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# Broadening eParticipation: Rethinking ICTs and Participation

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**Abstract**

The emergence of new information and communication technologies (ICTs) has resulted in numerous optimistic concepts like digital democracy, cyberdemocracy, the digital agora, the virtual community, and the global village, giving the impression that cyberspace automatically implies the broadening of democracy within society. The discourse has thus far mainly narrowly focused on concepts such as e-government and e-voting implying that the use of ICTs by public administration strengthens democracy.

In contrast to this narrow view the approach of the ICT&S Center at the University of Salzburg stresses that political participation is a broad concept that aims at including those affected by decisions within these processes. It is based on a broad concept of power that sees the latter not as something that is imposed on people from above by institutions that cannot be controlled. But as something that is distributed in a certain way and that is produced in social practices.

The task of eParticipation is to empower people with ICTs to be able to act in bottom-up-decision processes, to make informed decisions, and to develop social and political responsibility. Therefore, eParticipation is a means to empower the political, socio-technological, and cultural capabilities of individuals giving the possibility that individuals can involve themselves and organize themselves in the information society.

The relationship of ICTs and society (ICT&S) is not considered as one where a limited group of political experts takes decisions, controls power, and informs others by the way of new technologies of these decisions. We rather consider digital democracy as a process in which all people are enabled to become capable of acting as political experts, taking decisions, producing power, and using ICTs for co-operation and self-organization. Social structures have enabling and constraining effects on human practices (Anthony Giddens), the task of eParticipation is to limit the constraining and to maximize the enabling effects of ICTs.

This concept brings the ICT adoption process from the macro-level of state endorsed e-policy to the micro-level, representing the individual – an indispensable precondition in order to bring about the capable user. We need to turn away from techno-deterministic viewpoints to human-centred and culturally sensitive approaches. One can also characterize this concept as the shift from building infrastructure to creating identities or from bridging the digital divide to closing the knowledge gap. This means putting the individual in the centre of the adoption process of technology. Therefore cognitive, cultural, and social factors must be considered in order to achieve an encompassing understanding.

In this paper the notion of eParticipation is introduced and three application areas are outlined: eParticipation and user-centred design, an empirical study on political online

communication of youths in Salzburg, and an empirical study on political online discussion boards in Austria.

**Keywords:** eParticipation, political system, digital democracy, cyberspace, internet, e-governance, e-government, participation, participatory democracy, political theory, information society, knowledge society

## 1. Introduction: The Concept of eParticipation

The focus of this paper is to connect internet usage and political activity that has a grassroots character (i.e. is not organized hierarchically and in a centralized manner from above by political elites, but from below in decentralized processes), is self-organized, and takes place in civil society. We employ the term eParticipation for such activities and suggest that eParticipation allows a broadening of concepts such as e-government and digital democracy. eParticipation is a concept that goes beyond traditional concepts of digital democracy by focusing on civil society and citizen-citizen-communication as important aspects of democracy.

The task of this paper is to introduce and discuss the notion of eParticipation and to show how research on eParticipation is undertaken within the framework of ICT&S (Information and Communication Technologies & Society) research at the ICT&S Center in Salzburg. The main questions that this paper addresses are: * What is eParticipation? * How can eParticipation be studied?

For addressing these questions we first give an introduction to our notion of eParticipation (section 1) and then show with the help of three aspects of eParticipation how research on this topic can be carried out:
1. Usability and eParticipation (Section 2)
2. Framework for A Case Study on Young People and eParticipation in Salzburg (Section 3)
3. A Case on Political Online Debate in Austria (Section 4).

In scientific discourse the notion of digital democracy is frequently used in a very general sense for describing various forms of practicing politics online (cf. Hacker/Van Dijk 2000: 1, Catinat/Vedel 2000: 185). Digital democracy can therefore be defined in relation to the different methods, tools, and practices of using ICTs in politics. Representative, plebiscitary, and grassroots digital democracy are the three dominant forms of digital democracy.

Representative concepts of digital democracy mainly stress top-down digital communication between governments and citizens and within governments (cf. Norris 2001, Richard 1999). Technologies that are favoured include political guest books, newsletters, chats and online conferences with politicians on special occasions, e-mails to

politicians, online administration tools (such as online tax declarations, downloading and submitting forms online, etc.), citizen information systems, online election and information campaigning, online policy proposals, online consultation, citizens' juries, citizens' panels, or the electronic town hall.

It comes as no surprise that governments prefer centralized top-down information technologies as opposed to decentralized grassroots communication technologies because established political actors in contemporary representative political systems aim at accumulating and stabilizing power. Interactive technologies like public online discussion boards or collaborative wikis allow oppositional voices to criticize governments and parties, which could potentially shed negative light on these political actors and could potentially be detrimental to their interest of accumulating votes. Vilém Flusser (1996) described centralized information distribution mechanisms as conservative, proto-fascist, and totalitarian modes of communication; the focus on one-to-many information technologies discloses a very restricted view of democracy.

Plebiscitary concepts of digital democracy mainly stress bottom-up digital communication between citizens and governments (cf. e.g. Arterton 1987, Becker/Slaton 1997, Moore 1999). Technologies that are favoured are e.g. online surveys, online polls, online voting, and online referenda. Representatives of plebiscitary digital democracy consider televoting, telepolling, and telereferenda as empowering citizens and weakening centralized bureaucratic power. They reduce democracy to direct decisions in the form of voting and ignore that democracy is first of all a process of communicative action and deliberation. The conceptual focus on voting instead of on deliberation and communication underestimates the danger of the potential usage of televoting for installing push-button- and point-and-click-decision systems that give legitimacy to authoritarian leadership that manipulates public opinion.

Grassroots digital democracy (eParticipation) is based on an understanding of democracy as participatory bottom-up-process. Participation means that technologies, resources, organizations, and skills enable humans to design and manage their social systems all by themselves and to develop collective visions of a better future so that collective intelligence can emerge. Decisions in a social system should be prepared, taken, and enacted by all individuals and groups affected by the operations of the system in bottom-up grassroots processes. Participatory systems are self-organized and self-managed systems (Banathy 1996). A participatory social system is a system in which power is distributed in a rather symmetrical way, i.e. humans are enabled to control and acquire resources such as property, technologies, social relationships, knowledge, and skills that help them in entering communication and co-operation processes in which decisions on questions that are of collective concern are taken. Providing people with resources and capacities that enable responsible and critical activity in decision-making processes is a process of empowerment, participation is a process of empowering humans.

The idea of participatory democracy advanced here can best be described as the concept of self-organized democracy. Self-organization is a process of order formation that comes from within a system, in the case of political order formation self-organization means that affected citizens are enabled to take decisions all by themselves in bottom-up grassroots processes. Self-organized democracy is a process of self-determination and self-management that maximizes the involvement of affected humans in political discourse and decision taking and avoids the formation of political elites that constitute heteronomous political systems that are alienated from the direct involvement of citizens.

The notion of self-organized democracy is close to other concepts of participatory democracy such as Benjamin Barber's book *Strong Democracy* (1984) that stresses discourse, debate and deliberation, and David Held's (1996) democratic autonomy that is based on processes of debate and deliberation that are open to all.

We make use of the term eParticipation for describing methods, tools, practices, and concepts of employing ICTs in politics that are close to the tradition of participatory, self-organized democracy. eParticipation is a term that grasps the idea that computer-based information and communication technologies (ICTs) can be used for empowering cognition, communication, and co-operation processes of humans so that they can jointly construct participatory social systems. In eParticipation processes ICTs empower humans, groups, and society, i.e. they provide individuals with capacities and resources for changing organizations and society according to their will, they provide groups and organizations with capacities and resources for changing society and better including individuals, and they provide society with capacities to better include groups and individuals.

The grassroots concept of digital democracy (eParticipation) mainly stresses citizen-to-citizen (C2C) digital communication, and communication processes of and in non-governmental civil society protest groups and movements (cf. e.g. Barber 1998, Castells 2004, Macintosh 2004, Rheingold 2000). Whereas plebiscitary and representative models of digital democracy focus on the relationship of governments and citizens, the concept of grassroots digital democracy stresses the communication of civil society and citizens and has the vision that from these communication processes an alternative participatory society that is self-managed and self-organized could emerge. Technologies and tools that are favoured for online politics include online-discussion boards (web-based, non web-based), mailing-lists, wikis, political blogs, political chats (which are very rare, an example is the IRC channel #politics), cyberprotest tools (like FloodNet that allows ping attacks/denial of service attacks, e-mail bombs, or IRC jamming), online petitions, and online protest campaigns.

An analysis of the websites of important political actors in Austria shows that political institutions and parties mainly practice forms of representative digital democracy, whereas civil society groups seem to be more inclined towards eParticipation. Table 1

shows tools of digital democracy that are being used by selected political parties, governing institutions, and civil society groups. Tools such as e-mail, guest books, and newsletter are characteristic for representative digital democracy, which mainly relies on one-to-many-communication. It is not surprising that most Austrian parties and governing institutions (government, parliament, president) provide e-mail and newsletters as means of interaction and hence practice representative digital democracy. One exception is the Austrian Green Party, which provides a web-based discussion board and hence to a certain degree also practices grassroots digital democracy. This broader understanding of digital democracy might be due to the traditional importance of participatory decision-making in the Green movement. A website hosted by the Austrian government during its presidency of the European Council provided an online survey on the future of Europe and hence can be considered as an example for practicing elements of plebiscitary digital democracy. In most of these examples the understanding of digital democracy is rather limited in the sense that there are no possibilities for many-to-many-communication of citizens. In two examples from civil society (Attac Austria, Greenpeace Austria) elements of eParticipation can be found that enable political many-to-many-communication.

