

**Digital Democracy and Its Application to the International Arena –
From “Deliberation” to “Decision”**

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Alexander Siedschlag

University of Innsbruck
School of Political Science and Sociology
Universitaetsstr. 15
A-6020 Innsbruck
AUSTRIA

Tel. 0043 512 507 7065

Fax 0043 512 507 2613

E-Mail alexander.siedschlag@uibk.ac.at

<http://www.european-security.info>

1. Introduction

Apart from the discussion about computer-mediated change in community and domestic political affairs, there is a pending debate on general effects of internet- or “net”-based communication on international politics. The reference to international politics rather than international relations is a consciously chosen one – for this paper focuses on net effects on collective decision-making rather than international-society processes. IP/IR-driven research on internet-induced political change does not very much link itself to the state of knowledge in internet-and-politics research. Rather, it commonly departs from sub-discipline specific concepts such as neorealist power analysis or post-international turbulence analysis (cf. Allison 2002).

Nye & Owens (1996: 20) simply equated the increasing role of global information technology in general with an increase in individual capabilities at the level of the nation state: “Knowledge, more than ever before, is power. The one country that can best lead the information revolution will be more powerful than any other.” Rosenau & Johnson (2002: 74), in contrast, expect the rise of border-crossing net-based communication to empower “sovereignty-free actors”. They deem information technology “central to the emergence of the multicentric world [...] and, therefore, to the rise of multicentric actors that focus on new performance criteria such as human rights and protection of the natural environment.” Thus, IP/IR-originating perspectives on the role of digital communication and information exchange on a post-national scale leave us with a gap between two extremes, neither permitting a proper fitting of general internet-and-politics research results into the puzzle.

Conversely, this paper begins with discussing selected elements of the state of the art in internet-and-politics research, seeking to expand the related concepts to the international scale while investigating possible crossings from deliberation to decision-making. The paper first introduces selected perspectives on real-world impacting online communities. Because elaborating on the impact of digital deliberation on decision-making strongly depends on the analytical concept of internet-based democracy that we choose, “digital democracy” will then provide the reference model for the remainder of the paper. After identifying management needs for politically relevant digital deliberation, the paper discusses the problem of culture-dependency of online communication. It then goes on to identify specific interfaces through which digital deliberation may impact real-world political decision-making. This is the basis on which the paper then deals with possibilities of extending the digital-democracy model to the post-international level and to the problem of governing increasingly transnationalized societies.

Internet-and-politics research has largely made a farewell to its founding idea of realizing Barber’s (1984) “strong democracy” by virtual means: to create a new momentum for late-20th century democracy by defining it not just as a political order but as a (re)public(an) lifestyle, rooted in a digitally mediated active pluralism

throughout the “net-empowered” (Grossman 1995) people. Today, research rather suggests that (re)public(an) internet use such as online deliberation does not directly impact political decision-making. Moreover, views converge to the point that the internet has neither become a sui generis political sphere (as Grossmann 1995 also had expected), nor has it brought about fundamentally new, active-society centred criteria for assessing politics (as originally assumed by Rheingold 1993 and taken up for example by Hill & Hughes 1998). Thus, at first sight, there remains little scope for new, net-based forms of governance. In fact, looking beyond the OECD world even confronts us with a widespread public fear of the internet as a Western project of dominance and penetration, if not cultural threat (see Franda 2002).

In opposition, Castells (1998) believes a culture-fair transnational network society to exist already, opening up new opportunities for both deliberation and decision-making. Castells makes his point mainly with reference to NGOs and their virtual networks for mobilization of protest. However, Castells does not suggest any answer to the question if and if so, how the internet contributes to an interactive society and to the transition from mobilization into deliberation as well as from deliberation into decision-making. In the final analysis, Castells does not seem to believe that internet-based communication and mobilization has the potential for affecting conventional patterns and repertoires of real-world decision-making. This is because he treats the internet as a symbolic environment of social and political reality, and moreover as a symbolic environment that is not a shared context for its agents but strongly dependent on interpretations and, in its potential social power, inseparably linked to the real existent world, its social and power structures as well as offline decision-making mechanisms.

