

The background features thick, expressive yellow paint strokes on a dark, textured fabric. The fabric has a fine grid pattern with a few bright blue dots. The overall composition is abstract and layered.

**CULTURE OUTPACES
TECHNOLOGY**

REAL CHANGE IN GOVERNMENTS, INSTITUTIONS AND ENTERPRISE CAN ONLY BE ACHIEVED IF IT IS ACCOMPANIED BY A CHANGE IN THE CULTURAL VALUES BY WHICH PEOPLE THINK AND ACT. TECHNOLOGY IS AN ENABLER THAT CAN DRIVE CHANGE BUT WHICH IS FAR TOO INADEQUATE TO EFFECT IT ON ITS OWN.

INTERVIEW with Peter Kruse, by Ulrike Reinhard

Citizens, consumers and students all seem to be off their leashes. They're giving full vent to their dissatisfaction and letting their imaginations run wild. Why is this happening now? Why on such a scale? Why almost worldwide?

Taking the risk of leaving the shelter of the silent majority and going out on a limb is an essential part of any form of public expression of one's own opinion. Such unaccustomed exposure to the public gaze leaves most people feeling anxious and vulnerable. To reduce these unpleasant feelings people mainly use five coping strategies: (1) anonymity, (2) grouping, (3) habituation, (4) relevance, and (5) reputation. Furthermore, the emotional barrier to participation varies with the social or political impact of the issue being protested or advocated. Under totalitarian regimes the threshold is only passed in extreme situations like riots or situations of complete personal hopelessness.

With the rise of the internet, social software and smart phones the psychological conditions have changed dramatically. The new network technologies strongly support all five coping strategies for lowering the individual threshold to participation. (1) Anonymity: although a lot of efforts are made to fix the personal identities of people contributing in networks, it is still quite easy for everyone to maintain a relative high degree of anonymity. It is not necessary to put on a face mask as on a demonstration. Transparency is an option to be taken actively. (2) Grouping: the architecture of the networks fosters development of hypes that can generate mass movements in a very short time. People experience themselves as the sheltered part of a strong alliance long before there is any real presence on the streets. Virtual grouping precedes joint action. (3) Habitua-

*Chesbrough, H.W. (2003).
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tion: using the new communication technologies to participate in a wide range of initiatives is as easy as flipping through different TV channels. To agitate for one's own convictions and grasp the nettle of some contentious issue becomes part of everyday communication behaviour. (4) Relevance: the constant and interconnected real-time information flow provided by the internet gives people direct insights into the development of society. Easy access to historical as well as current facts provides them with the context and background needed to take a clear stance on a topic. (5) Reputation: with the internet Andy Warhol's prediction that "in the future, everyone will be world-famous for 15 minutes" approximates reality. Gaining a public reputation is no longer a question of being sponsored by the mass media; in principle it is open to everyone. Being recognized and valued by many people offers protection against political persecution.

For sure, the internet lowers perceived personal risks, reduces the costs of cooperation and enables rapid synchronization of activities. In short, the internet is an important enabler for participation, engagement and agitation. However, to explain peoples growing tendency to seize the initiative mainly by reference to the invention of new communication technologies is far too short-sighted. We have to differentiate clearly between the field of politics and the field of economics. Whereas in behavioural economics the idea of a causal relationship between the rise of web 2.0 and consumers off their leashes can be backed up by strong arguments, this idea is not very convincing when applied to the political domain. Here, it is a question of power. In the markets, formation of coherently acting stakeholder groups is a direct way of influencing profit and business strategies. The impact is high and the risk is low. In business the internet really did initiated a basic power shift from company to customer. Markets became conversations. Compared to the influence of customers on market dynamics, the influence of constituents on decision-making in politics is very indirect as in representative democracies or sometimes totally illegitimate as in totalitarian states. Impact is uncertain and the risk is clearly higher most of the time. Revolutions and citizens' initiatives cannot be explained by the existence of the internet. There must already be a strong underlying motivation for change in the social system searching for possibilities to express itself and blaze its trail. Grassroots campaigning via the internet is fundamentally different from classical marketing or demagogic manipulation. The effect is not dependent on the intensity of any given impulse but rather on the numbers of people who risk crossing the threshold. There is no boost without this type of emotional resonance. To utilize the internet for the interests of a minority is thus nearly impossible - which signals hard times for any dictatorship.