| **Website** | **E-Mail** | **Guest Book** | **Newsletter** | **Online Survey** | **Mailing List** | **Discussion Board** | **Chat** | **Wiki** | **Blog** | **Online Petition** |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Parties** | | | | | | | | | | |
| Österreichische Volkspartei (http://www.oevp.at) | X | | X | | | | | | | |
| Sozialdemokratische Partei Österreichs (http://www.spoe.at) | X | | | | | | | | | |
| Die Grünen (http://www.gruene.at) | X | | X | | | X | | | | |
| Freiheitliche Partei Österreichs (http://www.fpoe.at) | X | | X | | | | | | | |
| Bündnis Zukunft Österreich (http://www.bzoe.at) | X | | X | | | | | | | |
| Kommunistische Partei Österreichs (http://www.kpoe.at) | X | | | | | | | | | |
| **Government** | | | | | | | | | | |
| Bundeskanzleramt Österreich (Chancellor, http://www.austria.gv.at/) | X | | | | | | | | | |
| Europa hört zu (http://www.zukunfteuropa.at) | X | | | X | | | | | | |
| Österreich 2006 Präsidentschaft des Europäischen Rates (Austrian Presidency of the European Council, http://www.eu2006.at) | X | | X | | | | | | | |
| Österreichisches Parlament (Parliament, http://www.parlinkom.gv.at) | X | | X | | | | | | | |
| Österreichischer Bundespräsident (President, http://www.hofburg.at) | X | | X | | | | | | | |
| **Civil Society** | | | | | | | | | | |
| Attac Österreich (http://www.attac.at) | X | | X | | X | X | | X | | |
| Greenpeace Österreich (http://www.greenpeace.at) | X | | X | | | | | | X | X |

Table 1: Tools of digital democracy employed by different political actors in Austria

In the next three sections we will discuss application areas of eParticipation. Why have we chosen the areas of usability, youths and online politics, and political discussion boards as application areas of eParticipation? We think that these three aspects are central for the notion of eParticipation:

1. A good usability of technological applications is needed for the foundation of all successful ICT usage. Hence also in the area of political online activities usability and usability aspects supporting eParticipation have to be taken into account.
2. Young people form a group that is socialized entirely within the information society and is hence confronted by ICTs in everyday life. In most countries they are the group with the highest internet penetration rate. As the future of society will be shaped by the young generation, internet usage by young people is of particular importance for discussing online politics.
3. Besides information communication is an important aspect of the internet. That has been stressed recently by the concept of Web 2.0 that stresses the transition from the focus on information consumption and publishing to applications that support more communication, co-operation, and participation on the internet (O'Reilly 2005). Social software (like discussion boards, mailing lists, wikis, blogs) has become a central foundation of internet activities. Hence it is important for analyses of online politics in which ways communication and co-operation and applications supporting these modes of activity are used. According to scholars like Jürgen Habermas communicative action is a central characteristic of participation and decision-making.

## 2. eParticipation and Usability

When studying eParticipation at an individual level we have to take into account two important issues: First, we have to ensure, that the user is able to use the participation tools in the sense of usability, and, second, we have to ensure that the tools support the user in enabling eParticipation not only in the sense of usability, but in the sense of supporting social communication.

### 2.1. Usability of eParticipation Tools

In the field of Human-Computer Interaction, eParticipation is addressed by enhancing and exploring the usability of tools and services for digital democracy (Oostveen/Van den Besselaar 2004). Work in that field is focusing on user-centred development of tools. To make eParticipation tools more usable we recommend sticking to a user-centred development process. To ensure the usability of a product typically several types of usability evaluation methods are used during the development process. A development process might include user and task analysis in the beginning, followed by paper prototypes, some expert usability evaluations (e.g. heuristic evaluations), and a usability test.

When addressing the concept of eParticipation we see usability as a major influencing factor in the usage of the tools. To ensure that a bad usability of the system is not influencing eParticipation, we suggest a new form of usability testing. We want to show how usability evaluation methods must be adapted to address the issue of eParticipation more appropriately when studying eParticipation tools. Usability has to be seen as a major factor in using interactive systems. To avoid that users do not participate because of major usability issues, we suggest conducting extended usability tests. We will describe this method of extended usability testing in the following.

A typical usability test is performed in a laboratory (sometimes in the field), where users are asked to perform selected tasks. Cameras observe the users, and they might be asked to talk aloud (also called elicitation activity) while performing the task. A usability test typically begins with asking the users a pre-questionnaire related to the domain of the software (use of other related systems, experience with multimodal-interfaces, hours of training, etc.). Some tasks are then performed to ensure that the user is able to use the system. Tasks have to be completed within a given time. If the user cannot solve the task within this time, the experimenter (leader of the usability test) helps the user by giving hints or providing the solution. The number of successful completions and the completion time are recorded. Tasks not solved indicate usability problems, leading to further detailed investigations of the problems. For an example of a usability test recording see Fig 1.

Figure 1. An example of usability testing in action

The goal of a usability test is to improve the interface by finding out major usability problems of the interface. While a common practice is to use the most frequently performed tasks (based on the task analysis), we suggest to select tasks not only according to this criteria, but involve tasks which address the issue of social interfaces. After conducting the tasks, a user typically answers a questionnaire related to usability.

Finally an interview gives the possibility to gain further insights on the perceived usability of the system.

If the findings of the usability test (or any other usability evaluation methods) make clear that no major usability issues affect the eParticipation, the tool can be used for further studies.

### 2.2. Further Usability Issues in eParticipation

To study further influencing factors of eParticipation (based on the philosophy of Human-Computer Interaction), we suggest enlarging the usability test (or other suitable usability evaluation methods), by addressing several questions concerning social and emotional interfaces during the test. The ability of tools to support social and emotional components within communication is essential to provide a usable tool for eParticipation. Table X shows some suggested questions to test the support of tools for emotional and social components.

| Suggested Questions (Likert Scale 1 – 5, very – not at all): |
|---|
| • Do you think the system supports you in finding out what kind of users participated in this forum/chat/tool?<br>• Do you have the feeling that the system helps you to find out who participated more often in the discussion, blog, etc.?<br>• Do you have the feeling that the system helps you to express emotions during your participation?<br>• Do you think the systems gives you social information about other participants, like how often other participants communicate, how close the opinion of other participants might be?<br>• Do you have the feeling that you can easily understand emotional components within the eParticipation process?<br>• Do you have the feeling that this interface helps you in communicating emotions? |

Table 2: Six questions addressing social and emotional components within an interface.

The working hypothesis for the social and emotional components within eParticipation tools is that more emotional and social components enhance the user experience of the eParticipation and increase the level of participation. We will address this hypothesis in an upcoming study in 2007.

Another factor influencing the usability of eParticipation tools is the level of interactivity addressed. Based on the interactivity scale from Goertz (2004) we suggest evaluating the following aspects of interactivity:

- The level of selection possibilities, for example the number of different ways to participate given by the tool or system, for example email discussion list, chat, discussion group, blog, wiki. (Count: number of possibilities).
- The level of modification addresses the extent to which a user can change content, for example in discussion forums typically only the user can change his/her own postings, in wikis also content from other authors can be changed. (Count: O for no changes at all; 1 changes of own contributions; 2 partial changes of contributions of others, 3 full changes of other contributions).
- The number of users able to be interactive measures the size of the group that is allowed to manage all content (i.e. adding new items, deleting items, starting threads, deleting threads, commenting on items, editing items, etc.) (Count: 0 users can't change the format of contributions, 1 some users can change the format of contributions (discussion list owner), 2 all users can change the format of contributions).

We suggest to compute the level of interactivity by counting the numbers the tools achieves on the three areas for interactivity. The higher the level of interactivity, the better the possibilities of eParticipation in terms of usability.

Based on an inter- and transdisciplinary perspective we suggest to address usability and major usability factors within eParticipation studies in order to ensure that usability enables political participation.

Focusing on how the user interacts with tools is one important aspect of eParticipation research that focuses on the individual. On the group level of eParticipation research, social research on how eParticipation tools shape political communication is undertaken. We will outline two examples of the group level of research, first the framework for a study of eParticipation of youths, then the results of a study on political online communication in Austria.

## 3. eParticipation and Youths: Framework for a Study of Participatory Internet Usage and Mobile Communication of Young People in Salzburg

### 3.1. Framework of Research

Especially young people are supposed to have grown up with the internet and therefore are predestined to live new ways of (political) participation. According to numerous studies, the internet is medium and information source number 1 among young people. According to a report of Statistik Austria (2004) 94% of Austrian students and pupils use the internet and hence form the group with the highest usage rate.

| Group | Absolute number | Internet Usage in… | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | | …the last twelve months | | …the last three months | |
| | | Absolute | In % | Absolute | In % |
| Workers | 3 642 583 | 2 405 097 | 66,0 | 2 304 981 | 63,3 |
| Pensioners | 1 151 447 | 193 555 | 16,8 | 174 106 | 15,1 |
| Non-employed persons, house-wives/-husbands | 399 985 | 100 888 | 25,2 | 89 723 | 22,4 |
| Students and pupils | 379 006 | 354 327 | 93,5 | 353 342 | 93,2 |
| Others | 477 849 | 230 478 | 48,2 | 216 730 | 45,4 |
| Total | 6 050 869 | 3 284 345 | 54,3 | 3 138 882 | 51,9 |

Table 3: Internet Usage in the last twelve month respectively in the last three months

But the political elite and representatives of civil society organizations complain about the assumed lack of interest of young people in political questions and in traditional political forms of participation. So e.g. the results of the Shell-Youth-Report 2002 (Hurrelmann/Albert 2000) show a lack of trust in traditional political organizations, like political parties, government, and authorities.

Young people are intensive users of ICTs, but they seem to be scarcely interested in politics. The ongoing case study of the ICT&S Center is a contribution to a better understanding of young people's ICT use and the conditions that make ICTs attractive for political communication and participation. The study is based on an empirical survey targeted at young people between 14 and 25 years in the city and the country of Salzburg[1] (Austria/Europe). It has been undertaken in co-operation with “Akzente”, the most important initiative for youths in Salzburg. The three main dimensions of the study are participation, important themes of young people, and new media like internet and mobile devices.

The following research questions guide the study:

- To which extent can ICTs meet the needs of young people in order to reduce perceived participatory deficits?
- How can ICTs contribute to more inclusion and participation of young people in democratic discourse?
- How can politics and youth organizations use ICTs for improving communication?
- Which policies do we need in order to meet the communication style of young people?
- Which topics and themes are most appropriate to be discussed with the help of new technologies?

[1] circa 525.000 inhabitants, 7.154,5 square kilometre

Two of the central hypotheses are the following ones:

The active involvement of young people in socio-political decision-making processes is of genuine relevance for all societies. New ICTs (above all the internet and mobile communication) offer a new and additional spectrum of possibilities (options) for enhancing the active participation of young people.

The more young people are interested in special topics and the more they want to know about these issues, the bigger is the chance that ICTs will extend (emphasize) the possibilities of participation.