2. Selected perspectives on internet-based governance

However, we avail of working definitions of *real-world influencing online communities* including important hints to criteria for virtual community-building whose deliberative endeavours have a chance to impact real-world decision-making. An example is Preece’s (2000) set of criteria:

- a common goal, providing a specific reason for belonging to the respective community (This means that agenda setting is a precondition for – not an achievement of – any virtual community)
- an institutionalization of the community that is independent of individuals
- an internal social differentiation into specific roles to be taken by the members
- common “policies”, that is a set of social rules directed to achieving the community’s aims
- a “folklore”, that is, commonly accepted social norms and the consciousness of a common history

In addition, Lazar & Preece (2003: 137-138) directly address the concept of “*governance*”, however focusing it to the management of virtual communities themselves. According to their results, a virtual community cannot constitute a socially relevant actor unless it meets some structural-functional prerequisites, such as filling the roles of founding fathers, community leaders and moderators.

Just as much as net-based governance does not emanate from technical infrastructure but requires a certain degree of virtual social organization, it also is politically “neutral”, as Rosenau & Johnson (2002: 55f.) point out: Information technologies

“can serve to tyrannize publics as well as to liberate them. They can facilitate the dynamics of globalization as well as those of violent nationalism. They can mislead policymakers as well as enlighten them. In short, whether the consequences of information technologies are beneficial or deleterious depends on the uses to which they are put by citizens and their leaders.”

Following Rosenau and Johnson, I dismiss the view disseminated by Hundley et al. (2003, esp. pp. 36-37) that the information revolution – or a country’s “IT posture” – as such enables new governmental mechanisms and empowers new political actors. Appreciating that some schools of thought offer us interesting perspectives of online-communication and online-deliberation based modes of community building that has the potential for impacting real-world decision-making, we need to acknowledge that there still is a state-of-the-art fact: Elaborating on the impact of digital deliberation on democratic decision-making strongly depends on the analytical concept of internet-based democracy that we choose.

Departing from e-government, e-governance, e-democracy, cyberdemocracy or digital democracy means choosing different frames of reference for analysis and different models for governing (in) the information age. All models notably include assumptions about expectable negative side effects of including the respective net factor in collective decision-making (Siedschlag, Rogg & Welzel 2002: 10-14, see the penultimate line in table 1).

Table 1 summarizes related findings from my own work. For a comprehensive discussion from the Anglo-Saxon literature, see Hoff, Horrocks & Tops (2000).

Table 1: Main models of internet-based democracy

	e-government	e-governance	e-democracy	cyber-democracy	digital democracy
<i>political function of the internet</i>	increasing the efficiency of public administration	networked problem-solving in virtual communities, increase in efficiency	increased responsiveness of the leaders due to occasional online consultations	grass-root democratic reorganization of the political system in the internet	depending on existing structures, aiming at mending present deficits
<i>notion of democracy</i>	enabling state/consumer democracy	network state / network democracy	elitist democracy	grass-root democracy	neo-republican democracy
<i>notion of net-public</i>	irrelevant	segmented into problem-bound forums	elite-provided channels for civic participation	new-style, non-power-corrupted public	separate, self-organizing audiences
<i>predominant form of communication</i>	G2C	G2C and C2G	G2C, complemented by pre-given C2G channels	G2C, complemented by C2G	G2C, C2G and C2C
<i>necessary services of the state</i>	range of online-services	installation of IT-infrastructure and reform of administration	implementation of online consultations and elections	none: self-organization by online activists	promotion of deliberative forums and media competence
<i>typical civic activities</i>	online tax return or car registration	Online discussion of communal problems	participation in online consultations and elections	net activism, participation in virtual communities	political information and online deliberation
<i>objectives</i>	minimal administrative burdens for the citizens, high efficiency of the administration	effective, non-central problem solving along with increased participation	improved basis of legitimacy of the political system	self-governing virtual grass-root communities	increased deliberation in the political discourse; increased participation
<i>expectable negative consequences, management needs</i>	neglect of existing potentials, insufficient civic participation	neglect of existing potentials	electronic populism, fragmentation of the internet into partial publics	erosion of democratic institutions; protest attitudes and activism	over-saturation of the citizens (e.g. due to limited capabilities for receiving and processing information)
<i>exemplars</i>	Kubicek (1999); OECD (2003); Priddat & Jansen (2001)	6 (2004); v. Bismarck, Dettling & Schuppan (2003)	Browning (1996); Hoff, Horrocks & Tops (2000)	Hill & Hughes (1998); Holmes (1997)	Alexander & Pal (1998); Hague & Loader (1999); Siedschlag, Rogg & Welzel (2002)