If we really get serious about civil participation in policy-making what does this mean for those who are used to setting the rules? What would be a good start-out for them?

To realize the potential of civil participation, a fundamental reorientation of the concept of power and leadership has to take place in politics – regardless of whether the system is already democratic or still autocratic in nature. For a political class trying to do the best for but not with their citizens, any form of participation will never be more than an activity for enhancing people's sense of well-being. As long as politicians are convinced that decision-making in politics is mainly a question of expertise and tactical competence, they will not really be able to accept influences from the grassroots. Only under the condition of a high level of distributed knowledge can participation add a reasonable degree of expertise to finding the best solution in a scientific sense. However, given the exploding complexity of modern society, participation is now always an essential contribution to balancing conflicting interests in a sustainable way. Leaving this balance to lobbying or to competition between political parties no longer fits the bill. The growing criticism of the political class and much-cited citizen apathy in many western countries reflects the people's feeling that the principles of representative democracy need revision and need to be supplemented by more direct

forms of participation. In Germany steadily decreasing voter turnout shows that periodic elections are increasingly failing to meet people's expectations. Young people in particular prefer to experiment with new forms of participation enabled by the internet instead of engaging in political parties. Generally speaking, the system change seems to start from the local level where it is a lot easier to make competing interests transparent. In Germany the number of independent candidates in local elections is already close to taking over the absolute majority and more than 200 town councils debate or practice participatory budgets. In terms of influencing political decision-making on the national or international level, the internet is less a tool for direct participation than a catalyser for grassroots campaigning and political agenda setting. Internet platforms like "avaaz.org" organize worldwide protests to browbeat decision-makers while whistleblowers like "wikileaks.org" sometimes take the lead in media coverage. Only in the case of revolutionary change does the internet gain the quality of an instrument to directly influence the balance of power on a national or international scale. Up-to-the-minute examples in North Africa are impressive examples of how resonance effects triggered by the internet are able to accelerate the breakdown of a disreputable regime or the dismissal of an unloved leader.

To overthrow a leader like Hosni Mubarak seems to be the easy part – building a democracy is the much harder one. Can democracies be crowd sourced? What does a process like this require from citizens? What are the constraints?

Connecting people in scale-free networks creates complex dynamics that are able to induce revolutionary change. The stronger the degree of connectivity, the larger the number of active elements grows, while the more non-linear feedback loops there are in a network, the higher becomes the probability of sudden boosts or hypes. Resonance effects can destabilize even well established states of order in a social system. However, the creation of new states of order in a society is a very different story and the role played in this by networks and new communication technologies is not so clear. To build democratic structures in a previously autocratic system it is necessary to develop new cultural values, to negotiate new legal frameworks and to install new learning environments that nurture the required skills and attitudes. Creating a constitution by consensus is not a matter of shared knowledge or crowd sourcing; much more it is a question of intense dialogue between people. Online collaborative tools such as a wiki are of only limited use in this context because there is no chance to fix what is right or wrong as there is in an fact-oriented encyclopaedia. A wiki about values leads to infinite regress: a second wiki is needed to define criteria to review the contributions made in the value wiki which needs in turn a wiki to define the criteria to accept the criteria and so on. As long as there is no semantic web, communication in the internet will be too easily confused by misinterpretation to serve as a valid basis for the discourse needed to start a structured and targeted process of democratization on a larger scale. Even so, the internet is indeed extremely helpful when it comes to training the skills and attitudes needed for transformation. Even though substantial ways of participation can only be recommended when the new idea of society has already been elaborated in more detail, the internet should be used right from the start to publish all steps in the process and give people an opportunity for annotations. To make online communities and social networking an early and self-evident part of communication will surely help to protect the political culture from falling back into autocratic tendencies. Implementation of scale-free networks is by far the best means of preventing closed shops by enabling transparency, of suppressing hidden agendas by demanding authenticity, and of demonstrating the limits of top-down approaches to leaders.

