

**P4P – PODCASTING FOR PARTICIPATION****How Can Digital Grassroots Media  
Support Sustainable Development?**

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## Abstract

This paper discusses whether digital grassroots media, evolving within the Digital World, can be useful instruments to enforce *Sustainable Development (SD)*. As a representative of such new means of communication the young phenomenon podcasting is tested for its potential to enforce *SD*. The paper focuses on one aspect that is central in many definitions of *SD*: participation. First, important concepts (i.e. civil society, deliberation and participation) are clarified, then podcasting is introduced and finally, the question how digital grassroots media can support *SD* is discussed. This is done by presenting three theses how podcasting can strengthen civil society, citizen deliberation and political participation and by opposing three corresponding anti-theses. In this vein a number of research questions, partly theoretical, partly empirical, is derived. These research questions can be understood as the foundation of a broader research program to examine the potential of digital grassroots media for *SD*.

### 1. *Sustainable Development, Civil Society, Deliberation and Participation*

The central claim of this paper is that podcasting<sup>1</sup> as a new grassroots media can be a useful instrument to enforce *Sustainable Development (SD)*. First, the meaning of *SD* and closely related concepts such as civil society, deliberation and participation as used in the following are sketched. Understanding these concepts will explain, why the acronym P4P<sup>2</sup> is chosen as this paper's title and not for instance P4SD (Podcasting for *Sustainable Development*). Second, podcasting is described as a new participatory medium and a social phenomenon. Finally, the question "What can podcasting do for *SD*?" is discussed.

#### 1.1 *The participatory aspect of Sustainable Development*

Contrary to comprehending *SD* as an analytical category (Tremmel 2003) it is mostly regarded as a political category. Originally a notion from the forestry (Carlowitz 1732; Schanz 1986) the concept of *SD* was introduced into the environmental discourse by the World Conservation Union (IUCN 1980). As a global mission statement *SD* was made widely popular by the Brundtland-commission's report *Our Common Future* (WCED 1987). Since then a number of national as well as international political and social actors have tried to shape and influence the meaning of the concept. The discourse about the meaning of *SD* as it has taken place in Germany is well described by Brand & Jochum (2000). The authors stress that even though most of the influencing definitions of *SD* have in common that they try to balance ecological, social and economic interests - which are often referred to as the three pillars of *SD* - these definitions are often incompatible to each other. While some of them are very precise, specific and narrow others are rather broad, at least in parts. They often emphasize and neglect different aspects, which makes it rather difficult to work with them from a scientific point of view. Besides their diversity and incompatibility many of the most important definitions (as given e.g. by the Agenda 21, SRU, Enquete-Commission of the German Government, Wuppertal Institute, VCI, DGB) have to be regarded as expressions of a certain political actor. As such they reflect this actor's interests and worldviews.

One consensually agreeable aspect of *SD* is participation. Many authors have pointed out, that almost every definition of *SD* emphasizes participation in some way (Kopfmüller 1993; Arts 1994). Brand & Jochum have even stated that the participatory and procedural aspect of *SD* has obtained a major significance in the late 1990ies (Brand & Jochum 2000: 188).

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<sup>1</sup> Many things that are said about podcasting in this paper are actually true for a broad number of technologies and applications often subsumed under buzzwords like Web 2.0, Social Software, Social Media or Social Computing. Since presently podcasting is one of the most prominent among these technologies it represents all the others.

<sup>2</sup> Of course, the acronym P4P is supposed to remind the reader of the well known acronym P2P (Peer-to-Peer), which describes a democratic and efficient way to organize computer networks and share information.

In the current debate on *SD* two approaches can be distinguished to justify the need and usefulness of participatory elements (Hinrichs 2005: 30), one arguing rather pragmatically and instrumentally the other one arguing idealistically. While the first one understands *SD* as an organizational problem the second one regards it as an ethical one. From the pragmatic point of view the involvement of local people or initiatives is understood as a means of a faster, more efficient and generally acceptable legislation and governance (Feindt & Newig 2005: 9). For the idealistic approach it is a means to educate and activate people, integrate a community and establish citizen virtues.

This paper follows the idealistic approach, which has its theoretical roots in republican and communitarian ideas. For reasons summarized in the following this approach is regarded as more fruitful for the discourse about *SD* at a fundamental level. Instead of locating the concepts of deliberation and participation in the political sphere they are regarded as essential parts of what Taylor called pre-political foundation of society (Taylor 2002: 85). This pre-political sphere is identified with the term civil society. Instead of arguing that participation is only relevant for the debate on *SD* when it has an observable impact on legislation and governance it is claimed that participation is less of a means but rather an essential precondition of political decision-making. So even the engagement of ordinary people in questions of public interest, which does not produce any political results in terms of laws, enactments or institutions are regarded as valuable participation and as relevant for *SD* here because it is the fundamental way of ethical self-explanation, establishing citizen virtues, civic spirit, problem awareness and democratic practices in a community. To fully understand this claim the underlying concepts of civil society, deliberation and participation have to be clarified first.

