

# INTERNET ACCESSIBILITY AND THE AMBIVALENCE OF TRANSPARENCY

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## **Abstract**

*As far as digital communication technologies are concerned, it is commonly assumed that social diffusion levels are high. This means that in terms of social uptake of these technologies generation gap, gender differential and social difference are growing smaller. However, in terms of adaptation and usage social milieus are still important. The first part of the paper shall discuss this general claim with regard to internet accessibility and political/governmental transparency. On the one hand, it has been argued that the internet simply is 'transparency'. It provides disclosure, information, puts elite behaviour out in the open, and potentially allows everyone to know almost everything about anything. On the other hand, people tend to filter abundant information through their habitus, and the capacity to turn facts to information and eventually in political opinion, tends to vary across social milieu. Seen from this perspective internet accessibility will not automatically improve transparency. Much rather the latter remains tied to the social distribution of social and normative knowledge. Thus while there might be a link between good governance and information availability to the public, government transparency that aims at inviting the public to participate via the net needs a better understanding of the social embeddedness of 'voice'. Moreover, the ubiquitous norm of virtual transparency as an impulse for more democracy might actually disguise the quest for true representativity in contemporary society, as the second more analytic part of the paper attempts to argue.*

## **1. Introduction**

In a more recent US study [24] a longstanding mantra is once again repeated: internet accessibility improves transparency of business and administration processes and thereby contributes to good governance. Based on the investigation of online county government transparency data the study argues that easy availability and constant access by citizens to government information helps to regenerate trust in government activities and to improve the perception of government by its people. Moreover, it enhances the potential for positive interactions between government and civil society. However, the study also points out that better internet access in itself will not automatically improve neither transparency nor governance. Instead, it would need a 'holistic approach' that looks at how internet access relates to other social aspects such as age, income and education. In other words, we need to take account of people's social milieus in order to understand the civic and political potential that might unfold via internet driven transparency.

The above mentioned study finds its wider frame of reference in the lasting debates on the condition of contemporary democracy and the ambivalent potential of internet democracy that go with it [cf. x, y]. Within this discourse, one line of argument declares independence of virtual democracy from all the evils and constraints of representative democracy. Seen from this perspective a transparent internet is at once a source of better information, a means of enhanced networking between the like-minded, and a tool of direct participation in decision-making processes of societal relevance. As

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such it gives a new lease of life to the ancient promise of democratic self-government by the people. The other line of argument maintains internet transparency in itself is not sufficient to cure the crisis of democracy as a form of government. Instead it has just as well the potential to work detrimental through information overload instead of access to relevant knowledge, self-referential networking in closed milieus instead of cross-societal exchange of opinion, and further polarization of opportunity with regard to participation instead of direct democracy. Debates on the 'digital divide' are intrinsic to both lines of argument. While the 'net-utopia' argument argues for a rapid closing of the gap that once separated 'onliners' and 'offliners', the 'net-dystopia' argument refers to a prevailing gap between social chances *de jure/de facto* when it comes to access and usage of internet transparency. In other words, while the former standpoint largely relies on the drivers of technological improvement, the latter maintains the contextualizing importance of social milieus.

In the following section these general issues shall be empirically grounded by referring back to the German context. Looking at the so called SINUS milieus, this should provide for a better understanding of the linkage between internet uptake, internet usage, and social milieu. Subsequently then the findings made in this brief social structural analysis of internet distribution and usage will help to re-approach in the second part of the chapter the more analytical agenda of transparency, representativity and democracy.

## **2. Internet and Social Structure – SINUS Milieus in Germany**

Right from the emergence of the 'internet galaxy' [2] the sociological field of social structural analysis has been keen to advance understanding of the social structuration of internet access and usage across old cleavages (rich and poor) and new differences (life style) in society. Initially this attempt by and large followed an either / or pattern. Either the internet would follow other innovations in their typical 'trickle down' effect due to lowered access costs, improving user-friendliness and cultural diffusion. Or it would, despite a certain normalization of usage in everyday life, generate a particular pattern of 'info-haves' and 'info-have-nots' consistent with tendencies of social exclusion in general [15, p. 20]. While initial analysis focused on the standard indicators of socioeconomic status (income, education, professional position), later on these 'vertical' dimensions were complemented by 'horizontal' dimensions of the social structure (age and gender). Moreover, it increasingly dawned on researches, that internet uptake and online usage is not just dependent on socioeconomic outfit and level of formal education but just as much on certain skills such as self-efficacy and attitudes such as curiosity. Accordingly, attention of analysis has shifted towards a more nuanced understanding of the social embeddedness of internet participation within certain life styles. This is where the SINUS milieu approach comes in [14].