3. Digital democracy, deliberation and communication culture

I suggest turning to digital democracy as a frame of reference because it entails a *pluralistic concept of governance* that lets citizens develop own spaces for designing solutions to collective problems. Digital democracy is not a full-fledged electronic democracy consumer model but assumes that the existing institutional order of a given public sphere as well as the respective political culture are the foundations on which

digital modes of deliberation and governance can be built (Alexander & Pal 1998; Caldwell 1999; Hague & Loader 1999; Siedschlag, Rogg & Welzel 2002).

Deliberative democracy as a blueprint for information-age politics comprises various channels: government-to-Citizen, or “G2C” communication as well as Citizen-to-Government, or “C2G” communication and Citizen-to-Citizen, or “C2C” communication. Combining traditional and digital paths and modes of democracy, digital democracy in the first place aims at reinvigorating *civil society* – defined in this context as the interface between the institutions of democracy and the general public. In a digital democracy, political decisions ideally would not be prepared, taken, legitimized and implemented by an elite but result from a broad, issue-centered discussion at various levels.

This approach borrows from the Habermasian concept of *deliberative democracy*: Politics gain legitimacy through the *discursive* nature of the formation of opinion and will in a society. When, with a view to international politics, we specifically talk from the end of the era of “a tournament of distinctive knights” (Rengger 1993) this also means to deny the pre-dominant role of the nation-state as an information broker: It is the people that, in the digital age, can provide itself with real-time access to the international scene. This also means that the public needs to avail of digital media competence and a framework to find and assess the new kind of information. In a digital democracy however, media competence is more than technical knowledge. Media competence needs to empower each individual to process information and place it into an overarching context – as well as derive conclusions for their political attitude and behaviour. This brings us to the field of digital deliberation and *culture*.

So far, especially with reference to the international system, *culture and communication* have mainly been analyzed in one respect: how expansion of communications influences cultural change (cf. Axelrod 1997; see also the overview provided by Greig 2002). However, especially when investigating deliberation as a pillar of digital democracy and a reference point for reasoning about extending digital democracy to public spheres beyond the nation-state, we should also take into account the inverse relation: to what degree does a given culture *allow* for communication- and deliberation-induced political change?

Geertz’ (1973: 89) definition of culture as “a historically transmitted pattern of meanings embodied in symbols, a system of inherited conceptions expressed in symbolic form by means of which men communicate, perpetuate, and develop their knowledge about and attitudes towards life” as well as the tenets of cultural theory (Keesing 1974; Wuthnow 1984; Thompson, Ellis & Wildavski 1990) let us expect that any discourse within in cultural community will be *self-referential* instead of deliberative, not open to arguments and cognition but necessarily confined to the cultural context. Culture thus involves self-referentiality of arguments and interpretation, risking cognitive and argumentative *closure*. This risk of closure brings

about the risk of *fragmentation* of the online public into hermetic partial publics. Taking strictly, this should render discourse between members of different cultural communities as improbable as an exchange of views on different concepts of identity and values. On these grounds, for instance, we cannot expect the internet to contribute to the evolution of a global *norm of governance*.