### *1.2 Civil Society: Market place or various spheres?*

When talking about civil society one usually refers to a net of autonomous federations, associations or clubs, which are independent from the state and which were formed by people with similar interests to bundle their powers in order to achieve their individual goals. The liberal tradition tends to describe this net of associations as an economy or market place that means as a number of acts of production, tradeoff and consumption, which are following an interior dynamic, which are dependent on each other and self-organizing. Subjective, negative rights adverse the state and other citizens, some of which are regarded as natural rights “grounded in a higher law of transpolitical reason or revelation” (Michelman 1989: 446), grant the individual the space to pursuit individual goals.

Communitarians have criticized this liberal understanding of civil society as an economy. Firstly, they have argued that civil society contains not only voluntary but also involuntary associations (family, religious groups etc.). Secondly, they have emphasized that civil society consists of many different spheres in which people can take different kinds of action following different kinds of rationalities (Walzer 1994). Reducing it to the economic sphere runs the risk of ignoring an essential characteristic of civil society: an autonomous public with a public opinion and interest, which is more than just an

aggregation of individual interests but rather a collectively shared understanding of a good life. As such it refers to “what is collectively recognized as being of common interest” (Taylor 2002: 81) and has to be discovered through deliberation processes. By emphasizing public opinion and public interest an ethical dimension is added to the concept of civil society. Communitarians indicate that these deliberation processes about the good life are and always have been one essential component of civil society. It is not that they identify civil society with citizenship in a republican tradition as liberals identify it with the idea of an economy. Instead they emphasize that civil society consists of different spheres with different rationalities in which its members can switch from being consumers to being virtuous citizens, loyal partisans or devout believers each at its time. As such civil society is the place where different understandings of what it means to live a good life can be developed, negotiated and revised (Walzer 1996: 79).

A difference between the liberal and the communitarian approach is that they give different answers to the following questions: 1. What is the purpose of citizen deliberation and political participation? 2. In which social sphere are both of them located? Liberals tend to locate both in the political sphere and regard them as means to grant individual freedoms, to better structure, govern and administer economic life. Communitarians in contrary locate both in the pre-political sphere of civil society and appreciate them as means in themselves. They regard them as essential to ethically integrate a society or at least large communities within this society, which through this process constitutes itself as a political entity and centers itself in the state (Habermas 1996: 286). This way, political power is not only allocated and authorized but tightly bound to specific goals and ideas that were identified as of common interest and useful conceptions of a good life through deliberation processes. Society not only defines a framework of rights in which individuals can pursue individual goals but also agrees on an objective (e.g., *SD*) what it means to live a good life (Sandel 1993: 19). Whereas communitarians regard political participation and deliberation as an act of exercising freedom and self-actualization as citizens (at least from time to time), liberals fear that political participation may decrease their freedom, which they understand in terms of personal security and a broad scope of individual options.

### *1.3 Deliberation and participation*

Deliberation has been identified as an essential procedure within the spheres of civil society by which its members develop and revise different conceptions of what it means to live a good life. But what exactly is a deliberation process?

*“Deliberation (...) refers to a certain attitude toward social cooperation, namely, that of openness to persuasion by reasons referring to the claims of others as well as one’s own. The deliberative medium is a good faith exchange of views (...) in which a vote, if any vote is taken, represents a pooling of judgements.”* (Michelman 1989: 293)

This definition makes clear that deliberation (a) is more than cutting a deal between two or more individual interests or market partners and (b) does not necessarily culminate in a decision or ruling. Its value is determined by its process not its result.

In the history of political thinking, Tocqueville was a strong advocate of deliberation. Despite being a lawyer he doubted the usefulness of a jury's deliberation as a means of dispensing justice but he strongly appreciated it as a political and republican institution (Tocqueville 1835/2004: 174) and he welcomed its appliance even in civil court matters. He regarded a jury's deliberation as an effective way to anchor abstract laws to people's customs and thus legitimize them and pointed out how deliberation educates people to become citizens and helps to establish citizen virtues (Tocqueville 1835/2004: 177ff).

Habermas criticizes the republican understanding of politics for being too idealistic and overemphasizing citizen virtues. He argues that politics is not mainly composed of questions of ethical self-explanation and that the republican approach leads to an ethical narrowing of political discourses (Habermas 1996: 283). This might be true for many political debates. But there are at least three reasons why it is not true for the debate on *SD*: (a) The ambiguity of the concept among experts, (b) the fact that the concept which is meant to be a mission statement is unknown to broad parts of the German population (Kuckartz & Rheingans-Heintze 2006: 17) and (c) the gap between attitude and behavior of ordinary people concerning ecological and social questions (Dieckmann & Preisendorfer 1992). All three are indicators that nothing is needed more than an ethical self-explanation. Laws and legislation might transform behavior but often these laws lack a convincing ethical foundation why they are good laws. To put it in Tocqueville's words: Laws as abstract directives need to be anchored to citizens' customs. It is usually tried to anchor them by giving explanations and rationales. However, the problem is not the missing anchor but the absence of a solid ground it can hook into. And this ground can only be prepared by a broad ethical discourse about the world a community or society wants to live in and the life it regards as a good (e.g., sustainable) life.