### 3.2. Methodology

The ongoing empirical study is based on a multi-methodological design.
In March 2006 the authors together with the youth organization Akzente held two workshops with young people of different education levels and age, teachers, and businessmen who coach trainees and youth workers$. The themes of these two workshops were important topics in the lives of young people, activities that they perform on the internet and mobile phones, and how they use new media for participation. The results of the workshops were documented and discussed with students of communication science in a course at the University of Salzburg. A literature review and the above mentioned discussions formed the foundation for the creation of a web-based survey tool. After an intensive pre-test the survey started on the 6$^{th}$ of June 2006 and ended on the 9th of July. The authors were supported by schools and youth organizations all over the country. After the analysis of the data additionally a set of technically supported modes of participation will be tested and evaluated according to the needs of young people. Certain applications will be tested with the help of representatives of focus groups in the ICT&S Center's usability lab, which is one of the most modern usability labs in Europe. The final report will be presented in November 2006 and briefings for youth organizations, teachers, and politicians will follow.

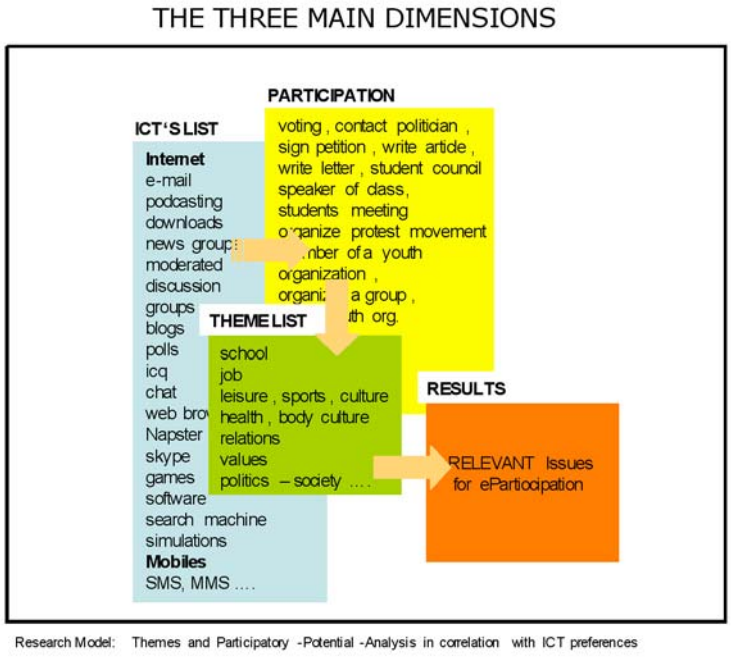



Figure 2: Dimensions of Analysis

The three dimensions of analysis (types of ICTs, participation, themes of online youth activity) are a result of the preliminary work which the authors of the study did before they started the survey. A participation-potential-index will be developed that shows the assumed gap between the interests of young people and the modes of participation which are offered to them by the political system. In the run-up to the study the authors created a "pyramid model of participation" as an orientation and a theoretical foundation.

Everyone is a producer and recipient of information, but everyone also has a specific cognitive structure that is based on past experiences. Thus depending on personal history, interests, and experiences, data that are considered as important by recipients are selected. Personal context and data are the preconditions for forming opinions, which is a precondition for participation. The first stage of real participation is the sharing of information and the discussion of actual topics with other people. The next stage of real participation is the support of existing projects and initiatives, which includes decision-making and voting, the most classical form of participation. The highest degree of participation is self-organization, i.e. the bottom-up self-management of social systems in grassroots processes. The aim of participation is to provoke reactions and change in society.

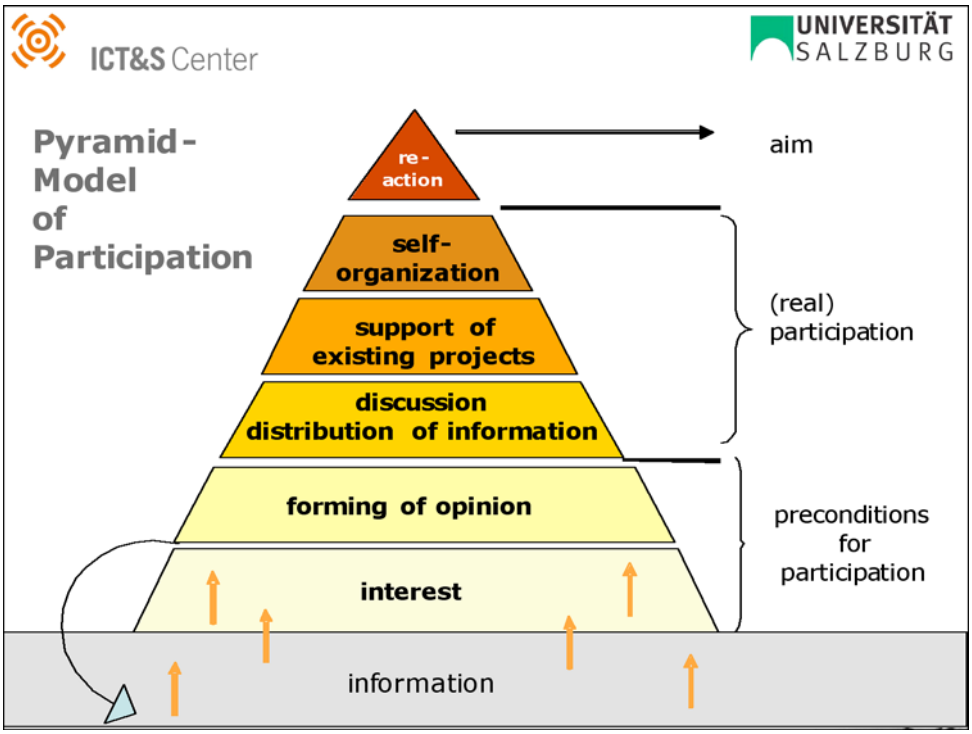



Figure 3: The Pyramid Model of Participation

The authors have intentionally chosen the form of a pyramid for this model of participation because the we assume that under current societal conditions the more time, energy, and money people have to spend and the longer the period for action, the smaller the group of participants will be. Thus the authors expect that a higher degree of participation will result in a smaller size of the group of participants.

The ongoing study is an empirical study of the application of new technologies for participatory purposes of young people in Salzburg, an analysis of theme-interests and participatory readiness.

### 3.3. The Questionnaire

The questionnaire is web-based and can be founded at the URL http://www.uni-salzburg.at/jugendumfrage. Its questions can be grouped into the following categories:

1. Socio-demographic variables
2. ICT-usage
3. Important topics in the life of young people. How do young people inform themselves on these issues if they need more information (information deficit analysis)?
4. Participatory-potential-analysis (in combination with ICTs)

The socio-demographic questions focus on the respondents' sex, age, education, work, birthplace of mother and father, personal wealth, and the place where the questionnaire is filled out.

The group of questions on ICT usage focuses on ownership of a mobile phone, access to the internet, different ICT activities accomplished by young people (via internet and mobile phone), usage frequency, self-assessment of usage (freak or denier), and finally on digital social networks.

The most important aspect of the questionnaire is the part on topics that young people consider as important that is combined with an information deficit analysis and the so-called participatory potential analysis, which assess both "traditional" ways of information, and participation and new forms that arise from the use of (new) computer-based information and communication technologies. There is also the possibility to measure the degree of participatory readiness within the participatory potential analysis. The pyramid of participation is based on four successive stages and degrees of participation (from low to high – from sharing information with others to self organizing). Thus the aim is to find out in which field of ICT application one can find the highest readiness to participate.

In our workshops with young people and youth workers we found the following thirteen important topics of young people that were used as a foundation for the questionnaire:
Love – Sexuality – Relationships
Traffic and Mobility
Body and Health
School
Jobs and Work
Lifestyle
Events – Projects
Values – Religions
Europe – Globalization
Youth politics
Natives – Immigrants
Consumption – Money
Environment

Within the study young people are asked which of these thirteen topics are the most important ones for them. Then they are asked if they feel they have enough information on these issues or need more of it, how they inform themselves (=information-deficit-analysis), and if they would like to take action by themselves (=participatory-potential-analysis). For young people who don't find their special topic and preferred form of participation represented in the questionnaire, there is an open question at the end.

Political communication makes use of various tools that enable social interaction. One type of tools are discussion boards that allow asynchronous, spatially disembedded communication. The next section presents a case study on political online discussion in Austria.

## 4. eParticipation and Political Online Discussion Boards in Austria

### 4.1. Framework for Analysis

The study presented in this part of the paper is an empirical case study on political communication in an online discussion board.

In developing the criteria for analysis for this case-study we formulated two hypothetical expectations, which were: 1) that there would be a high degree of interactivity among participants, 2) that there would be problems with rationality.
The assumption that people reply to the arguments of others in most cases and don't see discussion boards as means of one-to-many-communication (like television) is based on the facts that interactive internet applications have become quite important in Austria and that many people have gained experience in using them. According to the Austrian Media Analysis 2005 43,8% of the responding Internet users employ e-mail and 12,9% chats, newsgroups, or discussion boards (http://www.media-analyse.at/frmdata2005.html). Discursive rationality means that reasons for opinions are provided, communicative norms are realized, and that communicated content is comprehensible, truthful, according to facts, and well reflected. As political citizen-citizen-communication is not much supported online by political institutions, one can expect that people haven't gained much experience in it and to a certain extent don't know how to take care of aspects of internet communication such as its text-centeredness and potential anonymity. This grounds the assumption that there might to a certain degree be problems with the rationality of political online debate.

Obviously there are differing perspectives and understandings concerning digital democracy in Austria. The focus of study in this paper is the actual reality of eParticipation in Austria that is approached in the form of an empirical case study that focuses on communication processes in online discussion boards. The main research questions for the specific case analysed are:
1. How interactive is political online communication?
2. Which types and styles of arguments are utilized?
3. To which degree is there identification with political ideologies?
4. How rational is political online communication?
5. Which role do political values play in political online communication?

Participatory digital democracy requires highly networked forms of many-to-many communication supported by ICTs and individuals that are capable of engaging in rational, complex, comprehensive, normative right, and comprehensive political debates in which well-grounded arguments and political values are employed.