However, some authors propose ways to manage these risks. Fishkin (1995) and Schiller (1996) for example defined deliberation to include internet-based *agenda setting* for political decision-making so to avoid self-referential discursive closure. However, Fishkin and Schiller obviously did not appreciate Preece's (2000) proposition that virtual social and political organization requires agenda setting rather as a precondition. Fishkin and Schiller were also fast to link the concept of (virtual) civil-society based agenda setting to the view that corporative factions were to take hold of the cyberspace to exclude various publics from claiming a say in political agenda setting. Fishkin (1999: 290) advocated "deliberative polling" as a mechanism for establishing "deliberative micro-cosmoses" that are expected to guarantee a horizontally widespread discussion of governance issues without interest-based pre-structuring by political entrepreneurs (for a newer account, see Iyengar, Luskin & Fishkin 2003). The leading concept, then, is not to link public deliberation to political decision-making but to improve civic skills for public talk (Elkin & Sołtan 1999).

Indeed, regardless of the level of application (domestic, transnational or global-governance based), advocating digital democracy implies the need to improve the reflexive as well as the lateral component of "strong democracy" (Barber 1999: 42-44) before delving into real-world impact. The *reflexive* component refers to a self-critical dealing of the citizens with their own claims. The *lateral* component refers to a discursive interaction of the citizens among themselves (citizen-to-citizen communication), without discourse confined to citizen-to-government (C2G) communication. A premature focus on citizen-to-government communication seems to promote activism of the side of the government (Evans & Oleszek 2003: 118). Thus, much of the debate converges to the view that increased internet-based deliberation will not boil down to institutional substitution but rather to "institutional amplification" (e.g. Agre 2002). Institutional amplification means new chances for responsive governance through real-time information based politics, which however do not burst the framework of nation-state based politics but open up perspectives for *multi-level governance*.

4. Modelling transitions from net deliberation to real-world decision-making

Culture-oriented online-communication research (that is, *cyberculture* research) has its own concepts of linking deliberation and decision (see Silver 2000 for a comprehensive discussion). Extreme positions are represented by Turkle (1995) and Porter (1997), who assume that cyberspace-based social interaction produces sheer virtual identities that are

strictly distinct from the principles of social organization in the offline world. Within cybercultural communities, Suler (1998) identifies strong potentials for deliberation. Appreciating the strong practices of identification with the respective cyberculture which for example Dery (1996) described, the sharply inclusion-exclusion based mode of online community-building (see above) should favour the emergence of clusters of deliberation: The in-group has good foundations for discursive interaction, whereas between groups, socio-cognitive barriers to discourse tend to dominate (Döring 2003: 181). These findings are in keeping with the self-referentiality axiom of cultural theory in general.

How can we still conceive of the step from (net-based) deliberation to (real-world) action that impacts collective decision-making? There are two trains of thought that offer good foundations to do so.

The first represents an *actor-based paradigm*. Related approaches follow a functional-structural frame of reference and explore *online-offline interfaces* and then investigate how certain types of actors may make use of these intersections to transport discourses, linguistic definitions of reality etc. from online to offline or the other way round. *Table 2* provides a sum-up overview of relevant contributions.

Some of these models from the field of political communication research obviously offer promising connection points into international theorizing. I would find it particularly promising to carry three of them further to mesh with complementary reasoning from international relations theory. The *crisis of legitimacy model* with its emphasis on a communication-based operative public and on communicative power-building could be worth complementing with linguistic constructivist reasoning such as Kubáľková, Onuf & Kowert (1998). The *relay model*, focusing on strategic communicative action within institutional frameworks so to gain new opportunities to foster one's opinion and interests could be extended by certain neorealist models such as Grieco's (1996: esp. 287-288) "voice opportunity". The model of *social psychological transfer*, highlighting identity structures as independent variables and centring on decision-making communities, may be worth linking to Wendt's (1999) social theory of international politics, or systemic constructivism.