In general, SINUS Milieus aim at providing a comprehensive picture of the social landscape in Germany along two complementary axis of social stratification and differentiation (see graphic below): vertically in terms of social positioning according to socioeconomic status, and horizontally in terms of cultural preferences, value commitment and attitudes towards life and life style. Each of the social milieus thus identified, 'unite(s) people with similar tastes, practices, and comparable resources' [14, p.3]. Roughly speaking, the higher the milieu finds itself on the vertical axis the higher income and education level tend to be; and the more a milieu is placed to the right on the horizontal axis the more it tends to be open to post-material values and an individualistic outlook on life. This then applied to the particular field of internet access and attitudes towards the 'internet galaxy' provides us with the fowling milieu landscape for Germany as of 2012 [5, p.15]:

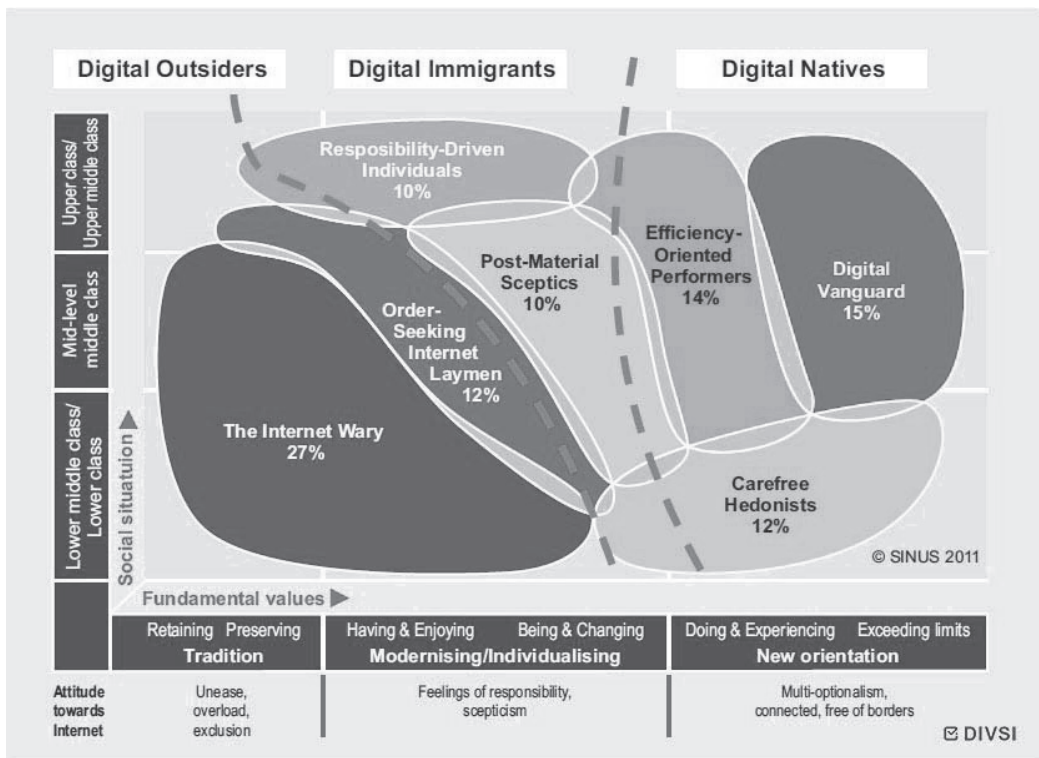


Figure 1

Accordingly, the following internet milieus can be identified, beginning with the web-affine milieus first (following 5, p. 20ff.):

- Digital Vanguard (15% of German population or 10.3 Mio people)

As suggested by its name, this milieu consists of the postmodern internet elite. Having grown up with it, the net is a natural part of their daily life, both private and professional. They are mostly young and well off. Accordingly, their attitude towards the net and its chances is most self-confident and playful, associated with more freedom, participation and democracy but also self-responsibility in terms of data protection. Due to their individualized life style and technical expertise, they fail to see that other milieus might feel less comfortable with the net.