### 4.2. Research Method: Empirical Content Analysis of Political Online Discussion

There are only a few political discussion boards in Austria. The one chosen for evaluation in this study is *politik-forum.at*. For analysing interactivity, argumentation style, political identity, rationality, and political values, the sociological research method of empirical content analysis has been employed (cf. Atteslander 2003: 215-249, Diekmann 2004: 481-516, Friedrichs 1990: 314-333, Früh 2001, Krippendorf 2004, Mayntz/Holm/Hübner 1978: 151-167). politik-forum.at has been online since spring 2003 and consists of 25 sub-boards that are focusing on different political areas and are organized in 8 clusters (national politics, international politics, economy – finance – state, education – health – sports – society – religion, ecology – science – technology, internet – (new) media – culture, internal, off topic).

In May 2006 there were approximately 2,300 registered users and a total of approximately 80,840 postings. For this analysis we have chosen the discussion-board regarding national politics, because it is one of the largest sub-boards in terms of the number of postings and one can expect that the most interesting discussions will be going on in this forum because national politics concerns citizens very immediately. With about 10 700 postings in May 2006 the national politics forum accounted for approximately 13,2% of all messages. A random sample was chosen for analysis by selecting all threads that were started during one specific month (January 2006). This resulted in a sample of 28 threads and a total of 754 messages. Table 3 shows the categories employed for the content analysis that were needed in order to find answers to the five initial research questions.

| **Variable** | **Values** |
|---|---|
| **Message Content** | Facts |
| | Opinion |
| | Questions |
| | Announcement |
| **Reply** | 0 |
| | 1 |
| **Overall Message Style** | |
| Scientific | 0/1 |
| Neutral | 0/1 |
| Value-Laden | 0/1 |
| Aggressive | 0/1 |
| Cynical | 0/1 |
| Polemical, Satirical | 0/1 |
| Personal | 0/1 |
| Other | 0/1 |
| **Incorporation** (of ideas of others, e.g. citizens, experts) | 0 |
| | 1 |
| **Political Affiliation (with certain politicians, ideologies, parties, political groups)** | 2 strong affiliation |
| | 1 moderate affiliation |
| | 0 no clearly stated political affiliation |

| | |
|---|---|
| **Political Attitude** | Communist, Marxist |
| | Social Democratic |
| | Green |
| | Liberal |
| | Conservative |
| | Extreme Right-Wing |
| | Other |
| **Validity Claim of Normative Rightness** | 0 |
| | 1 |
| **Validity Claim of Truth** | 0 |
| | 1 |
| **Validity Claim of Comprehensibility** | 0 |
| | 1 |
| **Complexity of Arguments** | 0 Simplistic, One-Dimensional |
| | 1 Rather Simple |
| | 2 Rather Complex |
| | 3 Complex |
| **Rationality of Arguments** | 0 |
| | 1 |
| **End of conflict in a Thread** | Conflict solved (agreement) |
| | Conflict unsolved |
| | Mutual acceptance of other viewpoints |
| | No conflict present |
| **Reference to Political Values** | 0 |
| | 1 |
| **Political Values** | |
| Freedom | 0/1 |
| Equality | 0/1 |
| Justice, Equity, Fairness | 0/1 |
| Solidarity | 0/1 |
| Democracy | 0/1 |
| Wealth | 0/1 |
| Social Security | 0/1 |
| National Security | 0/1 |
| Peace | 0/1 |
| Happiness | 0/1 |
| Faith, Belief, God | 0/1 |
| Home | 0/1 |
| Nation | 0/1 |
| Family | 0/1 |
| Nature | 0/1 |
| Economic Growth and Efficiency | 0/1 |
| Individual Choice | 0/1 |
| Independence | 0/1 |
| Participation | 0/1 |
| Human Rights | 0/1 |
| Plurality, Openness | 0/1 |
| Public Ownership | 0/1 |
| Privacy | 0/1 |
| Education | 0/1 |
| Health | 0/1 |
| Jobs | 0/1 |

| | |
|---|---|
| Research | 0/1 |
| Others | 0/1 |
| **Message author** | |
| **Thread initiator** | |
| **Average length (number of messages) of threads** | |
| **Average duration of threads in days** | |

Table 3: The category system employed in the content analysis of politik-forum.at

For researching eParticipation not only the access to technology and the frequency of use of political online applications are important, but also the human capacities and ways of using such technologies for political communication. For assessing the quality of political online communication, a content and interaction analysis was feasible for our study.

For conducting such an analysis, each message posted or sent within a certain time span is coded by a set of variables that can take on certain values. The variable "message content" characterizes the overall aim of a message, if it wants to report facts, expresses an opinion, asks questions, or makes an announcement of an event or initiative.

In order to analyse the level of interaction a variable is needed that measures if a message is a reply to other messages (1) or not (0). It doesn't assess if a message starts a new thread, but if it refers to other messages directly. So if a message is posted as a reply to a comment within a thread, but contains no direct reference to arguments from other messages, then it is not coded as a reply.

The style of how one expresses opinions in a political discussion affects the climate in which the discussion will be carried on. Hence it makes sense to assess if the message style is rather scientific, neutral, value-laden, aggressive, cynical, polemical/satirical, personal, or other. For each message it is coded if it adheres to a certain style (1) or not (0). A scientific message style refers to arguments or results from scientific studies, books, or scientists. A value-laden message at least once refers to personal or general values (such as freedom, justice, equality, democracy, etc.). In an aggressive message the author makes unfounded accusations, judgements, or personal attacks, or (s)he defames or insults other users. In a cynical message the writer makes fun of certain ideas and presents them as ridiculous. A polemical message makes fun of certain interaction partners and presents them or their ideas as ridiculous or inferior. In a personal message experiences from the life of the author are communicated. These message styles are not mutually exclusive; they can overlap.

Another focus of interest is the identification with certain political ideologies. Concerning political affiliation, messages either express strong (2) or moderate affiliation (1) with a certain political ideology, party, group, or person, or rather avoids a clear and direct affiliation (0). If there is a moderate affiliation, the author identifies positively once with an idea that is characteristic for a specific political ideology. If there is a strong affiliation

the author identifies positively at least twice with at least one idea that is characteristic for a specific political ideology or (s)he directly expresses feelings of identification with and belonging to certain ideologies or parties. If there is a strong or moderate affiliation, it can be further assessed by a variable that measures to which political camp and side the affiliations expressed belong or come closest: Communists/Marxists are anti-capitalist, oppose capitalist interests and exploitation in general and argue for a society that is based on collective property of the means of production. Social Democrats favour regulation of the economy, social welfare, and state-expenditure for education, equal opportunities, health care, poverty-reduction, and pensions. Greens are concerned with the environment; they stress human rights, minority protection, social welfare, anti-discrimination, and regulated markets. Liberals favour unregulated free markets, a separation of private life, economy, and the state; and they oppose heavy bureaucracy and state-intervention. Concerning culture and life-style the four ideologies just mentioned stress the right of the individual to choose by itself how it wants to live and express itself. In the policy field of state and economy liberals stress individual responsibility, whereas the other three ideologies stress collective responsibility. Conservatives argue for free markets and cutting state expenditures, they want to advance the private responsibility of individuals for welfare and employment, religious and family values, they are patriotic, hard on crime and keen on preserving traditions. Elements of the thinking of the extreme right wing are nationalism, xenophobia, and racism. This ideology favours discrimination of minorities and law and order policies, it is keen on preserving traditions and privileges for biologically or culturally defined groups, and believes in the importance of leadership. In Austria the political spectrum is made up of parties and group that can be considered as expression of these types of ideologies.

The theoretical framework for analysing the rationality of political online communication is Jürgen Habermas's (1984) concept of *communicative rationality*. Habermas argues that in order to achieve a common understanding and consensus, certain claims to validity of communication must be fulfilled:

- *Comprehensibility*: a statement must be comprehensible for the communication partners.
- *Truth*: statements must be according to facts.
- *Truthfulness*: intention and statements must be in accordance with each other.
- *Rightness*: the normative context of communication must be clarified and agreed upon.

Habermas considers the fulfilment of these four validity claims as the foundation of communicative action that constitutes a non-dominative dialogue. In assessing the validity of political online communication, one can assess all of these claims except the one of truthfulness because the anonymity of computer-mediated communication doesn't allow us to check the personal intention of statements. Concerning comprehensibility a message can be considered as not incomprehensible if another person expresses a lack of understanding in a follow-up message. Rightness of a message is not given if a

person's posting doesn't accord to general rules of netiquette (avoiding "flame wars", slander, sarcasm, slang and local acronyms, etc.). Comparing cyberspace communication to traditional communication shows that in the first gestures and facial expressions are missing and that it is more anonymous, which might result in easier violations of norms of communication and a more expressive and affective communication.

The arguments employed in online communication can have a different degree of complexity, ranging from simplistic and one-dimensional (0) to complex and well grounded (3). In one-dimensional messages (0) no reasons for holding certain opinions are articulated, in rather simple messages (1) one reason is communicated, in rather complex messages (2) two reasons, and in complex messages (3) three or more reasons. Another variable assesses the rationality of messages, i.e. if reasons for statements are given (1) or not (0).

If there are conflicts in political online communication (which will very often be the case), we are also interested in their outcomes. There are four general possibilities: an agreement is reached (conflict solved), the conflict remains unsolved (no agreement, quarrelling, retreat), there is no solution, but the mutual acceptance of other viewpoints, or no conflict is present. The end of conflict can be assessed for each thread.