Table 2: Online-offline interfaces

	<i>form of coupling of online and offline public</i>	<i>function of online-offline coupling</i>
crisis of legitimacy Marschall (1998)	extension of the range of institutional and civil society communication	improved chance of legitimacy due to more transparency, responsiveness and mediation of knowledge; construction of an “operative public”; communicative power-building of the civil society
relaying Bieber (1999): 186-200	establishment of online-offline coupling by strategic actions of institutional actors	net-based continuation of real-life politics
intermedia agenda setting Marschall (1997); Rössler (1998)	seizure of relevant online topics by traditional mass media	creation of a conventional political public for online topics
system intervention Marcinowski (1993); Pfetsch (2003)	professionalized political communication in the internet	attraction of attention and causation of consent
social psychological transfer Döring (2003): 498-499	identification with virtual communities leads to equal positioning within the offline-area	creation of political group identities

The second train of thought represents a *system-based paradigm* that centres on the relation between media culture and action. Findings include the following:

- New profiles of traditional institutions (such as e-parliamentarism, which means parliaments as information mediators between the societal and the governmental sphere) can change the *interface between “agents” and “structures”* (e.g. (Grendstad & Selle 1995: 6; Thompson, Ellis & Wildavsky 1990: esp. 21-23). This is an especially interesting argument with a view to extending digital-democracy thought to the international arena, for example understanding e-parliamentarism transnationally, as a means to exert parliamentary control over less deliberation-governed areas of international integration and cooperation. A current e-parliamentarism initiative refers to democratic control of international military cooperation and use of force. An initiative more pertinent to the subject of this paper comes from UNDP and aims at promoting regional democratization in West and Central Africa (see Dandjinou 2001).
- Societies gain new opportunities to *experience their environment* (e.g. Geertz 1973; Keesing 1974: 75f.) – for example through transnational digital networking.

However, we cannot expect this networking to result in a shared culture of transnational governance for we know that we need given identities and cultures that allow us to make experiences and to lay sense into our environment (Greig 2002). Thus, internet-mediated experience will rather push the trend in online communication to further a differentiation of the overall public in partial publics in which communication processes follow an inherent logic and do not open up a common discursive public room.

- Within those *partial publics*, internet-based communication can lead to changes in the symbolically mediated management of knowledge, which can result in a new *collective attitude* towards “reality” along with new *repertoires of action* (e.g. Paschen et al. 2002: 89; Winter 2001). This attitudinal change will also affect offline discourse and decision-making. In fact, Price & Cappela (2002) found in the case of the U.S. that regular participation in policy-related chats is a predictor for increase in the participants’ general social trust and thus may contribute to civic culture change, also beyond the national arena of digital democracy.
- Internet-based communication must also be expected to reinforce *in-group/out-group differentiations* (e.g. Thimm 2000). The condition of anonymity is found to be a major cause of this effect. In deliberation about conflict-laden issues, the internet setting risks radicalizing the positions of social groups.

These theoretical considerations suggest that there is a need to actively bring together internet-based self-organized governance and its communicative foundations into a “connectable” discursive perspective that is amenable to others. Thus, also from this perspective, a good governance of the online-offline interfaces identified above appears crucial. This nicely corresponds to Clift’s (2004: 31) conclusion that online deliberation is management-requiring and not quite discursive by itself:

“First, you need ‘e-deliberators’. You need citizens with experience and comfort with online political conversation. I call them e-citizens. Without the social expectation that Internet should be used for democratic purposes, advanced e-government and democracy efforts will only exist primarily where internal champions lead the way or they exist as out of sight small experiments. We will not see the most compelling experiences and services spread more universally to democracies around the world without a focus on e-citizens. Second, you need well-resourced hosts who can create the structure necessary to facilitate a valuable, meaningful experience for those who take the time required to participate.”

One only seemingly lapidary precondition for any influence of net-based discourses on real-world decision-making must not be overlooked: The respective discourse needs to yield results. This requires a “procedural consolidation” of the online discourse, which includes that the presented policy options and strategies rest on a variety of perspectives and stocks of knowledge and are subject to a cycle of revision which requires them to

prove their practicability in the light of iterated critical testing (Hohberg & Luehrs 2003: 334). Given that online discourses imply asynchronous active participation of many unknown persons, Hohberg & Luehrs (2003: 333) find it mandatory that online discourses be directed by a supporting methodical framework which consolidates the flow of the discussion and directs it towards commonly acceptable results. On the one hand, this can imply procedural problems because given the “unknown participant” we cannot foresee the range of positions and arguments. On the other hand, this very condition can provide a chance to break up solidified lines of argumentation and conflict and bring new aspects on the agenda.