- Efficiency-oriented Performers (14% / 10.0 Mio)

Members of this milieu have the highest income level and the necessary overall intelligence to keep up with developments in society so they can benefit from them as quickly as possible. Accordingly, the internet use and attitude of this success driven milieu is less playful but utilitarian-pragmatic. The internet is approached with the best possible IT skills and equipment, so that they can feel in control here as elsewhere in life. The net for them is a source to make work easier and to simplify things, but also a source of risks. Accordingly, they look for a balance of freedom and security in their net life.

- Carefree Hedonists (12% / 8,7 Mio)

This middle and lower class milieu of mostly young people relishes the easy access to the internet to which they bring a carefree attitude and self-belief that is not always founded on above average IT skills. It is possibly the milieu with the highest user intensity of social media, but at the same time largely confined to the realm of music and games. We can also find the least awareness of dangers and risks associated with the internet in this milieu. Accordingly, the distrust of institutions and regulations that characterizes their overall attitude to society is also prevalent in their net activity. Overall, it could be argued that theirs is an 'escapist' milieu.

- Post-material Skeptics (10% / 6.7 Mio)

This politically aware and well-educated milieu extends its critical attitude towards a consumption and media driven society consequently also towards the internet. Just as much as they tend to have doubts about globalization and other technology driven processes, so they harbor doubts on internet security and fears about the manipulative potential of the net. Accordingly, despite having above average IT skills, they have developed a very selective attitude towards the 'internet galaxy', largely focused on information and communication options. Based on the conviction that it is up to the citizens (and not government regulations) to organize a secure and democratic web they place emphasis on improving the internet skills of individual users.

- Responsibility-driven Individuals (10% / 7.3 Mio)

This milieu consist of professionally and financially very well established individuals with average IT skills. The internet they approach with the same systematic and (self)responsible attitude as they do in all other spheres of their successful lives. They are open to change but also demanding in terms of obvious benefit that a technical innovation has to provide in their eyes. They are self-confident enough not to simply follow the crowd when it comes to superficial use of technological gadgets. They are explorative with regard to information gathering online, but at the same time very aware of risks concerning their privacy. Here they do not trust their own skills but trust in professional assistance. Overall, they carry a certain reflexive respect for the complexity of the internet.

- Order-seeking Internet Laymen (12% / 8.2 Mio)

Members of this milieu belong to the conventional mainstream of society. They provide the second oldest segment and recruit from the simple to mid-level social strata of German society. Their general desire for harmony and security combined with lack of confidence in their limited IT skills makes them avoiding the internet if they can, or to rely on help from others. Even though they can see a few advantages in the basic functions of the internet, this is overshadowed by security issues and overwhelming sense of mistrust. The overall attitude towards the net consequently is general avoidance and/or periodical abstinence.

- The Internet Wary (27% / 19.1 Mio)

The internet world has largely passed by the oldest and most traditional segment of German society. Many within this milieu are indeed 'offliners', while others make occasional use of

basic functions of the net, more often than not with the help of relatives. They have a diffuse awareness of the risks involved in using the internet and can see very little advantage that the net brings to their own lives. The net is largely associated with a feeling of helplessness and being overwhelmed, leading in turn to resignation and even resistance against it.

Two major observations can be made when relating this rather detailed account of internet access and internet use in German society back to the debate on social divide in digital society. The first one rejects the idea of the internet as a level playing field. Despite the overall tendency to close the so called 'digital gap', there were by 2012 still about 40%, or 27 out of 72 million people in absolute numbers, who amongst Germany's population tended to view themselves as 'digital outsiders'. While on the other end of the spectrum there is also a social segment forming that can be described as 'digital natives'. It comprises of mostly younger people who have grown up with the internet and see it as a natural part of their daily lives. To complete the picture, in the middle of this panoramic landscape of internet milieus there is a large segment of 'digital immigrants'. They use the internet on a regular basis but retain a sense of skepticism and a means to end approach [5, p.8f.]. Subsequently, it is not one gap but two boundaries that run through Germany's 'internet galaxy', as far as access and use of internet facilities generally is concerned (see graphic above). A most recent follow-up study of SINUS internet milieus has shown that this landscape has become more sophisticated but not more equal in its social patterning. On the one hand, the study observes a further, even if slow, closing of the 'digital gap'. The part of true 'offliners' amongst Germany's population has between 2012 and 2016 further decreased from 20% to 16%. On the other hand, the study claims a rapid differentiation of internet use and level of digitalization amongst the 'onliner' milieus. Thus, the study highlights as its major finding that despite a steady overall diffusion of the internet Germany's 'digital society is drifting apart further' [3, p.12]. The study also claims that the question of social in/equality within the internet galaxy has moved on from the rather simple 'if' (technological access) to more complex 'how' (varieties of usage) questions [3, p. 25]. This resonates with observations made previously and elsewhere, which have called for a second round of digital divide research with emphasis on use rather than access, referred to 'second-level digital divide' [15, p.22] or 'digital inequality' as opposed to 'digital divide' [10, p.4] respectively. Arguing for a more processual understanding of this development, N.Zillien [26] has suggested a three-phase model of digital divides research. While the first period was simply about technological access the second was driven by differentiation in internet use. The third and current phase however is concerned not so much with how socio-economic status affects internet access and usage, but instead focuses on how differences in internet use actually affects the social distribution of social resources such as information and social capital.

