

# **Citizen Participation and New Perspectives in the Multimedia Era**

**by Prof. Dr. Hermann Hill, Speyer**

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## **I. Reducing Apathy Toward Government Through Citizen Participation**

Apathy toward government, toward democracy and toward politics were among the most quoted terms in the political discussion of the 1990s. Some thought this apathy was directed more toward politicians or toward political parties. Presently, the Allensbach Research Institute reports of a survey showing that German apathy toward political parties is at the lowest level in many years. On New Year's Day 1999, the director of the Institute, Renate Koecher, said on German Suedwestrundfunk (SWR 3) that only about one citizen in five was disappointed in the parties in Parliament. The change of government after the parliamentary election on September 27, 1998 had suddenly given the people "the feeling of tremendous power". This had "won them back to politics and the political system."

Apparently, the people had lost the feeling that it was worth actively taking part in politics, or even to go to the polls to vote. Now, one realizes that one can make a difference, that one does have an influence as a citizen and that civic action does succeed. This has always been known in "small democracy", in the immediate social and community surroundings. Precisely the 1990s have brought forth various new forms of communication and citizen participation. These new forms have been tried out and implemented, in particular, on the municipal level and, in connection with administrative modernization, especially in the cities.

At the Info Days 1998 in Berlin concerning "Citizens and Administrative Reform", measures relating to citizen participation were directly understood as starting points

to lessen citizen frustration. Support for active community spirit goes much further in the cities. Above all, it has an integrative function and creates a sense of identity. The development of a civil society is seen to create the possibility of even enriching people's lives, of conveying meaning, change and adventure.

Based on his research on the transition of values, my colleague in Speyer, Helmut Klages, has observed different changes in mentality on the part of citizens. He has determined that people have a stronger need to take an active part in the decision-making process concerning things which directly affect them. They also have a need to take part spontaneously based on a momentary decision, to act freely and to invest themselves. All together, a stronger need to be the subject of one's own affairs is evident.

Furthermore, the discovery that individual self-development and self-fulfillment and community spirit and social responsibility in no way exclude one another appears even more important. To the contrary, taking responsibility can itself become one of the attributes of self-development. The reasons for non-involvement are also noteworthy. Listed among these are lack of time, the stress and strain of problems but also, lack of information, stimuli and incentive. Consequently, the untapped potential for involvement requires a government which creates the general framework and activates and stimulates civil involvement.

As a result, the role of governments and municipalities has undergone a great change. Their monopoly position and their role as experts have changed to the role of organizer and coordinator of social processes. Accordingly, communication abilities and networking will determine the demands and competences of government and municipal decision-makers in the future. They must create ongoing opportunities in which citizens can continually work out and take control of their lives. People are not to be regarded as receptacles of decisions and custodians of acceptance but rather, as bearers of innovation and specialized knowledge, as experts in matters concerning their own lives and their immediate social surroundings.

## **II. Citizen Participation in the Creation of the Real City**

New visions for the modernization of municipal management in the Network "Cities of Tomorrow", sponsored by the Bertelsmann Foundation, the Hans Boeckler Foundation, and the Local Management Co-op, Cologne, show the way from traditional bureaucracy to modern governmental service, and on to community

driven government. The idea of the municipality as a service delivery agency, prominent in the 1990s, was already understood as an "outside in" perspective from the viewpoint of citizens as customers. From this arose the different forms of civic participation, e.g., citizen surveys concerning the definition of product and service quality. In citizen offices (so-called "one stop agencies"), people were offered full service for organic life needs, e.g., household moves. Different cities ran an active complaint management and, in so doing, used the knowledge of the customers and citizens in providing the services. In this way, the citizen became a building-block or consultant of the organization and a strengthening element to performance. As a result, it also became clear that efficiency and civic participation do not oppose one another.

Besides providing administrative services, more and more forms of civic participation are taking place in the area of strategic planning of cities. In future workshops and vision conferences, people in different cities contribute to the creation of municipalities of the future. In the context of the concepts of "Local Agenda 21", these conferences are linked with the philosophy of sustainable development. In this way, outcome orientated service delivery systems are being developed in several city administrations.