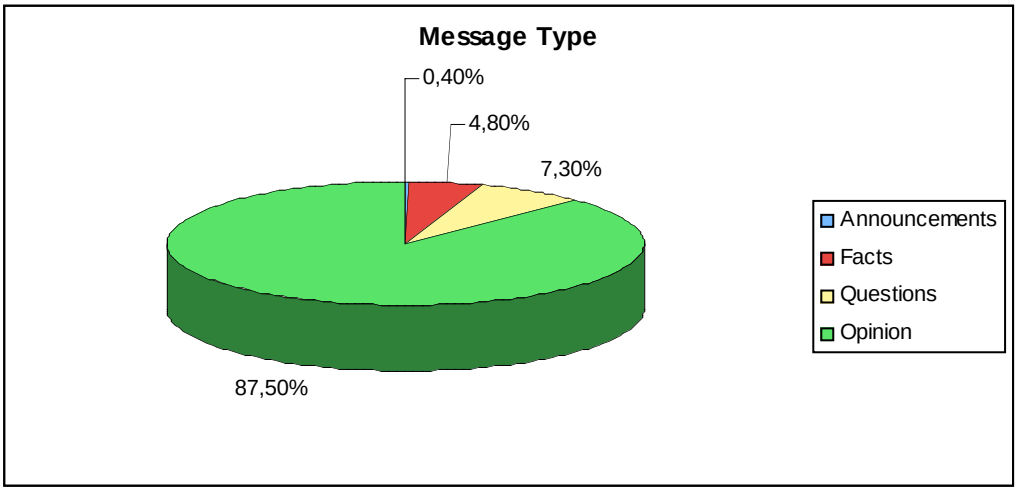
For each posting we assess if there is a reference to political values (0=no, 1=yes). If so, one can identify to which values a message directly or indirectly refers positively (freedom, equality, justice/equity/fairness, solidarity, democracy, wealth, social security, national security, peace, happiness, faith/belief/god, home, nation, family, nature, economic growth and efficiency, individual choice, independence, participation, human rights, plurality/openness, public ownership, privacy, education, health, jobs, research, others). For each message it is coded which values are considered as important (1).

Further variables include the author of a posting, the initiator of a thread, the length (number of messages) of a thread, and the duration of a thread in days.

### 4.3. Research Results

#### 4.3.1. General Results

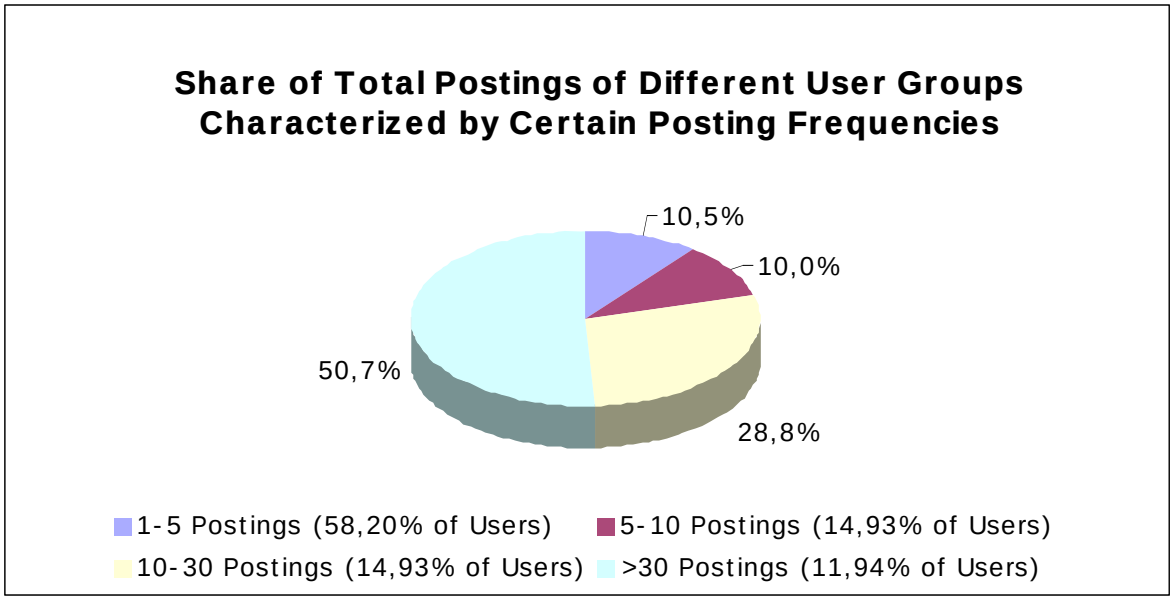
The average duration of threads was 14 days, the average length 27 messages. Concerning message type the vast majority of messages articulated opinions (87,5%), only a minority of postings were questions (7,3%), facts (4,8%), or announcements (0,4%).




In 15 of the 28 analysed threads (53,6%), no solutions of the expressed political conflicts were found, in 13 cases (46,4%) no exchange of differing opinions was present either because the threads were very short and uncontroversial (12 threads with an average thread length of 6 messages) or there was no real debate, but only an exchange of obscenities and insults (1 thread).

20 of the 28 threads were created by 20 different users; 2 users created 2 threads. Hence there was no a clustering and centralization of thread-creation.

Postings in the analysed sample are drawn from a total of 67 users. A group of 8 users (11,9%) who each posted more than 30 messages accounted for 50,7% (382) of all postings. The majority of users (58,2%=39 users) posted only 1-5 message(s) and in total only accounted for 10,5% of all messages. Hence there is a divide concerning the activity of posters, there is a small group of posters that is very active and a large minority that posts irregularly and sparsely. These results show that there was a clustering and centralization of postings. This corresponds to results of a study by Nicholas Jankowski and Martine van Selm (2000) who concluded in a comparative assessment of three studies on public debate in cyberspace that there is a lack of quality and a lack of “equality of involvement among the participants” (Jankowski/Selm 2000: 160) due to the centralizing clustering of postings (e.g. in one study of Usenet groups 0,05% of the participants were responsible for more than 40 per cent of all postings).

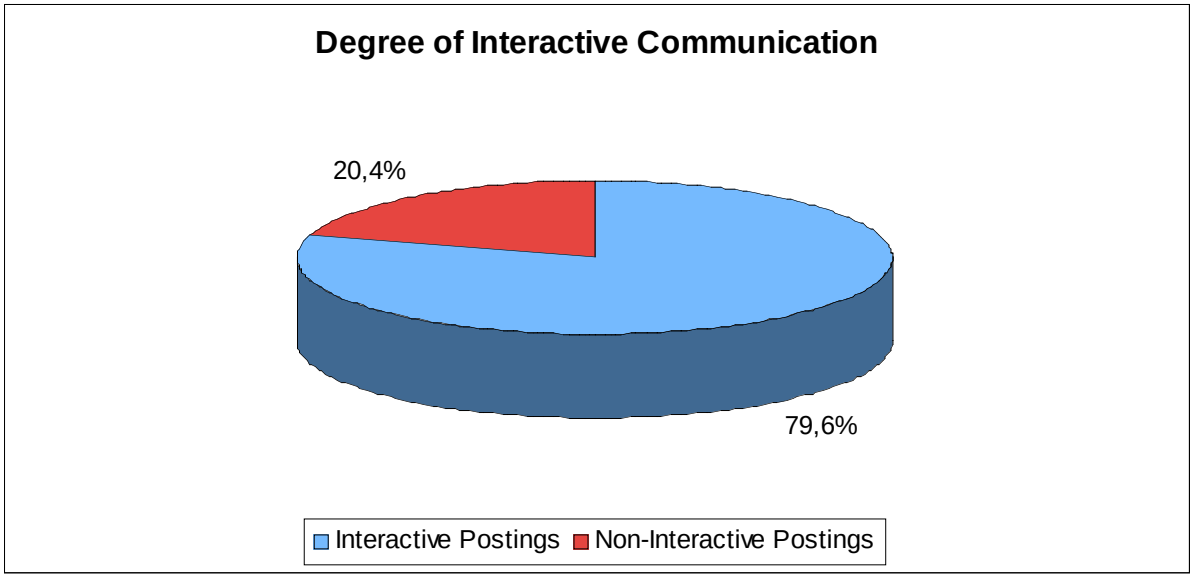



### 4.3.2. Interactivity

599 of 753 messages (79,6%) responded to arguments made by other users. Hence there was a relatively high degree of interactive communication. Only a small degree of users didn't refer to ideas and opinions from other messages. Most users seem to understand that the Internet is a medium that enables debate and many-to-many-communication. The results differ from those of Anthony Wilhelm (1999) who concluded from a content analysis of a total of 500 postings from ten political newsgroups that the newsgroups demonstrated "attenuated, episodic, and ephemeral social interaction" (Wilhelm 1999: 174). "Fewer than one out of five messages represent a direct reply to a previous posting, which suggests the notion of an attenuated public sphere. (…) The newsgroups analysed in this study are not very deliberative. (…) Only about 20 per cent of messages were actually addressed to other messengers, which suggests that sustained dialogue among all participants on a single topic or line of inquiry is uncommon" (Wilhelm 1999: 170f, 174). The results obtained more resemble the ones of a study by Roman Winkler (2002) who analysed a sample of 1093 postings from the Guardian's "Elections 2001" online talkboard. He found a "high degree of interaction among the posters", that "66% of the postings were replies to other messages", and concluded that "the Guardian talkboard widely fulfilled the requirements for civic deliberation since it enabled interaction among participants". Heizaf Rafaeli and Fay Sudweeks (1997) conducted an interactivity analysis of 4322 messages from 37 discussion boards, 52,55% of the postings referred to a single message that preceded them, 9,0% to multiple previous messages. The study concluded that "interactivity plays a role in creating the attraction of networks".

75 messages (10,0%) incorporated ideas from external sources (experts, citizens, media, science). This shows that references are not limited to the arguments of other users, but

that some users find it important in political online discourse to include arguments and facts from other authorities and sources. One extremely popular source of incorporated information is Wikipedia.




In section 2.2. we introduced an indicator for measuring the level interactivity. This index can be applied in our case study:

The level of selection possibilities: 2
The technology allows posting messages and contacting users per private mail. More synchronous forms of interaction are not supported.

The level of modification: 1
It's possible to edit one's own contribution, but not those of others (the latter can only be accomplished by administrators).

Number of users able to be interactive: 1
Only administrators can delete postings or threads, all users can start new threads.