Secondly, however, it is important to recall a second major observation then, namely that these new social cleavages do not simply follow socio-economic status. Instead, they are structured by socio-cultural attitude towards the internet too. While for some it is access to information or professional efficiency, for others it is the promise of entertainment and self-promotion that drives them towards the internet. The SINUS milieu internet analysis provides us with a sense of the deep social embeddedness of online styles within the various milieus mentioned above, especially when it comes to content, intention and intensity of usage. In other words, simple talk of a 'digital divide' tends to neglect the impact that each user's social milieu has on the concrete pattern of internet use. It is the social habitus (the confidence in self-efficacy, attitude toward new technologies) and the social capital (the networks of friends, colleagues, neighbours and family) which provides the more or less enabling informal ways of accessing and using the internet (as opposed to the more formal conditioning factors of income and education level). In other words, we need nuanced empirical research with regard to how concrete social milieu 'translate... into concrete digital practices' (14,

p.3]. Moreover, the picture gets rather complex if we take into account that just as offline society the internet galaxy serves various ‘social fields’ such as culture, politics, arts, health, education... [ib.]. In consequence, when looking at the concrete social structuration of ‘the motivation and ability to use the internet in a capital-enhancing way’ it might be more useful to refer to ‘participation divides’ rather than a ‘digital gap’ [ib., p.1, my emphasis]. For example, based on the SINUS milieu studies it is argued that the effect of (old) age on internet use is to a certain extent offset by general media competency acquired when it comes to strategic information and political judgement. Likewise counter intuitive to digital gap research runs the observation that it is actually ‘large parts of the high SES [socio-economic status] milieus... (that) opt out of participating online because of a lack of time or interest’ [ib., p. 2, 8].

However, what further complicates the debate is the fact that despite increasing scientific attention ‘digital participation’ remains a widely used but diffusely understood concept. The studies mentioned above note in this respect that as yet there is no reliable set of indicators that would ‘measure’ digital participation [3, p.76]. Commentators have argued that ‘digital participation’ has turned into an ill-defined concept [Meckel in 4, p.4ff.]. There is a tendency to equate any active engagement on the net with participation in its more civic or political sense. Even the difference between active and passive engagement on the net is difficult to maintain amidst the complexity of online activities such as surfing, posting, chatting, downloading, lurking.... Accordingly, the borders between information and entertainment become blurred. Moreover, even within the field that could vaguely be described as political or civic, where does activism start and ‘clicktivism’ or ‘slacktivism’ end [ib., p.6]? In this context, it is then also maintained by several commentators that more research is necessary in order to differentiate between political information, political discussion, and political participation in the sense of (online) influence on political decision-making. One suggestion to get a better analytic differentiation between various forms of online engagement is to lean on the well-established ‘ladder of participation’ model with its different degrees of activism. Accordingly, a first step of online political engagement would be political information online, followed by political commenting and other modes of feedback (ratings, likes), finally culminating in providing own ideas and initiating interactive projects related to public affairs (campaigning) [4, p.13].

Against this admittedly shaky conceptual background it is then estimated that (by 2011) 70% of the German population does not politically engage on the internet, another 20% shows limited engagement (can be activated for single projects and issues), while only the remaining 10% can truly be considered as ‘political activists’. The most common form of political engagement is online petitions (15% of respondents), followed by ballots on single topics (14%). To participate in political debate via social media is imaginable by 20% while another 18% is prepared to engage longer term in a political discussion group [4, p.21]. Looking at it from the SINUS Milieu perspective again, the panorama of political online participation can be sketched out as follows (cf. 14, p.4ff.):

- Digital Vanguard

Generally speaking ‘political participation on the internet is not common in this milieu’ [ib., p.4]. If at all then social media are used for ‘critical consumption’. Mostly this technologically up to date milieu participates online in educational, educational and cultural affairs, some of which perfectly relate to their offline avant-gardist life style (Couchsurfing).