On the international scene, one is already one step further. Abroad, citizens are also included in combining strategic city planning with the development of indicators. For example, citizen groups in Kansas City, Missouri have worked out strategic goals for the city, the desired outcomes and corresponding criteria for performance measurement and presented these to the city council. Access to this service evaluation system is available to all citizens through the city computer network. Another possibility for citizen participation exists in the discussion of the draft budget, as it is done in the citizen based budgeting project in Redding, California. Following the example of a similar system in Christchurch, New Zealand, citizen consultation in budget and finance planning before the city council is currently being tested in different municipalities in the Bertelsmann Network "Cities of Tomorrow".

In addition to participation in providing administrative services and in the strategic development of cities, a third approach to citizen participation can be found in combining independent citizen projects with designated or official measures of the city administration. As a result, contracts with the responsible actors, e.g., concerning the management of civic centers, kindergartens or sport centers are often made in which citizens act as co-producers in providing services for the common good. The variety of actors in city development and the different forms and

instruments of cooperation create multiple options and a variable set to overcome complexities and conflicts.

Worth mentioning in this context are, for example, the following: the Citizen Involvement Network, which connects different social initiatives within the municipalities of the State of Baden-Wuerttemberg and creates an infrastructure of civic contacts; the district renewal concepts in different cities in Northrhine-Westphalia, which combine job-creation and job-qualification initiatives, economic development, budget reorganization and city development into an integrated action plan; the model project of the Federal Office for Building and Regional Planning, "Cities of the Future"; or the award "Citizen Orientated Municipalities" sponsored by the Active Citizen Club (registered association) in cooperation with the Bertelsmann Foundation. The joint organization and implementation of city jubilees or the work of city foundations also belong in this context.

### **III. Citizen Participation Through The New Media**

According to a 1997 survey by the German Institute for Urban Studies, 64 percent of German cities with a population of more than 50,000 already have electronic city and economic information systems. The menus, which are selected according to different focal points, deal mainly with city administration, local economy, culture, leisure and tourism, city development and the environment. Many cities make a competition out of their self-presentations and also with additional service information for all areas of life. However, a study by the German Postgraduate School of Administrative Sciences in Speyer shows the focal point of municipal activities has been, up to now, in offering information. The potential for interacting with the customer is still relatively underdeveloped. The path from "window display to interface" must still be tread upon. In addition, new possibilities of democratic participation, like electronic townhall meetings, are still hardly available in Germany.

However, development is constantly going forward and offers from municipalities are improving. For example, the competition "Media@Komm", organized by the Federal Ministry of Education, Science, Research and Technology, has produced a variety of excellent project ideas. The experiments on implementing the possibility of a digital signature will eventually make a personal appearance at City Hall completely unnecessary. In this way, the vision of the "digital city" is coming closer to realization; with the mouse, government services will be available "at your fingertips". Still, what is missing is a network of the different government and

municipal offers which knows exactly where to lead customers, no matter what virtual entrance into the system he or she uses.

The new media provides people with more than just information. It also creates new possibilities of working with information and of deepening insight. Highlighting knowledge through the use of hypermedial and virtual technology leads to an illustration, clarification and understanding of knowledge and thereby, to a broadening of perspectives. Above all, this also has an influence on participation in city planning. Building plans can be virtually inspected on foot; geographic and environmental information systems can assist in networking complex data relating to space.

However, neither the "couch potato" nor the "couch commander" can replace interpersonal communication. Virtual communities do create new possibilities for contact which do correspond to stronger individual interests. Nevertheless, they transcend the social-spatial context of life and thus, can lead to a sense of displacement and to a loss of a general sense of responsibility and solidarity with the community. Therefore, it will be important in the future to combine real possibilities of participation with virtual accesses and contacts. In a digital society, urbanity must be newly conceived and defined. In the meantime, it is clear that the multimedia era has already unfolded new findings and perspectives for the further development of civil communication and participation.