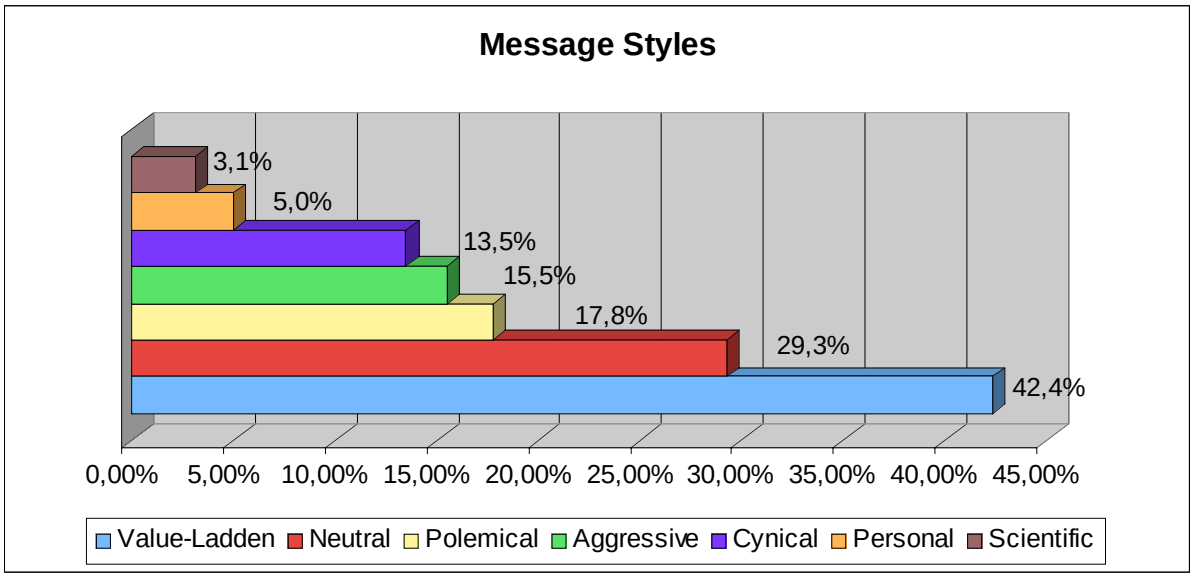
Level of Interactivity = Level of Selection Possibilities + Level of Modification + Number of Users Able to Be Interactive = 4

The discussion board's level of interactivity is 4, which is a mid-range value. All users can post new messages, open new threads, and change their own contributions, more co-operative modes of editing (as e.g. in a wiki) are not supported and deleting and editing postings of other users is limited to administrators. Asynchronous forms of interaction

are not supported directly. These results indicate that the discussion board does not enable co-operative modes of interaction as in a wiki.

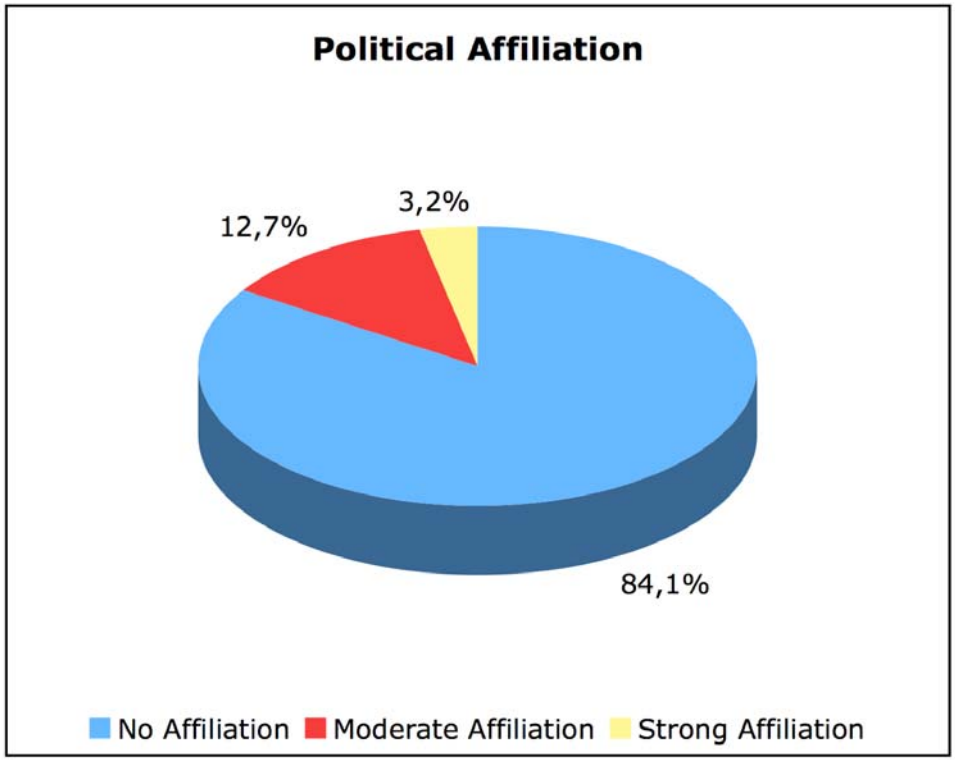
### 4.3.3. Style of Arguments

The most frequently found message style was the employment of values (42,4% of all postings). A certain degree of messages was polemical (17,8%), aggressive (15,5%), or cynical (13,5%) in character. Such messages violate norms of good communication that are needed for open and constructive dialogue. This result seems to affirm the hypothesis that the anonymity of behaviour in cyberspace can undermine the normative rightness of communication. Only a small share of messages was personal (5,0%) or scientific (3,1%) in character.

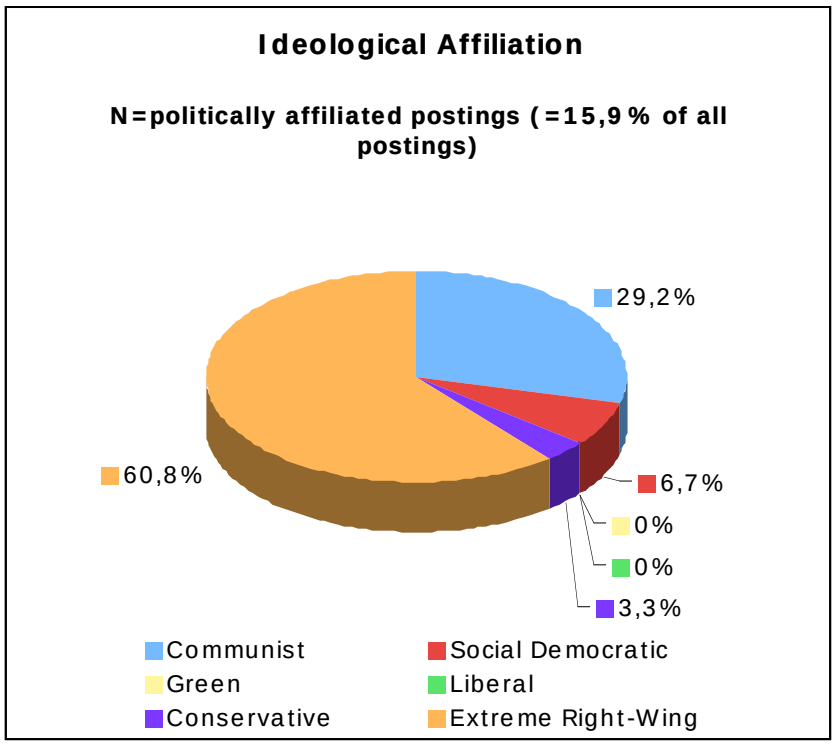



### 4.3.4. Political Identity

In a vast majority of postings (633=84,1%) no clear identification with certain political ideologies or parties could be found, the authors avoided heavy references to politicians, parties, and political worldviews. In a minority of postings there was either a moderate (12,7%) or strong (3,2%) identification with elements of thinking characteristic for certain political ideologies, parties, or politicians.




Concerning only those postings that showed some form of identification with elements characteristic for specific political worldviews (120 in total=15,9% of all postings), in 60,8% elements characteristic for the thinking of the extreme right-wing could be found, in 29,2% elements characteristic for communist worldviews, in 6,7% elements characteristic for social-democratic worldviews, and in 3,3% elements characteristic for conservative worldviews. There was no direct positive reference to green and liberal worldviews.




The following is an example for a strong ideological affiliation: One user argued that his home is the Austrian Social Democratic Party, that he completely agrees and that he is fully aligned with it (P#161). Another user said that Communism is "our worldview"[2] (P#367).

Most users didn't positively relate to specific political worldviews or elements of it. It is particularly alarming that a total of 73 postings (9,7% of all postings, 60,8% of those posting containing clearly identifiable political worldview-elements) alluded positively to elements characteristic for the thinking of the extreme right wing. These were postings that mainly contained xenophobic and/or nationalistic arguments. This result shows that more political education is needed in order to avoid the presence of inhumane arguments in political discourse and practice (both in the online and offline world).

Some examples: One user argued in a thread on the question if communal flats should be available to immigrants in Austria that increasing immigration results in ghettos and an explosion of criminality: "In places where the degree of foreigners gets out of hand, not integration is the result, but ghettos. The fact that mainly the social underclass emigrates results in a disproportional utilization of the social systems of the concerned nations. In addition crime firmly explodes" (P#48)[3]. This posting not only blames immigrants for bad housing conditions and crime, it is also irrational because no

[2] "unsere Weltanschauung".

[3] "überall wo der ausländeranteil überhand nimmt kommt es zur ghettobildung, aber nicht zur integration. da vor allem die sozialen unterschichten auswandern kommt es zur überproportionalen auslastung sozialer systeme in den betroffenen staaten, zusätzlich explodiert förmlich die kriminalität".

arguments and reasons for why this should be the case and why the user thinks so are provided. Another user argued that kebab booths and kosher butchering are no forms of culture, i.e. are uncivilized: "For me the mass agglomeration of kebab booths as well as kosher butchering are not culture. What else do Turkish immigrants have in line for us?" (P#78)[4].

One user argued that immigrants are dregs that rip off "our" social system (P#150), one that there were masses of foreigners travelling to Austria in buses for organizing thievery (P#427).
There was one discussion on installing as required by the Austrian State Treaty bilingual village signs in those parts of Carinthia that have Slovenian minorities. One user argued in this context against minority rights that bilingual village signs would result in a "balcanization of Austria" (P#215). In one posting a user said that immigrants want money from Austrians so that they don't have to work and that "good Austrians" have to work in order to sustain "foreigners afraid of hard work"[5] (P#279). Another user wrote that Muslims should be "cut down"[6] (P#283), one posting suggested that immigrants should be forced to reemigrate (P#330).

