable in a television-centred society and concomitantly hardly transformable into politics. Under this framework, those who actually handle problems are not positively sanctioned, but instead are those who create the media-effective illusion of problem handling by dispatching publicity. Thus, those political participants who could earn our respect for solving actual challenges are not successful, and those who control “media-savvyness, telegenicity, and a TV-suitable charisma” are (see Tenscher 1998: 191). If you define your position as such, you can hardly avoid the conclusion that promotions of new technical information-applications are actually a suitable means to re-establish the equilibrium between symbolic and material policy: Herein, nevertheless, lies the chance to return to a compatible measure of the tremendously powerful impact of TV and its format criteria and news value criteria for the facilitation of politics and concomitantly for policy itself.

If, in contrast, one looks at these problems from a more global perspective, placing communication as the elementary social operation in the foreground, the picture changes: Then, new information technology appears primarily as a factor, which causes serious control system problems for modern society. This will result in unknown thrusts of differentiation³ and globalization⁴ processes. If one – driving the argumentation to an extreme for reasons of descriptiveness – assumes that the problem handling ability of the traditional political-

³ Developments of autopoietic differentiation are a substantial cause for the political control crisis, because with the advance of these differentiation processes on the system level and the increasing complexity and vagueness on the level of environments arises an increasing demand for decentralized control, which tailors itself to concrete interests of specific areas and particular spaces. The parliamentary-representative system frequently cannot perform these functions adequately, because the decision makers are too removed from the problems, in order to comprehend them in the necessary fashion and resolve them within reasonable time.

⁴ The progressing globalization of modern society, inseparably interwoven with autopoietic differentiation, represents a further substantial cause of the political control crisis, because policies have conventionally been organized on the level of the nation state. Therefore, these policies are frequently overstrained when they are confronted with problems containing transnational dimensions. Or as Ulrich Beck's puts it: “Globalization is a process, which undermines the nation state and puts in into perspective, because a manifold, not locally bound multiplicity of social sets, communications networks, market relations, and ways of life cross-networks the territorial boundaries of the nation state” (see Beck 1997: 18). Furthermore, the position

– assumes that the problem handling ability of the traditional political-administrative system is subjected to a constant deterioration process, because its courses of action are questioned equally from two sides ever more strongly with the progressing of these developments, the predicate of Fritz W. Scharpf wins a new topicality, when he purports that political functionaries are assigned with generally far more event control ability than these could have generally assumed even under the most favourable circumstances (see Scharpf: 1991): Perhaps, in many cases, professional politicians at the end of the twentieth century have no option left but to limit themselves to publicity-effective symbolism with fundamentally changed socio-technical parameters? If this should apply, each attempt to diminish asymmetries between symbolic and material policy in a one-sided fashion by promoting information-technical innovations, would not only be doomed to failure, but even counterproductive.

Even if this example appears exaggerated and the arguments could not withstand a detailed criticism perhaps in all points, it clarifies nevertheless that, without performing the demanded expansion of the discourse perspective, one risks to lose sight of phenomena and connections that are substantial for the development of the democratic system in an environment of information-technical change.

F. Outlook and final considerations

Every position, which is represented in the controversy about the democratic potentials of interactive information technology, is always to be regarded as valuable. Because it helps us to see more clearly the arising problems of modern democracy in transition to the stage of a digitized information society, and also which developments appear to us desirable or undesirable. Looking at these associated immense challenges, we can conclude that a productive use of the new technology for the development of the political system and the political culture can succeed only in the context of social learning and organization processes, which must be supported by all substantial forces including science⁵. There are signs that this way of thinking is increasing at present. “Pragmatic neutralism” is to be much welcomed before this background: because it reduces the danger that the necessary learning and organization processes are obstructed by theoretical divergences or blocked by ideological fights.

It has yet to be seen whether the pragmatic neutralism favoured here can actually gain a central significance despite the still present dissenting opinions⁶ in the discussion about democ-

is made more difficult by the circumstance that structural reforms, which work against globalization and differentiation-conditioned control problems, must often be paid for with losses of legitimacy (see e.g. Zuern 1996).

⁵ The social sciences are yet to find their role within these incremental processes. The direction of activities is, however, predetermined: Already, because different phenomena, which led to a control crisis in political areas, pushed ahead a crisis of realization in sociological areas, the consequences of which must be compensated in some way. This is why today a close-partnered cooperation of theory and practice appears to be more important than ever.

⁶ A strong counter-position assumes that political communication must inevitably get into the suction of a

atic potentials of interactive information technology, and whether it will actually come to the demanded expansion of the discourse perspective. With regard to both points, however, a careful optimism seems to be justified: The demand to view communication as the elementary social operation, with equal weight and as apart from communication in a triangle formed by politics, population, and media, is not as drastic as it might appear at first sight. It is primarily designed to adequately record both the modifications of the arenas of the political process and the modifications of the problems that form the subjects of the political process. Because in many cases it will be sufficient for the expansion of the perspective to fall back to findings and diagnoses from other areas, maybe from special areas of sociological technology assessment or from the theory of international relations. It is true here, too, that under the conditions of increasing complexity, difficulty, contingency, and dynamics of social development, it is less interesting to further expand the perspectives of individual discourses, but truly inspiring to connect and network the perspectives of different discourses.

mechanization which can hardly be controlled, when social functions are increasingly transferred onto electronic networks, which so overtly characterizes the transition of democratic society to the stage of a digitized information society. Within the areas of the political system and the political culture this leads not only to unplanned, but also to unwanted results.

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