In other words: participation in the pragmatic or instrumental sense as a means of faster and more efficient governance only works when people are willing to and are experienced in governing themselves. This will only be found where strong civic spirit and citizen virtues exist as a result of citizen deliberation in numerous (apolitical) ethical questions. This is where (communitarian) participation becomes (instrumental) participation's necessary precondition.

Other critics of communitarian approach refer to the term citizen virtue, which they regard as anachronistic. Liberals tend to regard the concept as a strategy of conservatives to detain individuals from organizing their lives around their individual interests and wishes. Despite sounding old-fashioned citizen virtue is a necessary complement to the concept of civil society in a double sense: It is its precondition as well as its consequence (Münkler 1993: 3). Citizen virtue means that citizens orient their actions to respect and secure the conditions and the asset of the community they live in and belong to by their own free will without the coercion or force of a state. By practicing citizen virtue people prove to be citizens not subjects (Münkler 1993: 8). The historically fierce debate on virtues (see e.g. MacIntyre 1995) has lost attention in the recent past because it is incompatible to our

current central philosophical belief of irresistible progress of mankind. In contrast, virtue is nothing you can ever achieve or own completely. It is an elusive element and as such not very desirable for many. The problem is that the discourse about virtues does not allow the perspective of continuous progress (Münkler 1993: 13ff).

This is an essential insight for what it means to emphasize the procedural and participatory aspect of the debate on *SD*. In a communitarian sense this does not necessarily mean “taking stock and moving forward”. It means enforcing and appreciating deliberation in itself as a catalyst and indicator for a strong civil society, a precondition for an effective, instrumental political participation, and thus a strong foundation for creating, legitimizing, evaluating and reformulating political and legislative actions. It means appreciating deliberation and participation as a goal, not a means even if no “forward” is apparent.

Before the question can be discussed whether a new medium like podcasting can enforce citizen deliberation or political participation and thus strengthen civil society the medium has to be introduced.

## 2. What is Podcasting?

This section provides common definitions of podcasting and describes who the German podcast listeners are, and what content can presently be found in the German speaking podosphere<sup>3</sup>.

### 2.1 Definition

If you ask podcasters to describe what podcasting is, it is very likely that you get one of four different explanations (Mocigemba 2006a: 3):

1. Term oriented explanation
2. Technology centered explanation
3. User- and task oriented explanation
4. Explanation through comparison with other media

All four approaches are outlined in the following. Together they provide an all-embracing understanding of the phenomenon podcasting.

#### *Term oriented explanation*

The term podcasting consists of two components: *Pod*, referring to Apples famous MP3-Player iPod and *Casting*, referring to broadcasting. Thus, a podcast is a broadcast for a mobile device. This definition is misleading in two ways. Firstly, podcasts are not necessarily meant to reach a broad audience. Secondly, podcasting is not at all dominated by Apple-users anymore.

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<sup>3</sup> Podosphere is the term used to refer to “the world of podcasting”, that is to the entity of podcasters, listeners, shows, infrastructure and follow-up communication.

*Technology centered explanation*

Technically spoken, podcasting is an extension of weblogging on audio- and video-content. Like weblogs podcasts are distributed through RSS-feeds. RSS stands for *Really Simple Syndication* and is an XML-like file format, which describes how to list a certain number of items, for instance audio or video files (van Aaken 2005: 12). RSS was developed by Dave Winer and Netscape and enables users to subscribe to content from webpages. The advantage of this is that users don't have to revisit a webpage repeatedly to find the latest content. Instead they automatically receive the latest content through special software.

*User- and task oriented explanation*

From a user- or task-oriented perspective you could describe podcasting as:

*“User A records something and puts it on the Internet. User B downloads it and if he likes it he can automate this procedure for the future. Furthermore User A provides a feedback channel, which User B is free to use.”* (Mocigemba 2006a: 4)

This automation is called *subscribing*. To subscribe to a podcast a piece of software called *Podcatcher* is needed. After having subscribed to a podcast this software automatically checks in a defined time-intervall whether new episodes or shows of this podcast are available and if this is the case it downloads these shows. To get an overview about the available podcasts in a specific genre a user can browse through the listings of special platforms. In these listings the user can find audio tests of the podcasts and links to the associated blogpage. The blogpage can be used to gather more background information about a podcast and to subscribe to it.

*Explanation through comparison with other media*

Many people compare podcasting to other media to point out its characteristics. Common descriptions are *Radio on Demand* and *Tivo for Radio* to emphasize the time-shifting aspect of podcasting and the aesthetical alikeness of podcasts and radio shows. Others call podcasting weblogs with a soundtrack or Audioblogging in order to emphasize the technological similarity between podcasting and weblogging, which do not differ very much in the way, how they are distributed and received.

*2.2 Four central characteristics of podcasting*

No matter which approach one follows to describe what podcasting is, it is very likely that four characteristics are emphasized. Podcasts are usually a) privately produced b) audio- or video shows, which can be c) automatically received and synchronized with a (mobile) player (computer, cell phone, MP3-player, etc.) so that a d) time-shifted reception is possible.