This is again an argument for the need for *discursive clearing authorities* identified in the digital democracy approach – along with the fact that political public is to the largest extent not a spontaneously organized public but a *produced public*. Conversely, when we endeavour to facilitate online discourse as well as real-world impact of online deliberation, we need the production of a sustainable deliberative public, which includes exploiting new politically relevant publics so not just to end up with the reinforcement model (which assumes internet communication to reflect and reinforce real-world structures and attitudes). Both a deliberative net public and an online-offline transfer will depend on the management of the online-offline interfaces identified above.

This point gains further bearing when one considers the *inverse interfaces* that *critical cyberculture studies* have been exploring since the end of the 1990ies: how real-world decision-making challenges are translated into cyberspace in order to create benign virtual contexts for mobilizing support for political interests. Cyberculture in this sense is constructed by elite actors who seek to promote their self-interest by means of digital democracy (cf. Cooper 2002). Governance of the potentials of net-based governance is thus needed in order to handle the risk of digital deliberative spaces becoming rather a source of “other-empowerment” than of self-empowerment. This resonates with Hutchings’ (1999: 166) point that transnational democratic procedures in general have the potential to extinguish effective self-governance at local or national levels.

5. Towards a third-image digital democracy?

If it is correct that digital deliberation is to a lesser extent a root promoter of new forms of governance than it is dependent on existing pre-structuring of its field of application, the risks and challenges identified above, such as

- dependency on pre-existing social organization
- need for a communication culture
- inherent constraints that such a culture poses on deliberation
- self-referentiality, cognitive closure of discourse and partial publics
- need for online-offline interfaces
- need for governance of those interfaces

must also be appreciated in reasoning about a net-empowered public sphere beyond the nation state, that is, at the third-image level of analysis. Just as *global governance* (following the definition of the Commission on Global Governance 1995: 35 and the model laid out by Messner 2005, cf. also Messner 1997) is not a counter nation-state strategy but rests on several pillars, one of which is reliance on nation-state capabilities and structuring forces, deliberation based on a digital democracy model transferred beyond the nation state is not as such self-organized but is itself in need of governance. For example, the concept of digital democracy is based on the assumption that internet-mediated democracy and its deliberative quality are necessarily building (and dependent) on existing structures. This does not only refer to nation-state structures but also to societal ones, including communication culture. Moreover, as it is the case with global governance, a digital democracy perspective, within and beyond the boundaries of the nation-state, rests on the view that deliberation is a variable process involving a broad range of actors and institutions. The digital pillar is thus one among others within a framework of both formally and informally organized interactive procedures of weighting arguments and paving the ground for problem-responsive decision-making.

On this intellectual foundation, quite a view theoreticians and practitioners alike have suggested to first not globalize or transnationalize but to “localize” online deliberation, that is to empower interested citizens to set up communal and regional “public networks” engaging in digital discourse about local problems (Clift 2003a; on the concept of public net-work see also Clift 2003b). Behind this concept stands the assumption that the citizens feeling a direct impact and a proximity to communal real-world decision-makers will best guarantee the qualitative standards that deliberative democracy requires. The online-offline link is here established through leaning on pre-existent real-life communities, so that from a political science point of view, public-net works are complementary virtualizations of established structures of communal citizen engagement (Galbally 2003). However, from a critical point of view, making this model fruitful for transnational deliberation may risk boosting to digital divide to a world-wide scale, as Zinnbauer (2001) argues. Put less pessimistic, this argument underscores the point made above for a mediated rather than self-organized approach to online deliberation. Just as digital democracy within the nation-state both needs governance and opens up new perspectives for governance, digital democracy transferred beyond the nation-state frame of reference can foster governance as well as it needs to be embedded into a framework of democratic governance of the internet itself.