#### **IV. Life in the Multimedia Era**

The new media and new possibilities in dealing with that "life-blood" information influence everyday reality with regard to structures, processes and culture. This will be demonstrated as follows: With regard to (1) structures, through the example of the architecture of urban communities; (2) processes, through the example of urban construction in the sense of an active learning process; and (3) culture, through the example of the functions of urban design and urban staging for creating urban awareness.

##### **1. The Media World and the World of Life**

It is becoming more and more evident that perceptions - the visual and experiential habits in the world of new media - also influence everyday life and living together in local communities, and change our conception of reality, in general. Going further,

there even exists a mutual influence on the patterns of thinking, living and working between new technologies and social forms of life.

The design of web pages and Internet offers has brought forth a new architecture of information und likewise, a new term to describe it - hypertext. With hypertext, storing, combining and presenting information can be done in an extremely flexible way. Information is not ordered in a hierarchical and linear manner but rather, associative links and branches are produced and connections are realized transversely. The parallels to networking in everyday reality and in the common relations between people and organizations using novel forms of cooperation are particularly striking. Networking as the art of intelligent connecting of resources, potentials and chances was cited above as the success factor for the future design of civic participation.

A hypertext consists of knots and links. The knots can consist of only one sentence or of extensive text files. To an increasing extent, social life is also concentrated around just such knots of everyday life which are in contact with each other. Life is separated into program segments. The service offers of municipal offices address so-called "life cases", such as moving, birth, death, unemployment, and so on. In the flood of diverse information und lifestyles, anchors and clusters are formed in order to make orientation possible. Leading projects and events serve as attractors in both the organization and presentation of information, as well as in urban development. Reports on health, poverty or cultural economy group information and arrange correlations according to overlapping focal points.

A well-composed hypertext is made up of aphoristic thought-pictures which, even apart from a (variable) context, present themselves as a meaningful scene and, at the same time, afford significant transitions to other scenes to which interesting references exist. The information modules must be accessible in a flexible and individual manner, and understandable within changing contexts. Accordingly, urban information systems are drafted in the architecture of component parts. However, the configuration of the different, individual parts, which may have been added at different times, still presents a coherent picture and, at the same time, creates novel room for movement. On the other hand, when one considers the extent of the spatial action radien of modern people whose interest in community services are spread out among several municipalities which surround their homes as their center points, and further, when one takes into account the changing and overlapping time structures due to flexible forms of life and work, then it is possible

that these time-place lifestyle changes may create a new picture of living and working together in the city in the sense of a configured community.

In order to increase acceptance of the new media, there is a greater effort to improve user interface and user friendliness. The work on the man-machine interface has renewed and highlighted the insight that "we are all interfaces" and allows the awareness of the necessity of forming cooperation projects in urban planning to grow. The appeal of multimedia technology to several senses puts the demands on city experience sharply into focus. Besides the new design of text structures, we have become especially aware of and influenced by visual elements in our everyday life. Whoever uses modern web-sites puts new demands on the print media. Newspapers and magazines are following the lead with new layouts and new forms of presentation. City maps and city signposts cannot escape this trend, either. The furnishings in pedestrian zones, in train stations, at bus stops, or in parks are also patterned after these new visual customs.

Characteristic for modern information and presentation technology are the various structured views, angles or perspectives below which information can be prepared and presented. So-called hypertrails can provide new insights or pathways through different subjects for different target groups, and for task-arrangements that can be used for urban planning and urban development. In this way, user typical situations and needs can be determined and, at the same time, the plurality of lifestyles and life in different urban worlds, e.g., from the viewpoint of children, teenagers, senior citizens or working people, can be made understandable. In addition, the subjective interests of citizens can be made known to other groups. We become conscious of the constructive character of reality, as well as the interpretative character of all our understanding of reality.

In modern media, changeability dominates over stability, surface over depth and possibility over reality. This also influences our experience of reality apart from modern media. At any rate, for those who have grown up with music stations and computer games, the experience of a real city has been changed by these facts. For example, it has been observed that in the world of teenagers living in cities, the methods for acquiring information relating to facts, locations and space are increasingly moulded over and replaced by fictitious and symbolic forms of acquisition. The dominance of the virtual is gaining more and more ground and putting its imprint on life experience. Even adults cannot completely escape the effects of ease and changeability when the push of a button changes the TV channel or the click of a mouse immediately changes the screen. The effects of

these experiences on the reality of everyday life will most likely be recognized only in a few years.