### 2.3 Who are the listeners?

Since podcasting, established in 2004, is still a very young media no strategy has yet been developed to reliably and validly measure the size of podcast audiences. But to get an impression of who their listeners are 28 German podcasters joined together and established an online-survey among listeners, which is supposed to be conducted in regular intervals in the future. The first survey ( $N=2.344$ ) was realized by the end of 2005 and mainly consisted of questions concerning socio-demographical information and media usage. According to this survey the listeners of privately produced German podcasts are mainly male (88,6%) with an average age of 29,6 years. 82% are Germans, mostly well educated (56% with a university degree) and with a relatively high average net income (€ 2.100). They are usually subscribed to eight podcasts and spend between three and four hours listening to podcasts per week (Wunschel 2005).

These figures indicate that podcasting until today is rather the playground of a minority of people with a high affinity to technology and computers. Similar findings have been reported for the English-speaking podosphere (Chen 2005). But podcasting is a phenomenon, which is growing in many ways: Number of listeners, commercialization and media attention are increasing rapidly. So it has to be assumed that what at the moment looks like a playground of technological early-adopters who some years ago dominated the Internet or the blogosphere will soon become cultural mainstream just as the Internet and at least partly weblogging.

### 2.4 Preconditions and spread of podcasting

There are a number of preconditions that have to be met so that the podosphere can prosper: Firstly, listeners must accept their role as active consumers. They not only have to actively gather their content instead of just sitting down and zap through the channels. Since podcasting is supporting what has been called *Hearsay Culture* listeners also must accept that consuming information also means actively filtering which information to rely on, who the source of an information is and whether they want to trust it. Secondly, media literacy must grow. What is often referred to as the Second Digital Divide (Korupp 2006) has to be overcome so that larger numbers of people can participate in the podosphere as listener or sender. Thirdly, podcasting needs free access to information and knowledge, free as in free speech, not as in free beer (Stallman 2002: 41). Since podcasters very often work with other people's materials and transform these, a practice, which according to Lessig has always been essential for our Western culture (Lessig 2004), judicial restrictions like copyrights have to be clarified and reduced. But fourthly, the most important precondition for a prospering podosphere is that many people are willing to actively participate not only as listener but also as sender. Only if the creative potential, which has vitalized the Internet in the last few years in many so-called Social Software applications, will maintain or grow, podcasting has a chance to prevail in the long run.

Until today the strong willingness to participate induced the rapid spread and acceptance of the new medium. Since no reliable figures about the number of existing podcasts are available, statistics from hosting-services have to be consulted to illustrate this spread. The American hosting service *Feedburner* reported a total of 1.090 podcasts in January 2005, half a year after Adam Curry had published the first podcast ever. In August 2005 this number had grown to more than 13.000 podcasts (Crofts et al. 2005). By June 2006 the number of podcasts exceeded 55.000. Another marker of podcasting's growth is that a *Google* search on the word *podcasts* resulted in 24 hits in September 2004 whereas the same search resulted in 115 million hits in January 2005 (Vogele & Garlick 2006: 27) and 538 million hits by the end of August 2006<sup>4</sup>.

Though the figures are remarkably smaller in Germany, a similar trend can be observed: The most popular German hosting service *Podster* reported 170 podcasts in June 2005. In December 2005 the number exceeded 1.000 and in June 2006 the 2.000<sup>th</sup> podcast was registered.

### 2.5 What content can be found in the podosphere?

Since the German podosphere is very strongly dominated by technological early-adopters (as discussed above), it is not surprising that certain topics and issues, like social, political or ecological issues, were not represented in the first time. If you went to one of the platforms like *Podster* and searched for keywords like *environment*, *nature* or *ecology* in 2005 or the first half of 2006 what you found were mainly radio programs that were redistributed through podcasting.

But things are changing rapidly. In June 2006, the German Chancellor Angela Merkel started her own weekly videoCast. Other political actors who have been experimenting with podcasting are the Hessian Prime Minister Roland Koch or the Austrian party ÖVP as well as some youth organizations of political parties. Besides these, *Greenpeace* provided a podcast about its own history for a while, *attac* started podcasting in summer 2006, the University of Gießen distributes a podcast about political education, the research project *balance* provides balance [P] and the podcast *netzpolitik.org* focuses on social and political impact of information technology. An interesting facet of podcasting is its usage by minorities (e.g. *kommunismus.net* or *getupstandup.tv*), which are normally not represented in mass media. But mentioning all these podcasts only represents a moment's snapshot. Since it seems like that podcasting will develop from a playground of technological early-adopters to cultural mainstream not only the diversity of listeners but also of senders and content will increase and political, social or ecological issues will take hold in the podosphere. A similar process could be observed for weblogging. For quite a while the blogosphere used to be rather resistant to such issues. But since it is becoming more and more a mainstream medium these issues slowly find their way into the blogosphere. An online-survey among German webloggers showed that by now more than 40% of the bloggers write about prevailing political topics (Schmidt & Wilbers 2006: 13).

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<sup>4</sup> A search for the term „sustainability“ yielded 113 million hits at the same day.