- Efficiency-oriented Performers

This generally internet-oriented milieu is considered to ‘refrain from political participation on the Internet’ [ib., p.5]. Due to the overall entrepreneurial spirit of its life style, internet use is purpose- and consumption-driven. There is less motivation to engage for civic purposes.

- Carefree Hedonists

This self-centered internet milieu uses the internet for clique related consumption and entertainment (gaming, shopping). Accordingly, interactive auction platforms such as eBay are popular. Overall, members of this milieu ‘tend not to participate for political purposes on the Internet’ [ib., p.5]. If at all there should surfaces a political or civic purpose in the online activities of this milieu, it would be for non-traditional topics (animal rights).

- Responsibility-driven Individuals

In line with the down to earth attitude of its lifestyle, in this milieu ‘offline participation is more prevalent than online participation’ [ib., p.6]. They participate rather infrequently online, but if so then in a wide range of issues and topics, as long as there might be an effect on the ‘real world’.

- Post-material Skeptics

This well-educated milieu has a positive attitude towards political participation in general but harbours a reflexive skepticism towards the internet at the same time, especially its commercial implications. Accordingly, those members of this milieu ‘who participate online often do so for political and civic purposes, especially for ecological and social causes’ [ib. p.6].

- Order-seeking Internet Laymen

As digital outsiders they tend to be restraint in internet use, not to speak of participatory internet activities of political intent. If they overcome the technological hurdle, member tend to participate occasionally in the fields of culture and health. Overall, members of this milieu ‘see active online participation as less real and valuable than participation outside of the internet’ [ib., p.7].

- The Internet Wary

Due to significant influence of (old) age and social background (working class), ‘there is a desire for participation, which cannot be realized due to the lack of familiarity with the internet’ [ib., p.8]. If at all, there is passive use of the internet mostly in the areas of hobbies and health.

We can summarize this panoramic view on German internet society with the observation that contrary to scientific attention and interest, political online participation is less prominent in most milieus than expected, given the steady technological closing of the ‘digital gap’ [cf. 14., p.9]. Obviously, there is no automatism between access *to* and (political) participation *in* digital society. Would it be overdrawn to conclude this first section by claiming that at least for Germany the idea,

which is shared by transparency activists, namely that the combination of internet technology and lowered barriers to publicly relevant data would spur renewal of democracy in general and civic activism in particular, stands on empirically weak grounds? The following second part now attempts to investigate the 'transparency norm' from a conceptual perspective.

### 3. 'Voice Divide' and the return of the 'Well-Informed Citizen'?

Undoubtedly, the internet has the democratic potential to enhance poly-perspectivity, reflexivity and social connectivity [10, p.2]. However, quite a few analytic commentators on internet democracy argue that in practice the net seems to contribute towards ambivalent if not outright contrary tendencies. They describe 'fragmented publics' which each resemble a closed 'media-biotope' more than an arena of deliberating exchange. They account for a lowered threshold of 'public opinionating' that is closer to self-promotion than enlightened argument [4, p. 8ff.]. They observe 'personalized publics' that are shaped by largely self-referential 'feeds' and 'streams', follow personal rather than societal relevancies, and consequently gather like-minded followers rather than engaging in conversation with opposing arguments [22, p. 3ff.]. A largely privatized internet thus, despite ubiquitous access to information, has just as well the potential to provide tailor-made 'filter bubbles' and 'echo chambers'. Which might be ok as long as it is about information and decision making in the sphere of consumption, but rather detrimental when it comes to the sphere of politics and political information. Here the technologically supported combination of evasion of contradictory information and argument on the one hand, and of attracting like-mindedness on the other, might indeed result in a 'spiral of silence 2.0' rather than promote compromise and change of mind based on good arguments [16, p. 35]. In addition, we have to remember that the internet is an infrastructure provided by private software companies for debate in various largely unrelated publics, but not a public infrastructure per se [22, p. 8]. Finally, if we recall from the SINUS milieu internet study that online participation by and large follows the milieu structure in the offline world, then it seems no exaggeration to argue that the *e* in 'e.democracy' also stands for *exclusive* and not just *electronic* [cf. 18, p. 16].