New media not only influences city life. It is also the case that experiences in the everyday world influence the understanding of the possibilities of the new media. However, these bridges built into everyday life by socialized people as a means to understand new virtual possibilities are often only crutches, just as the use of words to describe the possibilities of film presentations can never be adequate enough. Nevertheless, one takes notice when real cities and net-communities are discussed in the same context and when local communities are compared and contrasted with virtual communities. One tries to comprehend the Internet by using spatial metaphors like information highway and navigating the information flow; information architectures are pictured as city structures; the perception capacity of our peripheral vision influences homepage design. The pattern of experience of the real and virtual world come together when, as of late, urban planning in different cities works with mental maps in order to determine people's subjective ideas about space, and then uses these perceptions for new experiments about citizen participation.

## **2. Educational Software for the Urban Society**

In the City of the Future, citizen involvement and community work, personal development and life-long learning must be combined with new forms of education and media aided offerings into an innovative learning in the city. To this aim, newer approaches to the development of educational software to improve qualifications of employees can be transferred to the learning experience involved in citizen participation. In so doing, civic development and civic learning can be made possible; the city presents itself as an educational site with educational opportunities for personal and social development. The local community becomes an urban learning society.

In order to activate the untapped potential for civic action, Helmut Klages calls for the elimination of the barriers created by a lack of knowledge concerning citizen participation, as well as the prejudice and fear which results from it, by providing additional information and by directing the people to concrete opportunities to participate. In the area of social work, Anthony Giddens argues for life politics. That means supporting self-help groups and activities in the community brings forth, in a learning process, new forms which are workable today, as well as tomorrow. This policy of life guidance is not only related to a personal way of life but is also meant to publically influence decisions which affect conditions in the community.

In the Information Age, visions and models concerning education and media competence stress that personal development is increasingly independent of time and place. In an information society, there will no longer be a place which cannot be defined as a learning site, and no time which cannot be understood as learning time. Personal development is no longer an introductory world which prepares one for the real world - it is, itself, part of this world. Through the use of new media and communication technology, a philosophy of life-long learning is made possible, i.e., self-guided, self-responsible and project orientated forms of learning which cut through the circle of learning and teaching and integrate learning and working.

Modern media psychology has developed from an instruction paradigm, in which the transmission of knowledge is in the forefront and the learner is regarded as a passive recipient of learning material, to a problem-solution paradigm, in which the personal acquisition of knowledge and the personal involvement with information as an active and dynamic process of discovery stand in the forefront, and then on to a constructive paradigm, in which the learner is seen as the subject who actively constructs his/her world. In this world, the contents of study should be anchored to stimulating episodes from real life.

A characteristic of this psychology of constructive learning is, first, the creation of a learning environment in which interaction with real problems and authentic situations is made possible, and/or encouraged. This can be done, e.g., through action orientated projects. Second, multiple contexts or perspectives in which the material to be learned is embedded in different environments and presented from different angles are necessary. These multiple contexts or perspectives promote practicing and using what has been learned in more than one situation, and with regard to several views of a subjectmatter. A third structural characteristic of the constructively arranged learning environment is learning in a social context in order to further social interaction, cooperative problem solving and the development of a learning community.

The use of modern media with interactive multimedia elements can support self-initiative, self-guided learning processes and can enable action orientated and discovery learning. Up to now, these findings have only been used in individualized learning, especially in a scholastic context, and in the workplace. They could possibly offer new perspectives for the further development of citizen participation in an urban learning society. In this way, life-long learning could be understood as social learning in and about the city. City building and citizen education could be meshed together; through spatially-associative and constructive learning, city

conception could become cooperative city construction; media competence and civic competence could combine into a new culture of learning.