### 3. P4P – Podcasting for Participation

After having clarified the underlying comprehension of *SD*, civil society, citizen deliberation and political participation, after having explained why a communitarian approach is chosen here and after having introduced podcasting the central question of this paper can be tackled: What can podcasting do for *SD*? How can podcasting strengthen civil society, citizen deliberation and political participation? Three theoretical answers to this question are presented in form of theses. Each thesis is afterwards objected by an anti-thesis. A number of hypotheses and research questions are addressed in this process. These are meant to guide further research and can be read as a broader research program, which aims at examining the potential of *Information and Communication Technology (ICT)* particularly digital grassroots media for *SD*.

#### *Thesis 1: Podcasting can open up the debate on SD*

This thesis goes back to a claim that the main potential of the new means of communication is their power to turn a lecture into a conversation (Gillmor 2004: xxiv), to lower entry barriers to discourses, to alleviate and encourage raising a voice in public matters and maybe in the end turn passive governance into a vivid deliberation process (see also Barth 2006).

Lessig (2004) associates new media like weblogging and podcasting with a chance to overcome political paralyses. He argues that in the US a norm has developed, which places a ban on talking about politics, especially with people you don't agree with (Lessig 2004: 42). Empirical research has shown that only political participation is diminishing among young people in the US but that apolitical and community-related civic activities continue to attract young people in significant numbers (Galston 2001). In fact, 15- to 25-year-olds volunteer more than do people of any other generation (Delli, Carpini & Keeter 1997). Referring to various examples from within the blogosphere and podosphere, Lessig is very optimistic to virtualize this kind of civic engagement and reactivate traditional political participation through grassroots media. Empirical findings support this aspiration by showing that the Internet has begun to serve as an important information resource and community-building tool for civic engagement and political participation among young Americans (Rainie & Horrigan 2005). Different arguments can be yielded to nourish this hope:

To begin with, podcasters as citizen journalists who usually have a much smaller audience than traditional media can customize their information and thus point out better how their listeners or they themselves are precisely affected by a certain issue. As a consequence listeners may regard this kind of information as more authentic and comprehensible. The barrier to join the conversation, ask questions, give feedback or enforce any kind of follow-up communication or action is lowered.

Besides, the advantage of flexibility through temporal and spatial independence is to be mentioned. To participate in a discourse one no longer has to be at a certain location at a certain time. The costs (economically and ecologically) of taking part are remarkably

reduced and the possibility of participation by people with little time or money increases. This argument is especially important for a modern society. Taylor (2002) and Walzer (1993b: 164) have indicated that modern societies are characterized by a geographical, social, occupational and confessional mobility of their members, which they describe as a process from being bound in original networks (like families) to being bound in categorical identities (Taylor 2002: 143). This observation gives the slogan "Think global, act local" a radically new meaning. Local in this sense is no longer determined through geographical or temporal nearness but rather through a felt commitment to a certain set of ideas, ethical beliefs and rituals or through a virtual socialization process. Establishing and enabling such communities has ever since been regarded as the main advantage of computer networks and new media (Nelson 1974).

Furthermore, the felt anonymity is much stronger in computer-mediated communication, which can induce disinhibition (Döring 1999: 214) and again lower the barrier to enter a discourse. Novices who are interested in but not familiar with a certain discourse and the prevailing communication patterns within this discourse might find it easier and be less cautious and anxious to interfere. As Walzer (1993a) has pointed out that the courage to interfere and to utter a common complaint has to be regarded as the mother of all social criticism and citizen deliberation.

But new grassroots media do not only open up the discourse for people to participate but also for topics and issues, which are normally ignored by mass media. Podcasting can be compared to a virtual speaker's corner, which gives minorities a voice. The podcasts *kommunismus.net* or *getupstandup.tv*, which were mentioned above are just two examples. But podcasting does not only help minorities send out their opinions. In fact it has repeatedly proven its agenda-setting potential in its young history. By various online-petitions and lawsuits of its members and by establishing a parallel music industry, called the *Podsafe Music Network*, the podosphere has strongly influenced the debate on copyright and non-commercial usage of cultural creations. Supplemented by the power of social networks this agenda-setting potential can lead to powerful and fast acting movements of strongly involved and well-informed citizens, which Rheingold (2002) called *Smart Mobs*. Net-rooted election campaigns in the US (e.g., Dean vs. Kerry in 2004) or Lott's resignation as US Senate Minority Leader in 2002 are vivid examples for such citizen movements. But because of the differences in the American and European political culture one should be careful generalizing these observations (Schmidt 2006: 147).

Since it is not the aim of this paper to euphorically praise podcasting but to carefully build hypotheses about its potentials the presented arguments shall be put into perspective and be opposed before moving on with the next line of arguments.