The popular idea that internet led transparency of government data will restore democracy and civic engagement thus seems at least shortsighted and 'rests on several problematic assumptions, primarily the presupposition that "if only people knew" things would be different' [12, p. 4]. To start with, information needs interpretation and transparent decision-making does not necessarily equal good policy. In fact, what many transparency enthusiasts tend to forget: information needs to be processed into knowledge, which in turn needs to be transferred into political judgement [1, p. 406]. Consequently, it still holds true that the vitality of democracy depends on the quality of democratic debate [21, p. 31]. Some commentators have argued that one such indicator of quality of democratic debate is the social distribution of 'voice'. Initially this question seems to continue the classic digital divide debate: whose voice will be heard on the internet, and will the voice of the so far marginalized find more resonance on the internet? It also indicates the ambivalence of internet democracy: the flip side to generally lowered entry barriers for debate via the net is a highly competitive 'attention economy' on the net that in last consequence seems to favour those voices that can rely on professionalized 'spin' [21]. However, eventually those commentators pushing the question concerning 'voice' get at the core of internet democracy: the quality of debate. Drawing on A.O.Hirschman's classic model of 'Exit, Voice and Loyalty' [9] they argue that there is a tendency to participate online in the mode of political consumption. Let's have a closer look at Hirschman's model to better understand their claim. On the surface of it, 'exit' and 'voice' simply stand for two opposite ways of dealing with the deteriorating performance of institutions. 'Exit' is the act of leaving the institution for somewhere else where there is better service on offer, while 'voice'



implies complaining with the intention of restoring or even improving the quality of the institution at hand. But it has to be noticed that while 'exit' is a largely private decision, 'voice' requires long term commitment, and sustained interaction with others. Thus 'politics of voice' stands for political reform that is driven and inspired by 'feeling a part of that society' [12, p.10]. Moreover, debates and politics inspired by an attitude of 'voice' require that apart from criticism there has to be voiced an alternative vision of how the institution / society should develop by exactly those who criticize it [10, p. 9]. In other words, 'politics of voice' require debate on 'inner alternatives' instead of 'outer choices'. Just as much as transparency we need different visions of 'good society' in democratic debate. However, what some of the more internet-critical commentators observe instead is 'that citizens react to the failures of democracy in a way similar to how they react when disappointed with the market' [12, p. 10]. Depersonalized interaction, fragmented attention and superficial transparency in combination carry the potential for a distorted vision of democracy which confuses opacity with publicity, the (loudest) 'crowd' (*volonté de tous*) with the sovereign people (*volonté general*), and opinionating with mediation and compromise. Consequently, those critics argue, what we need is perhaps not so much a debate on 'digital divide', which inevitably leans towards technological issues of online participation, but a debate on 'voice inequality', if by the we mean the different democratic potential of the various publics that constitute e.democracy [cf. 10, p.14].

A crucial aspect of this democratic potential is the readiness and capacity to engage with the complexity of politics and policies. Here too one could start the analysis with the truism that too much information means opacity rather than clarity. On the one hand, this applies even more so in a society that, at least in its self-perception, is exponentially growing in complexity. It is commonly assumed, that politics and administration are facing an increasing complexity of the social environment, indicated by the task of multi-level governance at all levels of politics, risky feedback loops of potentially global dimension even at local level, and pressurized decision-making for those in charge [11]. 'Open government' could thus be seen as a way of dealing with this complexity in so far as its main aim is not the procurement of legitimacy but the tapping of relevant knowledge, circulating in the everyday life of ordinary citizens [8, p. 42]. On the other hand, politics and policy-making always has been a more complex process than the normative call for more transparency of data and government procedures might suggest. As has been argued, even the most trivial mode of communal politics is not just about facts and figures but also about the authoritative judgement on values, and in consequence about generating winners and losers in (local) society. Moreover, politics and policies with some strategic ambition are always about the future, or at least unfold their potential in the future, and therefore they can hardly be measured against the facts available in the here and now [1, p. 405, 411f.]. From inside the discourse of government and administration it is thus plausibly maintained, that a simple call for more transparency misses the point insofar as it tends to generate information overload, and largely blanks out the complexity of policy issues [25, p. 7]. To help people to transfer information into political judgement, political and social framing are just as necessary as the ready disclosure of facts and figures. Instead of more information there is perhaps more need to fill the 'explanatory void' left by a mode of politics which is too much concerned with formal transparency norms but does not appreciate enough the importance of normative guidance and vision in complex society [11, p. 23]. To elaborate on this point, it could be argued that what we need is a better understanding of the link between transparency and trust in complex society. It is a basic feature of modern society that its life-world as a whole is neither fully understood nor fully understandable by anyone be they lay people or experts in some field or other. A crucial feature of 'ontological security' therefore is trust in other people (fellow citizens, politicians) in general and 'abstract systems' (institutions, expert systems) in particular in most areas of life [7, p. 36ff.]. It is the paradox of late modern society that its increasing complexity demands more trust rather than ever more information. Our contemporary debates on the