Different leads in this direction are already recognizable. In modern practice of museum learning, attempts are no longer made to reproduce historical development or to document it with original exhibits but rather, to animate visitors to act and to experiment. Visitors, or better, participants are guided to the subjectmatter by their own experiences; interactive exhibits and projects awaken their curiosity, encourage questions and spark dialogues.

The principles of museum learning could influence a new theory of urban learning. Through interactive, multimedia aided urban experiments, urban games and urban storytelling, the experience of city-life, as well as city creating could be discovered anew. Urban development projects could be organized as education-projects which take place in future workshops, in learning workshops, in charette projects or in open space conferences, and could be guided and supported by modern educational software.

The State Office for Political Education in Baden-Wuerttemberg already offers a future-workshop on the Internet called "City Worlds", which includes projects from as many areas of city or community life as possible. The invitation to participate is extended to school groups, teachers, students and youth groups which are working on a project about city life and are willing to have their ideas, work and outcomes included in the overall project. For example, a class from a school in Friedrichshafen (Lake Constance) is studying dangerous intersections in the city in cooperation with the city environmental agency. In Horb on the Neckar, middle school students are working on the situation of young people living in a small town and in Mannheim, teenagers are writing about their relationship to their city.

In Brandenburg, the State Office for Political Education has a pilot project called "Netpol" in which new approaches for teenagers and young adults to topics about political-historical education are being tested. A good example of the work of this project on and with the Internet is the creation of a "time machine" on the topic "Everyday life, Resistance and Persecution in Brandenburg from 1933 - 1945". The aim is, in cooperation with the users, to explore a clearly delineated topic of contemporary history. Teams both inside and outside of school look for clues in their local and regional area. They question witnesses of the time on location or on the Internet. In cooperation with school-classes and youth groups from abroad, they question the survivors of former concentration, prisoner of war or forced labor camps located in the area of the State of Brandenburg. The results of their investigations

are then put into the time machine and, in turn, offer new groups concrete starting points for their own work.

### **3. Urban Design As Media Aided Product Layout**

In the multimedia era, new findings and developments from marketing and product-design, from the link between media art, -culture und -technology, and from the set of laws peculiar to communication in modern media society can provide citizen participation with another new perspective.

In more recent marketing aesthetics, product design is understood as a part of social communication. According to the so-called cultural theory, products serve as signs which secure identities and visualize cultural differences. They contain a decision to live in a certain way and thereby, in favor of a certain kind of society. Human artifacts of all kinds have these functions and this includes city designs and city lifestyles, as well. City marketing, urban culture and urban design should take these findings into account when they are laying out cultural artifacts indigenous to the city, like landmarks, monuments, train stations, pedestrian zones, and also jubilees or exhibits.

In modern marketing, design management is also understood as a catalyst for innovation - as a joint process of creating knowledge in which new cultural contexts are organized and experienced. These shared contexts or ambiances create cooperative spaces in which the socialization and integration of the individual into the community is enabled. In this way, urban development in the sense of urban design creates and forms the city into a product of the community.

In the last few years, diverse experiments in modern media art, -culture and -technology have been made which, through the creation of electronic spaces have led to an altered sensual perception. Exhibits like those in the Art and Exhibition Museum of the Federal Republic of Germany in Bonn, in the Center for Art and Media Technology in Karlsruhe, or in the ars electronica Center in Linz, Austria document this development. The variety of electronically producible time-space dimensions has also changed the possibilities of reflexive control over perception and communication. Virtual realities lead the way from geographic to infographic space. Linking these developments in media culture and media technology with urban culture and life culture has yet to be realized.

As early as 1956, when the television era was just beginning, the sarcastic quotation "In the beginning was the television program and the world happens because of it."

was used in reference to communication in media society. More and more events in sport, culture and politics only take place because they are a genuine part of media ratings strategies. The media has long since transformed itself from the role of passive reporter of events to an active co-producer. As a result, the portion of reports about events which have been especially created for the media is continually growing. The current highpoint of this development is the award winning movie "The Truman Show", in which an entire town was created for the sole purpose of showing the whole life of the main character 24 hours a day on a TV program.

