Rethinking Political Communication and the Internet: A Perspective from Cultural Studies and Gender Studies

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1 Introduction: Politics and Media

Political communication is seen as a link and an intermediary between political institutions, mass media and the general public. The articulation of political interests and opinions, the identification of political problems or the finding and enacting of binding political decisions requires diverse communication processes. Politics, and therefore political communication, is transmitted and experienced mostly via the media. These days political communication in and through the internet takes on a central function in democratic societies. Faster access to information, participation opportunities for diverse actors, communication via e-mail and exchanges on online discussion forums all indicate that the internet is seen as a medium of political communication and means of deliberative processes. The internet is the technical infrastructure that makes social communication of any kind possible (cf. Schweiger and Weihermüller 2008: 535), but it can also be examined as a "cultural forum" (Jensen and Helles 2011: 530) in terms of the number of communicative practices – including political communication. Since the internet has changed both the formal political process as well as political communication among institutional, civic and individual actors and movements, the question of the composition and the formation of public spheres must be reexamined.

Based on a critique of the traditional view of political communication, this chapter will propose an expansion of the concept and the subject area of political communication from the standpoint of cultural studies and gender studies. This view of political communication, as will ultimately be shown, is useful for analyzing the relationship between the internet, participation and democracy.

2 Political Communication: State of Research

A systematic overview of the research on political communication is difficult to compile due to the large number of studies and the diversity of the approaches chosen. For this reason, in what follows I would like to work

out primarily the central aspects of the existing research and to emphasize its inherent positions and exclusions.

In research on political communication, an analytical distinction is made particularly between the actors and content of political communication and its impact and reception (cf. Vowe and Dohle 2007). Consequently, a focus on the Laswell formula ("who says what in which channel to whom with what effect?") is initially a useful systematization in order to proceed economically with the research. Although the research process is divided into individual parts, the component phenomena of political communication can still be researched (cf. Schulz 2011: 58). Based on the varying meanings of the concept of political communication, Donges and Jarren (2005) suggest an analysis that distinguishes between the different social levels. By dividing the subject into the micro, meso and macro levels, each of the levels on which political communication takes place can be taken into account: At the micro level, individuals act as though they are not part of a special group of actors. The meso level is the action level of organizations and institutions. The macro level refers to the societal level. The political actors in this distinction are primarily the government and parliament, on the one side, and organizations, movements, parties and media on the other. Individual citizens still have no constitutive role in the political communication process, because they have hardly any agency ascribed to them on the micro level. Political communication is thus only a flow of news and information which structures the political process and plays out in two arenas: First, the parliamentary-administrative arena, and second the public arena, in which organizations and movements also operate (cf. Pfetsch 2005: 349). The participation of citizens is not considered, since the main task of political communication is to be a transmission and information service. Moreover, political communication in such approaches is often equated with public communication (cf. Marcinkowski 2001).

In addition to this distinction regarding the role and the effective power of the actors, another distinction in political communication has been established. The production of politics, which precedes a decision-making process, is distinct from the representation of politics, which is shaped in communication processes (cf. Sarcinelli 1994: 40–47). The representation of politics, according to Jarren and Donges (2006), is increasingly becoming an integral part of the political process itself. Particularly in empirical research, as Sarcinelli and Tenscher (2008: 7) also point out, the mass media's representation of politics is sliding into the foreground, while the production of politics in isolation from the public is examined far less.

Political communication is therefore seen altogether as the central mechanism for formulating, establishing and enforcing collectively binding decisions (cf. Jarren and Donges 2006: 22) – and thus as a basic component of a democratic society. The subject area of political communication is defined in various ways, however.

3 On the Relationship between Media, the Internet and Political Communication

What the approaches to the concept of political communication shown in the previous section have in common is that they view (political) communication processes between the government and citizens as a constituent part of a democracy. These days, the focus is on the connection between media, the internet and political communication.

