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Civic Tech in Germany: Echoes from the Past…

It is a good week to talk about „discontinued civic tech initiatives":

On Tuesday and Wednesday the conference „Digitaler Staat" took place in Berlin, its slogan was „Staat im Umbau" – „Rebuilding the State". This is somehow fitting, as it actually describes what is happening since at least three decades. But – in this rebuild, nothing ever seems to be completed.

While preparing this statement, I also stumbled upon this article from the *Süddeutsche Zeitung*: „Deutschland, immer noch analog" („Germany, still in analog mode"). It lists some of the most prominent failures at the digital frontier: broadband internet, digital administration, electronic patient files, smart meters, and the digitalization of Deutsche Bahn (yes!). Reading through this article, I wondered whether those examples would fit into our concept of „civic tech initiatives" (to a certain extent, they do). And I realized, that there still is no good German translation for the term „civic tech" – which of course is somehow telling. If there is no such thing as „civic tech" in Germany, you do not need a name for it.

To put my thoughts about the societal dimension of discontinued civic tech projects into one sentence: The history of digitalization in Germany is a history full of failures, misconceptions, and misunderstandings - but I should not start the workshop on such a dark note. Thus I went way back to the archive and I can tell you: There is hope…

Because: Going back into time, we would even be able to find a period when Germany was kind of a frontrunner innovating the digital future: those were the 1970s and 1980s, with early takes on computer usage in political and/or administrative contexts. Bonn am Draht or Politik im elektronischen Zeitalter were popular books from that time. „Bonn, wired" and „Politics for the Electronic Age" would be my favorite translations here. Also, the first data protection laws date back to the 1970s. It is still fascinating, that lawmakers really had a good idea about how computing machines might affect peoples lives – and that politics could be a regulative power.

The following decade holds another milestone: [The census of 1987](#) can be considered a first setback, or maybe a reality check for the rather problematic innovation climate in German - a widespread public protest addressed the suspected „espionage" by state actors using computing machinery to process personal data against the citizens. Back then, the term "digitalization" was not in use yet, but it basically meant to randomly explore the possibilities of data and computer usage for administrative purposes.

In the 1990s (the late 1990s, to be specific) „digitalization-as-we-know-it" hit German politics with the advent of the Internet. After being confused by the new options to communicate globally, the new millennium started with the initiative [BundOnline2005](#) which had the goal to digitize many administrative services. And this it did: in about five years some 400+ services had been translated into digital form. Of course, this initiative ended up incomplete and it also gathered a huge amount of public scrutiny and critique. Now, "digitalization" was a playground and a business opportunity for many – for politics and administration it became

a more strategic goal. (The recent discussion about the Onlinezugangsgesetz is kind of a *Wiedergänger* of this old discussion).

Let´s move forward another decade: until the Bundestagswahl 2005 in Germany voting machines were allowed (in official language: „elektronische Wahlgeräte"). A slowly evolving public debate and specific interventions by actors like the „Chaos Computer Club" (who forced a voting machine to play chess), the German Constitutional Court in 2009 issued a ruling to not actually prohibit, but to limit the use of such machinery. Since then, the technical specifications for voting machines in Germany are very restrictive and demanding - as a consequence, there is no viable market for voting equipment or other forms of digital decision making. Is this episode also a discontinued civic tech initiative? Probably yes.

Interestingly enough, almost at the same time voting machines were ruled out of the process, Germanys possibly most important innovation in digital politics took center stage: the Pirate Party started their raids on the political market and was able to board a number of state parliaments. From that point on, digital politics (or „Netzpolitik") became a household item in political debates on state and federal level. Nevertheless, the fight of the pirates lasted only for one legislative term. But that does not mean they were not successful – au contraire: since then, all other parties adopted key issues from their program (and, literally, also some of their politicians). It is ironic (or maybe not) that one of Germanys biggest addition to digital politics is such an analog thing like a party organization. And although the Pirate Party is technically not discontinued, they are no longer a factor in the political competition.

Despite all the experiences over the years and the signals sent by a new player in the party system, German politics failed to develop an institutional framework to deal with digital innovations. Although our lifeworld turned digital in almost any public and private aspect, no coherent policy field took shape and thus young politicians refused to build a career on the topic. The long term effect of all this is – Volker Wissing (sorry for mentioning the name of the Federal Minister for Digitalization and Traffic).

Most recently, COVID-19 was a small game changer with all-digital party conventions and some online-only political campaigning. But this was only an episode, currently we see a return to a pre-pandemic status and a rollback of digital solutions, especially in deliberation and decision making.

In the light of these developments, "digitalization" is not only new devices, new networks, or new content - it is also structured by a process-dimension, connecting technological innovations to a broad set of lifeworld activities.

To sum up: When it comes to digitalization in the civic sector, there have been a lot of interesting and inspiring ideas around in Germany. Also, we had a lot of public debates about the benefits and dangers of these innovations. And as we are in Germany, it´s dangers, not challenges. Overall, this led to a rather sceptic position when it comes to the use and adaptation of civic tech in Germany - and although we even had a political party in place promoting digital innovations for society, German political actors have not been able to develop strong, resilient institutions that focus on the implementation of civic tech innovations in a broad variety of policy fields.

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