In our everyday life, communication in urban society is also influenced more and more through events, happenings and staged festivals. Urban design not only deals with objects, but has increasingly to do with media - with the world of technical communication. The mediality of new architecture leads to the situation that we live in a city of signs and search for sensual certainties. It has been discovered that especially young people are less interested in analysis and acquisition of real social space. They are more interested in symbolic presence and imaginary participation in the game of signs and symbols. The experience of aesthetics, symbol orientation and virtualization out of the electronic world also effects a change in perceiving the real-life world of the city.

With this backdrop, urban design can take on various functions. For example, cognitive communication patterns using texts and facts provide, at most, only the framework. In contrast, design conveys intuitive and emotional messages, awakens sympathy and addresses worlds of feeling and thereby, strikes completely new chords. The sensual attraction and aesthetic integrity of forms and symbols expand the spectrum of perception and lead to new understanding, insight and involvement. Design creates new possibilities in the battle for perception and scarce resources of attention and identification.

However, design also serves as a storehouse, catalyst and generator of implicit (tacit) knowledge. In creating a common context, the city is experienced and vividly conveyed. In this way, design acts as a transmitter of shared messages and common values of knowledge and feelings. And finally, through its symbolic content, design can express and integrate different contemporary issues, aspects and views. It creates aesthetic harmony but also conveys tensions that allow the contrasts but also the openness and tolerance in urban society to become clear. In this way, design contains, in its ambivalence, the seed of possibilities and, at the same time, demands different interpretations.

In conclusion, design contains a potential for differentiation among different products (cities). It describes differences and creates (visual) identity which is expressed in the construction and the image of the city. This identity moulds the self-understanding of a city, indicates value worlds and creates cultural acceptance for locals and guests. Last but not least, design provides a catalyst for innovation and a medium for the active layout of the future. In this way, aesthetic innovations can be combined with social innovations and future transitional processes can be influenced in a active way.

In the time ahead, urban design as product layout must put the possibilities of the new media to greater use. For example, there is often a lack of correlation between the design of a city and its homepage design. As far back as 1989, Jeffrey Shaw showed in his Installation Legible City how one can virtually drive through the city-space. Media art provides further examples of linking real space and virtual life which can help make the city more understandable to its citizens, as well as enriching citizen participation with the help of its new possibilities.

## **V.     Reprocussions And Mutual Effects**

Enthusiasm for the new possibilities of life in the multimedia era with regard to structures, processes and culture should not obscure the fact that real locations and physical experience are the basis of our perceptions and actions. All life functions and life performance are realized as spatial transformations. Space, time and being are related to concrete ways of living and can only be understood through them. The position from which humans act opens up and conveys to them a specific perspective. For this reason, the city will continue to be the home also of virtual human nomads. It is not only necessary as the symbol of a political idea. On the contrary, the real city works as the starting point for media discoveries in the telepolis. The cities and their urbanity are the fertile ground upon which all of this is possible and integrable.

However, the experience with new media leads to a virtualization or derealization of reality, or better, of our understanding of reality. Medial mouldings of our everyday reality cannot be overlooked, just as the transfer of metaphors from the everyday world to media or virtual perception structures lead to a new understanding of these metaphors in their original real world. However, media experience is not a substitute for but simply an extension of real experience. They lack a dimension of "social readability" which is provided by cities and their localities. In digital reality, there is no place for breaks, nuances, gestures or personal touches.

It is exactly the ease, speed and changeability of media experience which leads to a new assessment and re-validation of non-electronic forms of experience and their inimitable and irreplaceable qualities. In this way, social forms of reality experience in everyday life acquire new meaning as contrasts and counterweights. The need to slow down experience by building in time for leisure, ripening, reflection and remembering traditional human values lead to a new search for monitor-free and handy-free zones and so, to a revaluation of the social community.

For the future of urban development and urban politics, it will be necessary to formulate new concepts for learning in and about cities which offer productive links between virtual and real experience and create opportunities for connection but also allow for differing and opposite experiences and, in so doing, provide a balance between aesthetic and social orientations.