management of mistrust in democracy and politics seen from this perspective indicate a loss of ontological security in late modern society more than a loss of trust in democracy. Control of facts concerning good governance and the conduct of political representatives, is at best a substitute for trust, and an emotional valve in dealing with the loss of ontological security, but will not generate more trust in either democracy or a complex global society [12, p. 4; 1, p. 413].

Such a situation needs citizens that regard themselves not primarily as customers in the realm of politics but have the confidence to take decisions in terms of aligning with political programs, based on both information and moral judgement. In other words, it needs people who are able to participate in public debate not on the base of control of and mistrust in politics, but trust in their own moral competence due to mastery of everyday life. Debates that focus on the disclosure of government information, and thereby turn the citizen into some sort of political or scientific quasi-expert, tend to neglect this moral competency [12, p. 5]. An ideal type of that sort is provided by Alfred Schütz' classic 'The Well-Informed Citizen' [23]. Schütz distinguishes the 'well-informed citizen' from both, the 'man on the street' (or lay person) and from the 'expert' alike. While the latter is caught up in a monopolistic system of expertise, the former is driven by sentiment. It is the well-informed citizen's responsibility to emancipate from both and to redirect and reinterpret the relevances imposed by each of them. In the end 'it is the well-informed citizen who considers himself perfectly qualified to decide who is a competent expert and even to make up his mind after having listened to opposing expert opinions' (ib., p. 123]. But on what grounds and to what extent would he be inclined to follow someone else's opinion? Here Schütz offers another useful distinction concerning the social distribution of knowledge that could help us in our analysis of the transparency norm. He differentiates between 'socially derived knowledge' and 'socially approved knowledge'. The first mode of knowledge acknowledges that most of what we know is not personally acquired, but passed on and handed down by others. The second mode however is based on the crucial observation that 'any knowledge... receives additional weight if it is accepted not only by ourselves but by other members of our peer group' [ib., p. 133]. Not surprisingly then, 'socially approved knowledge is the source of prestige and authority; it is also the home of public opinion'. What is remarkable in the light of today's development is Schütz' insight that in the age of opinion polls it is the opinion of the 'man on the street' that 'becomes more and more socially approved at the expense of informed opinion'. Schütz concludes: 'It is the duty and the privilege, therefore, of the well-informed citizen in a democratic society to make his private opinion prevail over the public opinion of the man on the street' [ib., p. 134]. In this courageous pleading for the well-informed citizen, Schütz indicates already its counterpart too, namely someone sensitized to and driven by public opinion rather than his own morals. American sociologist David Riesman has given this character a most emblematic portrait in his figure of the 'inside-dopester' [17, p. 210ff.]. He describes this counter figure to the well-informed citizen as 'other-directed', keen to win other people's approval, keen to know the inside story to any topic and to belong to the inner circle 'for whatever peer group satisfaction this can bring'. He or she is politically competent in so far as 'living in a politically saturated milieu, (demands that) he knows the political score as he must know the score in other fields of entertainment, such as sports'. It remains to be seen which of these two social figures shall prevail in e.democracy.