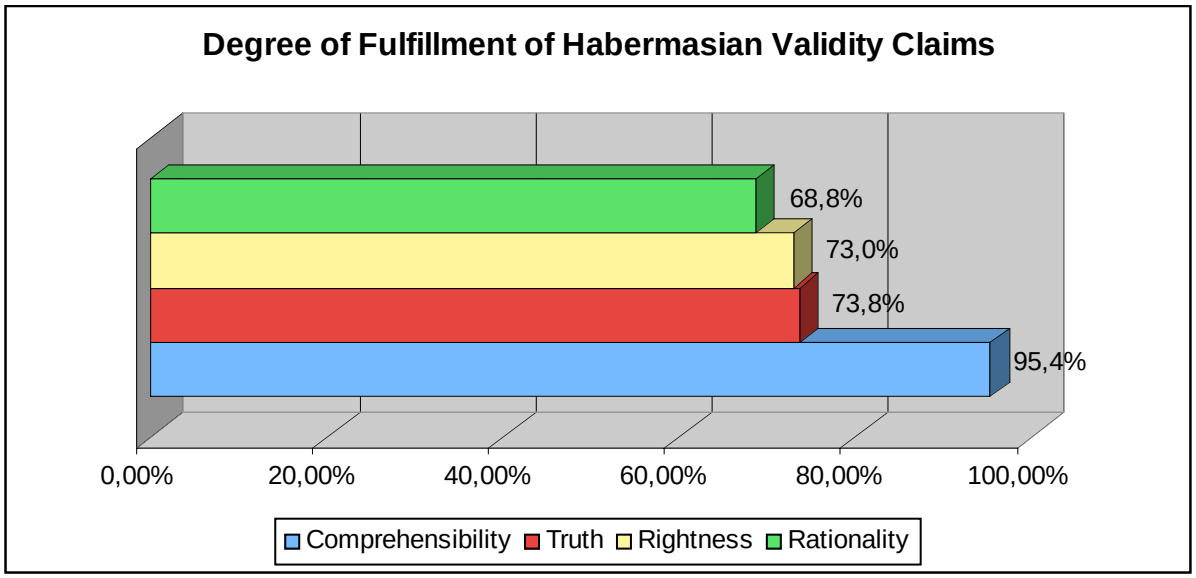
4.3.5. Rationality

Concerning Habermasian validity claims a vast majority of postings was comprehensible for other users (95,4%). 73,8% of the postings were according to facts (which means that 26,2% of the messages doubted widely accepted or scientifically proven data). 73,0% of the postings swere normative right, i.e. 27% of the messages violated norms of online communication by insulting or ridiculing other users or employing an aggressive tone. 68,8% of the postings were rational in the sense that their authors provided reasons for holding certain opinions. Concerning rationality these results resemble the ones of the study of Anthony Wilhelm (1999) who found that "about three out of four [messages] provided reasons to justify their statements; the remainder of the postings did not validate or support their statements with arguments. (…) an overall high degree of critical-rational text was evinced on Usenet and AOL political forums", whereas they contradict the ones of Winkler's (2002) study who concluded that "about 43% of the messages involved rational arguments". Although the majority of postings was rational, the fact remains that more than 30% of the postings were irrational in the sense of providing no arguments for opinions and almost 30% violated norms of online communication. In many cases this included insults and threats.

Some examples of hate speech in political debate: In a heated debate on the restitution of Jewish-owned artworks expropriated by the Nazis one user referred to another one as

[4] "Für mich ist die massenhafte Ansammlung von Kebab-Buden und das Schächten keine Kultur. Was haben uns die türkischen Zuwanderer noch zu bieten?".
[5] "arbeitsscheue Ausländer".
[6] "zurechtstutzen".

an "intellectual tomfool"[7] (P#259). Other terms employed that violated normative rightness were e.g. "company clown"[8] (P#309), "forum clown"[9] (P#519), "dickhead"[10] (P#376), "hypocrite" (P#378), "class enemy" (P#378), "dirty Bolshevik"[11] (P#416), "parasite" (P#634), "dumbass"[12] (P#650), "fucking child of a capitalist"[13] (P#660), "loser", "criminal", "liar". Another example of a violation of normative rightness is that one user asked another one to lie down and masturbate instead of posting ("Lie down and spank your monkey!"[14], P#570).




An example for an irrational posting: One user argued that the massive immigration of have-nots (propertyless immigrants) must automatically result in the reduction of the living standard of the overall population (P#113)[15]. (113). No arguments were provided why the user thought this is the case, no data for substantiating such speculations mentioned. An example for rational arguments: In a discussion on immigration two users cited a scientific study that showed that more than 45% of Austrian immigrants are overqualified for their jobs, whereas this rate is 19% for Austria at a whole (P#117, P#143). With this practice of incorporating scientific data and studies the users wanted to avoid ungrounded arguments and provide a solid foundation for discussion. Another user in a rather irrational response questioned these results, he doubted that there were many highly trained and qualified immigrants without providing any arguments (P#118,

[7] "Intellektueller Hanswurst".
[8] "Betriebsclown".
[9] "Forenclown".
[10] "Schwachkopf".
[11] "Dreckiger Bolschewik".
[12] "Blödmann".
[13] "Scheiß Kapitalistenkind".
[14] "Leg dich hin und rammel dir einen runter".
[15] "Die massive Zuwanderung von Habenichtsen muss zwangsläufig zur Senkung des Lebensstandards der Gesamtbevölkerung führen"

P#147). Another user replied that not accepting results of studies is unserious and immature behaviour (P#151, P#152).

There also were some threats directed towards users. E.g. one user asked directed towards a left-wing user how many Bolsheviks can be killed by a certain type of missile: "I ask myself how many Bolsheviks such a missile can … well you know what" (P#340)[16]. (340). One user spoke directed towards another one of a "virtual coup de grace"[17] (P#554) which was perceived by another one as a threat to life (P#556). In one posting it was argued that Communists should be put away into wild parks (P#627), in one of the follow-up posting reservations for Communists at the South Pole were demanded (P#629). One user said directed towards others that the masses will annihilate defenders of current conditions and that they hence should not rest easy (P#633). Another one held the opinion that one user should be shot according to martial law ("by martial law you should be … well you know what, P#673[18]).

These are examples of violations of the normative rightness of the discussion board that has been defined in 12 rules of netiquette that e.g. forbid insults and defamation: "§1 Insults: Insults, slander, personal attacks are not tolerated. They destroy and poison the atmosphere of the fora"[19].

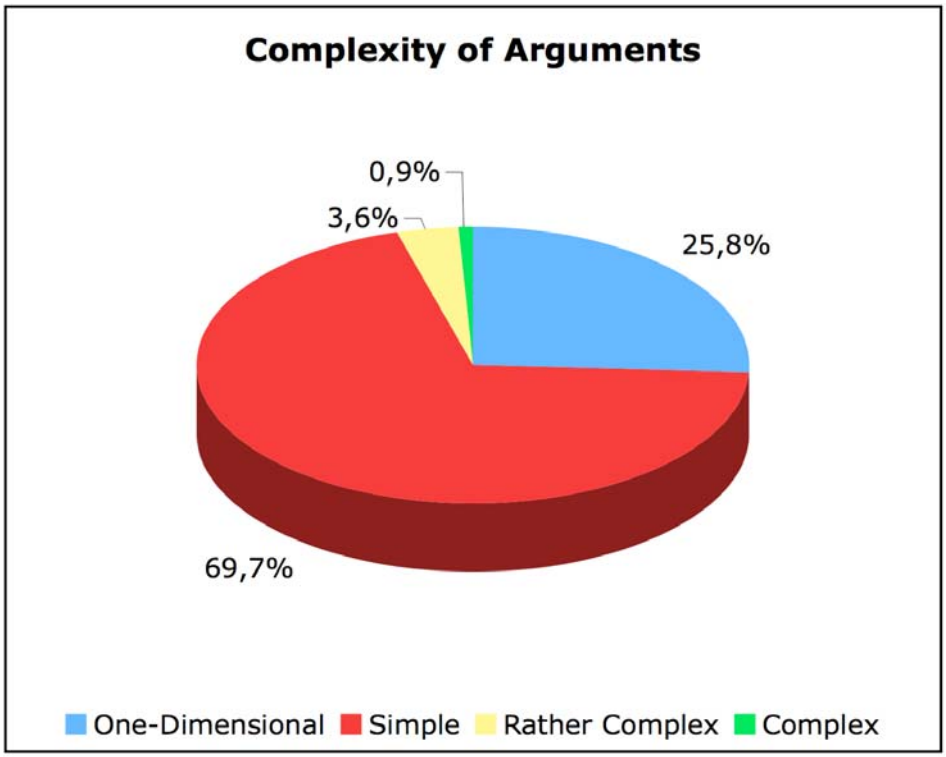
Concerning the complexity of arguments (providing arguments for opinions), the vast majority of postings were classified as either one-dimensional (25,8%) or simple (69,7%). Only a very small number of postings could be considered as rather complex (3,6%) or complex (0,9%). This shows that in our case study most users in politic online debate didn't try to ground their opinions and ideas by looking for and communicating multiple reasons. There is a lack of complex arguments.

[16] "Frag mich wieviele Bolschewiki man mit eine solchen Rakete [sic!]… na ja ihr wisst schon".

[17] "Virtueller Gnadenschuß".

[18] "sollte man dich standrechtlich … ihr wisst schon".