*Anti-Thesis 1: Opening the debate through podcasting is only a theoretical possibility*

Weizenbaum (2001) once warned not to mistake the channel for its usage, not to confuse a potential to participate with actual participation and an actual strengthening of democracy:

*„I remember a very old medium, the message in the bottle – a very democratic medium. Everybody can take a bottle, put a message into it and pitch it into the sea. The question is: Who is going to read this? The mere possibility to write something to the Internet does not mean very much. Arbitrary pitching is worth as much as arbitrary fishing.“ (Weizenbaum, 2001, S. 30)*

This argument is advanced frequently against new grassroots media. But looking at podcasting it can hardly be adhered: First of all providing a podcast is not anymore comparable to an arbitrary pitching. The centrality of podcast-forums like *Podster* and technologies like collaborative tagging as well as the improvement of search algorithms make sure that people do not need to fish arbitrarily to find something of interest for them. This is punctuated by the fact that so many podcasts find their (admittedly sometimes small) audience. In the long run the question will be how well integrated these audiences are and how consistent they prove to be. Second of all there is an implicit criticism in Weizenbaum's argument that the number of people who arbitrarily come together through a podcast will always be small and will never gain relevance for political decision-making. Following the communitarian approach this criticism is of little relevance. Even deliberation in very small discourses (like Tocqueville's jury) may be the source of civic engagement, citizen virtues, ethical self-explanation and integrated communities.

The actual question here is whether the communicative activity around a podcast or blogpage really deserves to be called a discourse or deliberation in which people explain themselves, listen to others and respond to each other's arguments, in other words: whether it resembles a process of cooperative modeling (Licklider & Taylor 1968: 22) rather than a process of making speeches at each other. Different opinions have been uttered in this context. Legewie calls weblogs an "egomaniac event" and doubts that there can ever develop a consistent line of arguments in the linear commentary-function of a weblog (Legewie 2006) even though he is more optimistic about other technologies (e.g. wikis), which are presently converging with weblogs and podcasts. Empirical findings, on the contrary, seem to prove that the ability to synthesize contributions and ideas of others and the lack of talk about one's self are central characteristics of online leadership (Cassell et al. 2006).

Another argument can be advanced against the claim that new grassroots media have the potential to open up the debate on *SD*: Even if weblogs or podcasts have proven their appropriateness to initiate debates on technology (e.g. computer-forums) doesn't mean that this works for political, social or ecological topics as well. A positive evaluation of new grassroots media as means of political participation seems to correlate with a high involvement and affinity to these media. Abold (2006) has shown how political actors used weblogs in the German 2005 elections. He comes to the rather skeptical conclusion

that mainly the people who actively participate in the blogosphere (by having their own weblog or frequently commenting other people's weblogs) appreciate the potential of weblogs while outsiders to the blogosphere are not equally convinced (Abold 2006: 19). Grunwald et al. (2005) called this the reinforcement thesis, meaning that mainly those people are using new media to participate politically who were already participating through other channels before. Whether this is also true for podcasting is an empirical question.

With the above-mentioned pragmatic understanding of participation, grassroots media could even be regarded as a danger. Referring to empirical findings, that online-communities are often lead by those people who talk most – also called the babble hypothesis (Sarker, Grewal & Sarker 2002) – it could be argued that the discourse about *SD* doesn't need any more talk but action, not sheer quantity of contributions but high quality. For reasons given above this action-taking approach is not shared here.

Another opposing claim concerning the potential impact of new media on deliberation, was uttered by Fortunati (1997). She argued that mobile phones steal attentiveness from the public sphere into the private sphere. The Italian tradition of interfering in and sharing of other people's communication or action in public places decreases because many people are focused rather on their private communication through the mobile phone than the communication of people right beside them (Fortunati 1997). It can be assumed that podcasting supports this slipping of attentiveness from public to private sphere even stronger than mobile phones. The typical reception mode of a podcast is idealized in many Apple-TV-advertisements: Listeners are characterized through their white ear-plugs which isolate them from the rest of the world and keep them in a kind of homelike bubble which totally absorbs all their attention and separates them from any public sphere. This phenomenon has been called social cocooning (Popcorn 1992). At first this kind of cocooning seems to be totally incompatible with any idea of participation and deliberation. But referring to the argument advanced above about categorical identities and a virtualization of communities it could be argued that commitment is strongest in community where a high ethical integration results in a high identification of its members. Instead of lamenting that traditional communities defined through geography and space are losing attention, the question has to be asked whether they, too, can be virtualized.

The final argument in this line is an ontological and very fundamental one. It refers to a basic difference between the liberal and the communitarian approach: the understanding of what a citizen is. It was Rousseau who established the distinction between *bourgeois* and *citoyen*, having more sympathy for the *citoyen*:

*„La plupart prennent une ville pour une cité et un bourgeois pour un citoyen. Ils ne savent pas que les maisons font la ville mais que les citoyens font la cité.“* (Rousseau, 1762/ 1996, S. 26).