#### **4. Reclaiming conversation - and yet another alternative Democracy?**

It is a recurrent observation in research on 'open government' and digital participation that more transparency actually has led to more rather than less resentment towards politics and government. Often this argument is illustrated with reference to Obamas White House initiative on 'Transparency and Open Government' and the detrimental effect this has had. Critics argue that it

has made transparency a global norm of democracy without really inducing a new trend of democratization of government [1, p. 399]. Following this observation, some commentators have concluded, that it needs indeed a 'change of culture' in terms of thinking about transparency, in fact not just in the way of handling government data but in the art of 'good governance' [18, p. 18]. They have subsequently tied this observation to the claim that what we need is another mode of communication than the one structured around followers and likes, namely 'conversation' [22, p. 4]. If we take that approach seriously, we might recognize that calls for more transparency could go to the core of what is perceived as a 'far reaching socio-cultural change' [ib.]. Rightly understood this social transformation referred to, is not confined to the political system of representative democracy but concerns society as a whole. American social psychologist Sherry Turkle has most recently enlivened this cultural debate by stating the urgent need for 'reclaiming conversation' [cf. 13]. She argues that 'we are being silenced by our (digital) technologies'. Driven by self-presentation and instant feed-back, they have made us unlearn 'conversation', understood as mode of communication based on undivided and open-ended attention, self-reflection, empathy and mentorship for the other. To reclaim conversation therefore is to reclaim fundamental human values, according to Turkle [ib.].

French social historian Pierre Rosanvallon [cf. 6] has adopted a similar approach to democracy theory, without the luddite-like subtext that one can find in Turkle's argument. For him the most fundamental reason for implementing what he calls a 'narrative democracy' does not lie in technology but the very design of representative democracy. Instead, according to Rosanvallon, it is to be found in the irresolvable incongruence between the 'concrete people' and the 'abstract sovereign', or the people and its polity for that matter. The concrete people will always feel at least in parts misrepresented in the abstract body of the sovereign, elected by majority [cf. 19, p. 21ff.]. However, Rosanvallon maintains, that this fundamental problem of any representative democracy has intensified due to recent developments in modern society. Modernity, in his view, has moved from an 'individualism of universality' (universal human rights and standardized life style) to an 'individualism of singularity' (unique biographical patterns of life-style and social inequality) [ib., p. 28f.]. Notions like 'deficit of representativeness' and 'transparency' get a much wider meaning and importance when looked at from this perspective. Because it is not a crisis of democracy as a political system but a crisis of democracy as a form of society that Rosanvallon points us to [ib. 34]. Consequently, the project of 'narrative democracy' is not primarily about better communication between the people and its political representatives. It is about no more and no less than the 'deciphering of society' as a whole. A society that has become opaque to itself due to superficial 'mediatization' and distorted notions of 'transparency' [ib., p. 19, 36]. The deciphering of society via a joint narrative of a cacophony of different voices Rosanvallon calls 'the parliament of the invisible'. To put this democratic project into practice, he calls on a long tradition of narrative writing committed to the invisible of society, ranging from Charles Booth's 'London Labour and the London Poor' (1889/91) to the 'Federal Writers Project' (1935) as part of the New Deal under F.D.Roosevelt, and on to St. Turkel's 'Working: People Talk About What They Do All Day and How They Feel About What They Do' (1972). However, to do justice to the new 'individualism of singularity' there should be no hierarchy of genres and styles, he argues. Consequently, Rosanvallon puts trust in the 'democratic virtuality of the internet' in order to get as many people as possible to be their own representatives. His own project [www.raconterlavie.fr](http://www.raconterlavie.fr) he regards as a small piece in an unfolding panorama [ib., p.64f.]. Others can be found at [www.leisestimmen.org](http://www.leisestimmen.org).

## 5. Summary

What we encounter in a network society where the majority of bottom-up initiatives on the internet are counted under transparency and/or participation initiatives, such as e.g. [www.abgeordnetenenwatch.de](http://www.abgeordnetenenwatch.de) [18, p.17] is often celebrated as a revitalization of democracy. The chapter aimed at taking a critical look at this view. Both from an empirical standpoint and from a conceptual perspective we found reasons to be hesitant towards a full embrace of what amounts to a politically correct transparency norm. This sceptical view is shared by others who have referred to ‚transparency-actionism‘ [1, p. 398], ‚transparency-illusion‘ [25, p. 15] or ‚transparency-delusion‘ [12, p. 1] respectively. However, while agreeing with their analysis, the best fitting term for the phenomena described might still be ‚transparency-fetishism‘. Leaning on Marx’ notion of ‚commodity fetishism‘, what the terms intends to describe is an illusion generated by contemporary internet based transparency initiatives. It suggests that the political norm of ‚transparency‘ in the sense of disclosure of government activity and government data masks the need for another holistic understanding and practice of ‚transparency‘, namely the deciphering of contemporary society in a ‚narrative democracy‘, both on- and offline.

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