What role can new technologies and networks play in the process of starting and organizing civil participation and what role can they play in ensuring that it really is included in policy-making? And for ensuring that civil

participation does play its part in policy-making, is an idea such as “government in a lab” really a good choice to make?

In my opinion the two entry points which offer the highest chances for the successful use of the new communication technologies in participation processes are to be found on the small scale of local affairs and on the large scale of political agenda setting. When it comes to integrating open networks into political decision-making we have to remember that democracies are still in a very early stage of development. In Germany the official commission tasked with evaluating the impact of the internet on society has strayed off course to become preoccupied with questions of how to restrict and regulate the self-organised dynamics. Legal problems seem to be far more at the centre of its interest than feasibility studies that evaluate the chances for democracy. There is some hope that the newly founded Google “Research Institute for Internet and Society” in Berlin is heading more in that direction, although this issue needs to be decoupled from lobby interests. More experiments and more empirical data are urgently needed but the readiness to risk taking a playful approach is still at a minimum. Today the laboratory for testing the political impact of the new communication technologies is more on the streets than in the hands of government. Politicians seem willing to give the internet a try only in the hope of having their own profiles raised by viral effects in political campaigning. In most other respects the fear of initiating developments that cannot be controlled is too high and the recent use of networks in the organization of riots by frustrated young people as has happened in Great Britain hardly qualifies as a confidence-building measure. Nevertheless - with or without governmental support - creative local authorities will intensify their search for new ways to stimulate the engagement of their fellow citizens, and the silent majority will not stop using their newfound power to influence public opinion whatever the mass media might say.

These “new models” require a tremendous cultural shift in the way our countries, companies, universities & schools, institutions are led. This is nothing that can be achieved in the short term. What kind of process do we need to get us there?

At the actual stage of development it is far too early to speak of “new models” organizing civil participation. What we have today is far from a consistent approach to adding more direct aspects to our representative democracies. Naive enthusiasm for the possibilities of crowd sourcing and collective intelligence is not very helpful. What is needed now are concrete experiences in situations where the risk is not too high and where the effects can be understood. Otherwise the political class will never allow such an open-heart operation. There is nothing as delicate as a power shift in society. This is why I strongly recommend starting out on a local level. Let’s find some town councils which are ready to serve as guinea pigs. Provide them with additional budgets, accompany their launch of new forms of participation with a structured process that assists initial acceptance and monitors the developments triggered. The rise of “new models” is not a question of technology but rather a question of adapting the cultural value system, of negotiating new legal frameworks and of installing learning environments to nurture the required skills and attitudes. There is no real difference between revolutionary change and opening representative democracies to self-organised network dynamics - in both cases established systems of power are fundamentally challenged. Given the sheer complexity of the problems our societies are facing, the attempt to establish new forms of participation is surely worth the risk involved. Political leaders are under pressure like never before. To wait for some geniuses to make the right decisions as suggested by the “great man theory of history” or to rely on circles of experts seems to be no longer an appropriate response. To reiterate: calming down by delegating the tasks to a vague “collective intelligence” is an oversimplification that’s about as helpful as Adam Smith’s notion of the invisible hand of the market.



How can collective intelligence be harnessed to tackle problems – like climate change, poverty or crime – that are generally too complex to be solved by any one expert or group? Can it be harnessed at all?

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Collective intelligence – as it is understood and operationalized today – is just a turbo-charger for processes of interaction and discourse that already exist in society and not an adequate instrument for tackling problems like climate change, poverty or crime in the sense of a cause and effect relationship. The semantic problem of hyperlinked information in the internet mentioned above limits the use of platforms in trying to deal with the big questions of the world on a larger scale. New communication technologies make an extremely invaluable contribution to enhancing global awareness but up to now networks are unable to reduce complexity in itself. With the internet, web 2.0, and the invention of innovative devices to use networks at any time and place, the structural basis for creating collective intelligence is already well developed, but differences of culture and language still define the limits. As long as Tim Berners-Lee's dream of a semantic web is not realised, we should concentrate on the lower hanging fruit.