While the bourgeois is best characterized as a *homo oeconomicus* and is the preferred concept of the liberals the citizen resembles Aristotle's *zoon politikon* and is the standard assumption of the communitarians. This distinction mainly concerns the question what degree of public interest and activity can and should be expected from a person. In the 1920ies and 1930ies, when communist radio clubs tried to establish the radio as a grassroots media (by building receivers and providing their own "pirate" radio channels) Brecht addressed this issue in combination with media:

*"Suddenly you had the chance to say anything to anybody. But when you thought about it you had nothing to say."* (Brecht 1932/1972: 19)

Knowing about Brecht's emancipatory ambitions this quote can be read idealistically: People (workers) have nothing to say because they have been oppressed and don't know how to articulate themselves. But looking at the resonance of the radio experiments among the workforce of these days it can also be read as: People have nothing to tell and no interest to communicate. It's not mainly a question of competence or media literacy they just don't want to express themselves; they enjoy their passivity and their withdrawal into privacy.

This question bothers new media in an even more radical way. Podcasting like weblogging demands a very high degree of activity not only from senders but also from listeners. To get yourself informed about an issue requires active searching for content and active filtering of this content for relevance before you might even actively participate in a discourse by giving feedback or even sending yourself. Associating new media like podcasting with ideas of strengthening deliberation processes and political participation is thus based on a very strong understanding of persons as *citoyens* and might overestimate an average person's degree of activity, of cognitive capacity and might underestimate human dullness. Bolz demanded a *human right of passivity* and strongly criticized idealistic assumption like Brecht's:

*„Television is a wonderful medium of passivity. After a day's ado and affliction you finally come home. (...) And there you long neither for information nor interactivity but for entertainment, dispersion and trance.“* (Bolz 1999: 162)

The fundamental question whether humans are better described as *citoyens* or *bourgeois* is too philosophical to be tackled here. A rather empirical question in this context is whether evidences of citizenship – if they can be detected – can be nourished and exploited by new grassroots media.

A number of reasons and objections have been given in this thesis. The next thesis is not so much concerned about strengthening participation and deliberation processes but focuses more on the benefits or pitfalls of integrating *SD* into processes of cultural creation.

*Thesis 2: Podcasting can enforce a culture or lifestyle of SD*

While the first thesis and anti-thesis were referring not only to podcasting but also to digital grassroots media in general, this thesis is focused rather on visual or even audio-visual media like pod- and videoCasting. The main claim here is that podcasting is a useful means to establish a culture and lifestyle of sustainability.

It is often argued that the gap between attitude and behavior in environmental questions is due to the problem that people don't incorporate environmental ideas. They might have high problem awareness, might even know about solutions and even give the socially desired answers when asked for their opinion. The problem is that they don't regard these problems and solutions as their problems and solutions. A strong suspicion of manipulation towards mass media keeps them from integrating these ideas and solutions into their lives. Traditional product advertisement faces the same problem but tries to circumvent it in different ways. Two ways are to be discussed here, both of which might be helpful to advertise *SD* and to establish a culture or lifestyle of sustainability.

The first aspect to be learned from product advertisement for *SD* focuses on the form how information is presented. Over decades, environmental communication used to be threatening, moralizing and patronizing. As such it certainly served and still serves its purpose to activate people, get their attention, spread problem awareness, motivate activists and set the issue on the political agenda. But permanent penetration easily leads to immunization, ignorance and rejection. This is why product advertisement comes up not only with new slogans but also new forms to of communication all the time. Lichtl (1999) has pointed out that threatening, moralizing and patronizing might not necessarily be the adequate strategies to sell green products to a broad mass of people. In his *Ecotainment*-approach he strongly recommends emphasizing solutions instead of problems and inducing positive emotions by mentioning the additional immaterial benefits of a (e.g. fairly traded, environmentally friendly) product. The idea behind this is that the "right" behavior does not only follow the "right" conviction but that the "right" behavior provoked through a "wrong" motive might induce the right conviction in the end anyway, e.g. through processes of cognitive dissonance or emotional conditioning. Following McLuhan's famous dictum *The media is the message!* (McLuhan 1992) positive emotions towards a product and thus in the end maybe certain ethical beliefs are not necessarily evoked through what is communicated but maybe also through which channel it is communicated. The fact that millions of people enjoy Social Software applications like podcasting, *YouTube*, *mySpace*, *Second Life*, etc. indicates that these are interesting fields to experiment with in terms of sustainability communication.

The second aspect to be learned from product advertisement for *SD* concentrates on user-generated content. User-generated content is not only challenging the music industry in the shape of a parallel music industry or the media business in the shape of citizen journalism it is also challenging the advertisement industry. An example is the *EarthLink Ad Challenge*, which took place in the summer of 2006. The Internet service provider *EarthLink* figured out that they don't need expensive advertisement agencies anymore to

produce professional, authentic and creative audio-spots. Instead they announced a so-called Ad Challenge and asked podcasters and hobbyists to produce spots for them. The result was that for very little money (US\$ 2.000) they got hundreds of mainly professionally produced spots, some of which exceeded the limits and augmented the aesthetics of traditional advertisement. But more important than the direct outcome is the indirect impact of this procedure: *EarthLink* made sure that hundreds of people and customers who produced spots for them incorporated the idea what *EarthLink* is all about. The claim here, which still needs empiric backing, is that this kind of user-generated-advertisement induces a much higher identification with the company, its philosophy and products and is additionally much less vulnerable to a general suspicion of propaganda and manipulation. Why shouldn't such a procedure work for *SD*?