What is central in terms of political communication, according to Funiok (2007: 92 f.), is the information function of media. Media can transmit knowledge, create discussion topics, offer identification and invite to social action. Politics appears to be transmitted mostly by way of the media, and citizens experience politics primarily via the media, since they are mostly informed about it through mass media. Media can also, according to Krotz (2007: 89 f.), modify, change and differentiate communication, which leads to a rise of new forms of interaction and communication. The media thus contribute far more than the mere provision of information or opinion; media have become fundamental for a democracy. Dahlgren (2009) sees the role of media in a democracy in the visualization of politics, in which media provide information, but also analysis as well as forums for debate. Additionally, media can stage a particular view of the world, but it also has an integration function, as it is used, received and appropriated (cf. Thomas 2010).

A change of media and technology requires a change in the political communication processes, which is accompanied by a discussion of its implications for politics, democracy and society. Particularly with the increasing penetration of the internet into so many areas of life these debates have flared up anew. For political communication, the internet serves as a medium for information, communication and participation (cf. Polat 2005). The ways of utilization related to political participation are varied and include not only the traditional forms of communication, but also informal and everyday practical forms (cf. Moy et al. 2005). In the theoretical debate over the relationship between the internet and politics, three positions are usually found: The first assumes an increase in political mobilization through the internet because it enables new forms of democracy and participation; the second posits a strengthening of existing patterns of political participation and their actors; and the third warns against the negative effects of the internet, such as a growing digital divide (cf. Norris 2001).

In order to make any statements about the relationship between the internet and political communication, however, it is crucial to consider what is generally understood as political communication. This is because, depending on the underlying conceptual and theoretical assumptions – as presented – different subject areas of political communication are defined. It is prevalent in analyses of online communication to limit the content that is considered political to an institution-based view of actors (such as political parties and government), and to focus on specific events such as elec-

tion campaigns (cf. Davis 2009; Papacharissi 2010; Wright 2012). What are essential for studies of political communication on the internet are also the assumptions made concerning the forms, content and actors of political communication.

To determine the relationship between media and democracy theoretically, there are *three traditional lines* (cf. Dahlgren 2009), which are based in a similar form on analyses of the emerging political public spheres on the internet. The first traditional line comes from political science and has a strong focus on the political system and the actors within it, including political institutions, citizens and media. In the second traditional line, particularly through Jürgen Habermas and his conception of the public sphere, the perspective on media and democracy is extended to encompass deliberative processes and civil society (cf. Habermas 1995, Calhoun 1993). In the third line, the perspectives of cultural studies are offered, which deal with issues of identity, ascription of meaning and practices of culture, and interrogate them critically (cf. Dahlgren 2009).

According to each of these three traditional lines, the role of the *actors* is constructed differently. Thus today it is mostly institutions, as well as the market, the economy and civil society, that are viewed as actors that produce public spheres (cf. Winter 2010). The economy takes advantage of the new technologies for information and communication in order to sell products (e-commerce) and to generate target group-specific data. With the focus on political communication – particularly within political science – institutionalized communication has resulted in the long-popular concept of eGovernment (cf. Henman 2010). As a consequence of this, the view of certain forms of participation of government and state actors has narrowed; research has therefore come to the not-unexpected conclusion that the internet is mostly used for the dissemination of information. eGovernment is often seen as part of the measures to modernize administration and make it more efficient, but it is also part of electronic democracy and it is increasingly seen as a means of ensuring greater citizen participation (cf. Chadwick 2003 and 2009). The concept of eDemocracy expands the scope of political participation on the internet and involves the participation of civil society and its actors. In this context, Baringhorst (2010) points out that protest movements in particular strongly influence the political debate, as network-based campaigns generate feelings of political community, mobilize and show the possibilities for vertical and horizontal co-operation (ibid. 389 f.). Social movements and civil society groups in particular contribute to the emergence of counter-publics (cf. Wimmer 2007). The internet is both a medium of communication as well as a mobilization tool or sometimes the site for the rally itself (cf. Harders 2005). Altogether, according to Lang (2004), there are three aspects that form the civil-society basis for the public sphere on the internet: the facilitation of networking between actors, the production of common problem definitions as a basis for common action and the provision of mobilization opportunities for political commitment. In addition to institutions and civil societies, however, it is mostly individual actors who are on the internet

– i. e. citizens who can participate in a new kind and a new way of political communication and produce public spheres. Particularly through the development of the so-called "social web," passive recipients become active content producers (cf. Bruns 2008). These individual forms of communication are especially evident in blogs; with citizen journalism, the mass media is confronted with a powerful form of alternative journalism (cf. Allan and Thorson 2009).

