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Civic Tech in Germany: Echoes from the Past…

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 still, there is hope…

Going back into time, we would even be able to find a period when Germany was kind of a frontrunner innovating the digital future: but those were the 1970s, 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). Also, the first data protection laws date back to the 1970s. The census of 1983 can be considered a first „setback", or maybe a „reality check" for the rather problematic „innovation climate" - a widespread public protest adressed the suspected „espionage" by state actors against the citizens (yes, that was 40 years ago!). Back then, "digitalization" 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 millenium 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 for many (and a business opportunity, of course) – but for politics and administration it became a more strategic goal.

Let´s move forward another decade: until the Bundestagswahl 2005 in Germany voting machines (in official language: „elektronische Wahlgeräte") were allowed. After a growing 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. COVID-19 was a small game changer here, but currently we see a return to a pre-pandemic status and a rollback of digital solutions in deliberation and decision making. In the light of these developments, "digitalization" is not only new devices, new networks, or new content - now 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 (yes, dangers, not challenges) of these innovations. And of course, D-A-N-G-E-R is usually the dominant perspective. 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.