Correspondingly, the role of deliberative digital culture in governing increasingly transnationalized political communities needs to base on existing social and political organization of the respective public space. Disillusionary as one may find this perspective, from a methodological point of view it implies remarkable systematic potential for real-world decision-making impact of digital deliberation because the model of *online-offline interfaces* grips.

Some of the few studies on real-world impact of internet communication in a world society follow an approach comparative to that of Featherstone (1995), which is highly critical of world culture, including communication culture. Featherstone argues that globalization as such and the globalization of chances of communication in particular go hand in hand with the dissolution of social attachments, with an unclear range of identity and value choices, with a disembedding of culture and communication from (local) historicity and with the overstretch of culturally bound meaning in alien contexts. However, following authors like Münch (1998: 314-322), this interestingly lays the ground for a specific role of net-based transnational and international communication in the field of conflict management. This is because we can then expect the world society of the 21st century to rest on an identity that develops from a primordial (defined by territory and origin) over a medial (defined by communication) into a *virtual identity*, which is abstract, *disembedded* from everyday life and thus also not immediately convertible into capital for social interaction – so that identity-related conflict could constitute much less manifest conflict potential. In this perspective, the governance impact of virtual identities – which could for example result from and be reinforced by digital discourse and deliberation – would not be to foster but to mellow integration beyond the sphere of the nation-state.

Nevertheless, there are also models that deem internet-based communication an important factor in constituting a *transnational public* that contributes to solidifying, for example, the enlarged and deepened integration within the European Union. McGrew (1998: 396) for instance, extending the argument from McGrew (1997), argues that within the European Union, publics cease to be definable on spatial (e.g. national) grounds but will in the short-term only be definable on an issue- and policy-related basis. The resulting various de-territorialized publics will be transnational partial publics, and they will be the field in which European governance will have to gain legitimacy and public support (cf. also Trenz 2002). Classics of transnationalism and integration such as Robert Nye, departing from their initially cited view of the internet as a nation-state soft-power resource, go as far as to see the net-based identity factor as a foundational principle of coming integration processes divorced from national grounds: “Interactivity at low cost allows for the development of new virtual communities. While still in their infancy, transnational virtual communities are likely to grow and more complex identities and loyalties to develop” (Nye 2002: 166).

However, one must not forget the fact that digital democracy, regardless of the scale on which we place it, is to a much lesser extent a tool for forging a post-national deliberative communication culture than it depends on existent communication culture, with its embodied ideas and constructions of identity. The *UN World Summit on the Information Society* (<http://www.itu.int/wsis>) already in its first round in December 2003 in Geneva obviously acknowledged this caveat. However, its action plan does not contain a critical discussion on the consequences for digital deliberation on a world-wide scale and the potential and potential paths of the information society to contribute to decision-making about its governance. Rather, the summit’s Plan of Action (World

Summit on the Information Society 2003) made a step back to the safe side of the model of a digital consumer democracy, or basic e-democracy, basing on the concept of an enabling state (or, in this case, an enabling community of states) – deciding on a case by case basis which opportunities to provide for civic deliberation. The summit’s Plan of Action met with a harsh counter-action plan of the plenary of the representatives of the civil society, which emphasized the general demand for increased rights of information and participation on a world-public scale (WSIS Civil Society Plenary 2003).

Whereas state actors obviously do not fully appreciate the governance potentials of post-national digital discourse and deliberation, non-state actors tend to overestimate its self-organizing potentials and fail to fully take into account the need of governance of digital democracy and deliberation as fresh means of governance. It is a similar gap that we need to overarch in theorizing, especially when advance from domestic to third-image applications of the digital democracy model. Research on digital democratic potentials for governance of increasingly transnationalized societies should therefore proceed on the cutting edge between the fields of “political system”, “political culture”, “comparative politics” and “international relations” – for neither governance issues nor the concept of deliberation as such fundamentally alter their systemic substance and requirements when we transfer them to a different level of analysis and practice of internet-based discourse.

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