The democratic-theoretical classification of media and the internet can thus be distinguished from the content and actors of political communication on the internet. From each of the underlying theoretical assumptions, a particular view of the subject area results.

4 Rethinking Political Communication

In what follows, it is proposed for research into political communication to consider the insights of cultural studies and gender studies more carefully in order to broaden the subject area of political communication conceptually. The potential of this expansion is shown by means of five central discussion threads that result from the foregoing explanations:

1.) The concept of participation and role of citizens
2.) A discussion on the content of political communication
3.) Argumentation for an expansion of the concept of politics
4.) A consideration of the contextual linkages of political communication
5.) Changes in the public sphere

1.) In an approach to the subject area of political communication, the role of citizens in processes of political communication is defined conceptually and structurally. This is closely related to the underlying concept of citizenship, as well as to the question of who is considered an active member of a political community. In the past, for example, women were excluded from voting; now, migrants who lack state citizenship are usually ineligible to vote. These aspects are closely linked to the question of what role is granted to the citizens in a democratic society, as well as to the types and forms of participation that are considered political and relevant. Voluntary engagement, for example, is usually not considered to be traditional political participation, which is only recognized as involvement in political parties and social movements. Accordingly, the "gender gap," which is often held responsible for varying political participation, is not questioned for its gender-specific connotations, nor are their causes analyzed (cf. Westle 2001).

Feminist political theory expands the concept of citizenship accordingly, and as a consequence, social movements and seemingly apolitical areas of private life are politicized (cf. Sauer 2001). Politics is thus no longer seen as only produced by certain institutions, spheres or levels of society (cf. Mouffe 2005). Varying political participation is also caused by sexually hierarchical access and an unequal distribution of speaking and listening (cf. Holland-Cunz 2006). These structural inequalities should be made avail-

able to a critical test, and the opportunities for participation that are not yet taken into account must be reflected accordingly. Coding various forms of participation as political can also lead to more opportunities for participation in a society (cf. Carpentier 2011: 47).

2.) Regarding the content of political communication, mostly political topics and forms of presenting political content are up for negotiation, as well as the question of which fields of action require a public social negotiation process. According to a central point of discussion, political communication will, through increasing tabloidization – e. g. by dealing with increasingly private connoted topics – either lose political content, or on the contrary, make groups of people who cannot be reached through traditional channels of information receptive to political content (cf. Dörner 2001).

Gender studies see the separation between information and entertainment as altogether critical. In a narrow understanding of political communication, as Zoonen criticizes (2005: 143 f.), entertainment and popular genres are marginalized and devalued on the grounds that they do not pertain to serious information and deliberation. For example it is assumed that such popular formats as soap operas cannot be political *qua* form (ibid.). However, entertainment and popular formats have an explicit political component, because these formats include diverse citizens. In this way, civil rights can be tested, even if the exercise takes place in a way that Zoonen paraphrases as to "entertain the citizen" (ibid.: 151). Saxer (2007) makes a similar argument, that "politainment" – the integration of politics and entertainment – encourages at least a temporary political inclusion of marginalized citizens, and therefore a variety of formats can be described as political. Thus viewers use the format of politainment to construct identity and meaning in the context of their current living situation, both of which are politically connoted actions (cf. Dörner, 2006). Not only is high culture relevant to this, but everyday and popular culture are also central to contemporary societies and are a part of politics (cf. Dörner 2006: 223). Likewise, the entertainment dimension can be located not merely on a symbolic level (cf. Saxer 2007).

3.) Both cultural studies and gender studies argue for a broader definition of politics. The very concept of culture employed by cultural studies is politically dimensioned, because it is not possible to separate the concept from the political and the two ideas are mutually dependent (cf. Dörner 2006: 222 f.). For the concept of political communication, this means that even supposedly "popular" communication, and not just the communication of traditional political actors such as governments or – following Habermas (1995) – civil societies, may also have a political impetus. Those forms of communication are also important for a democracy, but they are often viewed as non-political or pre-political, or even as non-informative in the traditional research on political communication. In contrast to a narrow definition of politics, a broader definition presupposes no social field to be apolitical (cf. Pelinka 2004), because the coexistence of people and any connection between them is potentially political.