[19] "§1 Beleidigungen: Beschimpfungen, Beleidigungen, persönliche Untergriffe, ect. werden nicht geduldet. Sie zerstören und vergiften das Forenklima"



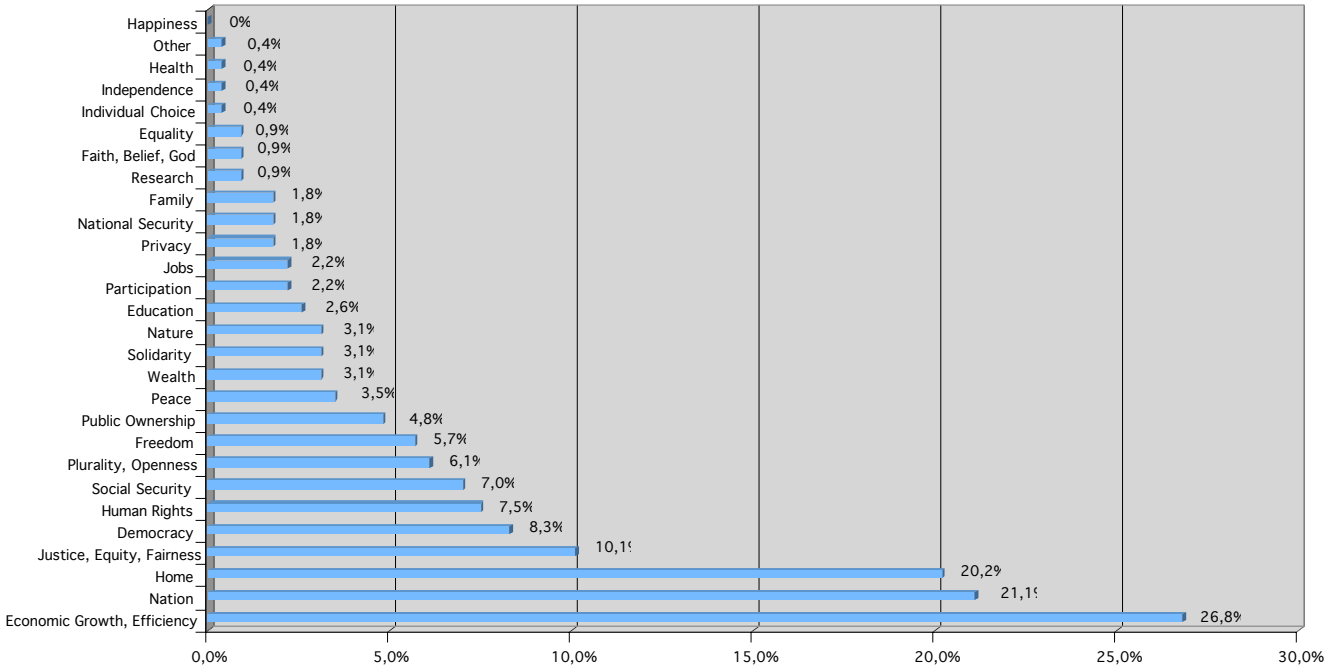

### 4.3.6. Political Values

In 228 postings (30,3%) there was a direct reference to political values, i.e. about one third of the users found it important to ground their ideas and opinions in political morality. Morals hence seem to be an important aspect of political online debate.

Economic efficiency and growth was the political value mentioned most frequently in value-laden postings (in 26,8% of all value-laden postings). Other frequently mentioned values were nation (21,1%), home (20,2%), justice/equity/fairness (10,1%), and democracy (8,3%). The three dominant values are in the first case (economic efficiency) an expression of instrumental economic reason that assesses social systems first of all in terms of profit, performance, output, money, and productivity and in the second and third case (nation, home) an expression of conservative and right wing worldviews.

# Relevance of Political Values

**N=value-based postings=30,3 % of all postings**




An example of a posting that was keen on stressing economic efficiency is that one user argued that the extensive economies made by the Austrian government are no bed of roses, but a necessity[20] (P#447).

When concerns were expressed for nation and home (Austria), this was predominantly done in the context of xenophobic opinions. E.g. one user argued that 60 years ago "we Austrians" were faced with ruin and had to drudge in order to achieve something and that hence it would be the right of all citizens to preserve created goods (i.e. by limiting or prohibiting immigration and asylum)[21]. Another user argued that "our jobs" are lost due to the European union and immigration (P#144). In the discussion on bilingual language signs a user who opposed minority rights argued that he is a patriot who loves his home country and traditional values (P#220).

[20] "Der Sparkurs der heutigen Regierung ist kein Zuckerschlecken, aber eine Notwendigkeit!".

[21] "vor etwa 60 Jahren standen wir österreicher vor dem absoluten nichts, hatten viel weniger als die von dir angeführten staaten! unsere vorfahren haben eschuftet und mit politischer klugheit unser land dorthin gebracht wo es heute ist (...) es ist das RECHT jedes burgers sich das erschaffene bewahren zu wollen, damit er und seine familie ein gutes auslangen finden".

That democracy is an important value for a certain degree users can be seen e.g. by the fact that one of the threads was devoted to direct democracy in Austria.

### 4.4. Conclusion

Many-to-many-political online communication of citizens is not broadly supported by political parties and governing institutions in Austria. Platforms for political online debate are rare, but nonetheless present. In this paper a content analysis of a political discussion board was conducted in order to make a case study that test aspects of eParticipation such as interactivity, argumentation style, political identity, rationality, and political values. Five research questions were identified, based on which a category system was developed that was applied to 753 postings from a political discussion board.

The results from this study demonstrate that there are strengths and weaknesses of political online debate in Austria.

Research Question 1: How interactive is political online communication?

The internet enables many-to-many-communication and hence networked debates in which users connect and compare their ideas to other ideas. 79,6% of the messages were assessed as interactive responses. Hence a vast majority of users in this case study has understood and practices the networked potentials of the internet.

Research Question 2: Which types and styles of arguments are utilized?

The most frequent style of argumentation was the employment of values (42,4%). A certain degree of postings was polemical (17,8%), aggressive (15,5%), or cynical (13,5%) and hence violated rules of normative rightness and netiquette.

Research Question 3: To which degree is there identification with political ideologies?

In most postings users avoided a clear identification with political ideologies, politicians, or parties (84,1%), a minority of 15,9% of all postings showed a moderate or strong political affiliation. A majority of 60,8% of these politically affiliated postings contained elements characteristic for right-wing worldviews, especially xenophobic and nationalist arguments. This shows that cyberspace is not yet a space of rational discourse, but contains strong elements of cyber-hate.

Research Question 4: How rational is political online communication?

A percentage of 68,8 of the postings was rational in the sense that arguments for opinions were provided. 73,0% fulfilled the validity claim of normative rightness. These

are relatively good results in comparison to other studies. But within the remaining set of 31,2% irrational and 27,0% normatively false postings, insults, threats, prejudices, and hatred were heavily present. Such a violation of communicative norms is detrimental to an open and participatory political culture and shows that there is a requirement of learning how to communicate constructively and reflectively in political debates. The tendency for irrational and normatively incorrect communication might also be fostered by the dominant anonymity and lack of non-verbal elements of contemporary internet communication. That there might be a strong need for more political education is also suggested by the fact that in this case study 69,7% of the postings employed one-dimensional arguments and lacked more complex reasons for why certain opinions are held and communicated.

Research Question 5: Which role do political values play in political online communication?

Political values play an important role in online debate. Values that were of particular importance in this case study are economic efficiency, nation, home, equity, and democracy. Besides a stress of humane values there was a strong dominance of conservative and instrumental values.

There was a strong clustering of postings: A small minority of users (11,9%) posted each more than 30 messages and accounted for a total of 50,7% of all postings, whereas a majority of users (58,2%) posted only 1-5 messages and accounted for only 10,5% of all postings. This shows that voicing political opinions online has a divided and centralized character.

The overall result of the case study is that the postings analysed were highly interactive, clustered around a small group of very active users and a large group of spontaneous participants, predominantly rational and normative right, but that there was a strong minority of irrational and normative incorrect postings that relied heavily on insults, threats, hatred, and xenophobia. Cyberspace has a potential for constituting a digital agora, but this has not yet been realized and requires a whole lot of Paideia and political capacities as well as institutions that strengthen digital democracy and its underlying learning processes. The conducted case study provides results that support the two initial hypothetical assumptions that political online debate is highly interactive and has to a certain degree face problems of rationality.

## 5. Overall Conclusion

The emergence of new information and communication technologies (ICTs) has resulted in numerous optimistic concepts such as digital democracy, cyberdemocracy, the digital agora, the virtual community, and the global village that give one the impression that cyberspace automatically implies the broadening of democracy within society. The

discourse has thus far mainly narrowly focused on concepts such as e-government and e-voting that implies that the use of ICTs by public administration strengthens democracy.

In contrast to this narrow view the approach of the ICT&S Center at the University of Salzburg stresses that political participation is a broad concept that aims at including those affected by decisions within these processes. It is based on a broad concept of power that sees the latter not as something that is imposed on people from above by uncontrollable institutions, but, rather, as something that is distributed in a certain way and that is produced in social practices.

The task of eParticipation is to empower people with ICTs to be able to act in bottom-up-decision process, to make informed decisions, and to develop social and political responsibility. Therefore, eParticipation is a means to empower the political, socio-technological, and cultural capabilities of individuals so that they can involve themselves and organize themselves in the information society.

The relationship of ICTs and society (ICT&S) is not considered as one where a limited group of political experts takes decisions, controls power, and informs others by the way of new technologies of these decisions, but, rather as one where all people are enabled to become capable of acting as political experts, taking decisions, producing power, and using ICTs as a system of co-operation and self-organization. Social structures have enabling and constraining effects on human practices (Anthony Giddens), the task of eParticipation is to limit the constraining and to maximize the enabling effects of ICTs.

A good usability of applications that support online politics is of fundamental importance for eParticipation. Young people are an important group that will shape the future of society and the internet. Hence research on youths and online politics is undertaken at the ICT&S Center. Continuous political debate is a central feature of participation; hence an analysis of political online discourse is central to research on eParticipation. The overall result of the case study undertaken by one of the authors is that the analyzed postings were highly interactive, clustered around a small group of very active users and a large group of spontaneous participants, predominantly rational and normative right, but that there was a strong minority of irrational and normative incorrect postings that relied heavily on insults, threats, hatred, and xenophobia. eParticipation is a new concept that can broaden the understanding of digital democracy, its actual realization shows good potentials that nonetheless are still in need of much institutional support that strengthens political and digital capacities.

The solution of current problems of eParticipation such as clustering and centralization can besides institutional and educational intervention also be supported by technological applications. For doing so the notion of social translucence (Erickson/Kellogg 2000) is important. In the context of digital communication it means that applications should make information visible and transparent (visibility), users should be made aware of

available information and the activities of themselves and others (awareness), and they should be inspired to feel accountable for their online activities (accountability). Social translucence can be achieved in online applications such as chats or discussion boards with the help of special tools that visualize information and usage patterns. Examples for such tools are Babble, Coterie, Loom, Loops, Netscan Dashboard, Talking in Circle, and Visual Who. Such tools could visualization structures of centralization and decentralization in political online debates and be helpful in achieving non-dominative discourse by informing users of clustering tendencies. Solutions for the problem of clustering can be supported by technology because it can be analyzed quantitatively. Unfortunately political online debate thus far makes hardly use of social translucence. Concerning solutions for problems of rationality qualitative approaches are needed that are much harder to support by technology because the rationality of speech is based on semantic and pragmatic aspects that can only be understood by humans and not by machines. In order to achieve more meaningful political discourse institutional measures such as political education are required. Applications that could support are increasing the rationality of discourse are rating and evaluation systems (as thus far mainly used in e-commerce) that allow users to rate the rationality and quality of the postings of other users.

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