The redefinition of the concept of political communication is primarily due to the insights of gender studies. Feminist communication studies works with a gender-theoretical perspective on different levels (cf. Dorer and Geiger 2002: 11 f.; Klaus 2001). Thus, to begin with, the social model that underlies the conventional view of political communication is scrutinized. Furthermore, the effects of the androcentric orientation are examined and, based on feminist theory, new concepts and models of social communication processes are developed. It should be noted that gender relations are embedded in the political culture of communication in a variety of relationships (cf. Abels and Bieringer 2006: 9), and neither politics nor the public sphere are gender-neutral terms. The "gendering" of political communication, according to Abels and Bieringer (ibid.), could be linked, from a feminist perspective, to reflections on democratic participation in order to call into question the conception of political citizenship according to its inclusions and exclusions. It is also important to reflect on what actors and forms of communication can be counted as political communication.

4.) Media as well as the internet are part of different communicative, social and societal practices that must be taken into account in any analysis of political communication processes. Cultural studies points to the contextuality of media content that cannot be considered separately from historical, social and cultural contexts (cf. Krotz 2007; Fiske 1992). Furthermore, media and the internet are influenced by organizational, economic and technical peculiarities as well (cf. Dahlgren 2009). This means that a change in the forms and the subject area of political communication has an impact on the citizens' perception of politics and political events. Cultural studies also follow an action-theoretical approach and shows that differentiated media-oriented action takes place within specific contexts of interpretation.

5.) It should also be discussed how the internet can ensure the mediated production of the public sphere in the sense of deliberation (cf. Dahlgren 2007). It is crucial that the internet has changed the production of the public sphere. Not only privileged actors, but also individual citizens can create public spheres. The public sphere cannot be regarded as a static concept, but can be found in the interplay of social and technological transformations in a constant state of change. Fraser (2005) points to a critical-theoretical approach which seeks to locate normative standards and emancipatory political possibilities precisely within the historically unfolding constellation as an alternative to participation and inclusion in the center of a concept of the public sphere. Therefore it is not just a question of what the public sphere actually is; rather, the transformation and the various forms of the public sphere must be taken into account in order to study political communication on the internet. The public sphere can in this case consist of different levels of conceptualization, as Fraser (1996) introduced and Klaus (2005) further developed. Political communication in and through the internet does not take place in only a single public sphere; the public sphere consists of a variety of publics and partial publics, all of which can have social relevance.

Furthermore, the media contributes to the fact that systematic distinctions, such as between public and private as well as the aforementioned related distinction between entertainment and information, appear fragile (cf. Lünenborg 2009). These distinctions, however, are often still part of the subject descriptions of political communication and thus also the considerations of media and democracy. Gender research has already for some time drawn attention to the productive dissolution of socially constructed dichotomies and thus has critically challenged the concept of a political (media) public sphere. Cultural studies has also worked to ensure that popularization, entertainment and politainment are counted in the realm of politics as well and can be considered politically relevant to a democracy.

These (and other) discussion threads are related to aspects of participation and representation, which are substantial for a democratic society. Representation moves between substitution and portrayal, while participation is in most cases based on a varying constructible citizenship (cf. Carpentier 2011: 16; Klaus and Lünenborg in this volume). To summarize, it can be said that the subject area of political communication is often based on implicit normative statements about what is considered to be political, or descriptive questions about the organization of the political realm, which require a reflection especially in relation to the insights of cultural studies and gender studies. This appears to be helpful in expanding the field of political communication to take a variety of participation opportunities into consideration.

5 Conclusion: A Redefinition of the Scope of Political Communication

For research on political communication, it is not sufficient to describe only the functions of media and the internet in a democracy. According to Dahlgren (2009), the value of theories can be measured by the fact that, in addition to the mere description of empirical phenomena, they can show better alternatives. With the help of a broader definition of politics, an expansion of the spectrum of actors and the renunciation of a narrow view of political content, both the concept and the subject area of political communication can be extended. Based on this, both the changed forms of communication embraced by the internet as well as dichotomies such as between private and public, or between entertainment and information, can be critically scrutinized. This expanded concept opens up perspectives that enhance the visibility and distinguishability of varied actors and in the process, feminist media production and feminist audiences can be considered as central for political communication.

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