The above-mentioned importance of self-explanation in deliberation processes in order to integrate communities must not only be ethical in nature. Referring to Taylor's concept of categorical identities a self-explanation in lifestyle (which indeed often reflects ethical beliefs) can be as important. Ray & Anderson (2000) have argued that in the US a new subculture has evolved beside the *Moderns* and the *Traditionals* out of various countercultures in the 1960ies and 1970ies, which they call the *Cultural Creatives*. This subculture is mainly characterized by a lifestyle, which is compatible to basic ideas of *SD*: anti-materialism, affinity to green and healthy products, political activism etc. Segmenting society by lifestyle patterns instead of socio-economic variables has achieved some popularity in sociology over the last decades. Similar approaches come to comparable results with different labeling. Ray & Anderson's *Cultural Creatives* have elsewhere been called post-materialists, modern performers or LOHAS. But the segmentation itself, its' measuring, quantification and labeling is not of central interest here. Based on qualitative interviews among *Cultural Creatives* Ray & Anderson state that the *Cultural Creatives* are a coherent subculture in terms of similar habits, practices and ethical beliefs. But they are missing one essential thing: self-awareness (Ray & Anderson 2000: 39). Referring to the biblical story of the Exodus Walzer (1995) has exemplified how collective narratives help establish collectively shared habits, practices, values, interpretation patterns and symbols (Walzer 1995). According to Ray & Anderson exactly these narratives and heroes are missing for the *Cultural Creatives* and with them a basis for recognizing, supporting, deliberating and working with each other. This is where podcasting and new grassroots media come into play. Assuming that the *Cultural Creatives* are a fragmented subculture, descending from different new social movements (Women's Rights, Civil Rights, Ecology etc.) with different narratives and thus different stories, heroes and symbols but also a compatible set of values and ethical beliefs podcasting might be a means to synthesize and clarify the confusion through self-explanation.

Greenpeace's podcast about its own history can be regarded as an example for such a self-explanation. Since symbols are usually non-verbal in nature (gestures, habits, clothing, buttons, chants etc.) audio (-visual) media seem to be superior for this purpose than mere textual media. Again, it must be regarded as an empirical question whether grassroots media are in fact appropriate to support such mediation processes.

*Anti-Thesis 2: Podcasting will have little effect outside the podosphere*

The main argument to object Thesis 2 is to point at the current circulation and importance of podcasting and thus its little social and cultural impact. It can be argued that even considering the possibility that podcasting might become a strong force in mainstream processes of cultural creation and lifestyle development is a huge exaggeration at the moment and indicator of an unforgivable techno-centric worldview. This skepticism could be opposed by pointing out that podcasting is just regarded as a representative of various technologies and means of communication in the so-called Web 2.0 here. It can be observed that these technologies converge and develop rapidly. Even if the technological basis of podcasting will have totally changed in a few years and even if another term is used instead of podcasting it is unlikely that the social phenomenon, which can be observed in the podosphere, at *YouTube*, *mySpace* etc. will totally vanish. Besides, the millions of people who already use so-called Social Software applications suggest that this already is a mass phenomenon with a stronger social and cultural impact on some fields than some mass media.

Furthermore one might object that a self-explanation process which is not ethical in nature but centers around cultural and life-style issues and aims at establishing a self-awareness of *Cultural Creatives* has to be organized centrally. Otherwise it would only lead to even more diversification among the *Cultural Creatives*. This might be enforced by the fact that a certain percentage of *Cultural Creatives* has a skeptical opinion towards new media and technological progress. As a consequence they would either not be represented very well in the online-deliberation. In the end the *Cultural Creatives* would simply be divided in the *Digital Creatives* and a rest.

Finally it can be objected that focusing on new media like podcasting will – at least in the near future – enforce the First and Second Digital Divide and thus establish a social situation which is totally incompatible with the basic ideas of *SD*. People with either no access to ICT or low media literacy (which usually positively correlates with age and negatively correlates with income education and social status in general) are systematically disadvantaged. This argument has to be put into perspective. First of all sustainability communication online is only an addition to traditional communication offline and even if some people are still disadvantaged to take part it is an approximation to the idea of a free and self-determined discourse. Second of all the Digital Divide - especially the Second Digital Divide, which focuses on media literacy rather than access – will not be reduced through not using and ignoring digital media because media literacy is a consequence of media usage just as literacy in general is a consequence of reading.

*Thesis 3: Podcasting is a useful tool for the existing SD-community*

Thesis 1 and 2 were concentrating on opening up the debate for novices and establishing a culture or lifestyle of *SD*. Both were focusing on expanding the scope of the debate (new people, new topics, new means). The following thesis concentrates on the potentials of podcasting for the existing *SD*-community.

The first argument in this line is that using podcasting in combination with blogging is a way to create synergy and to use the power of networks. Bloggers have shown that they can direct (public) attention to certain issues only by being active and connected. This connectedness is reflected in high *Google*-ranks, and thus a high centrality and prestige within the Internet. This again can be interpreted as a louder voice on the marketplace and a grant of high attentiveness. Since journalists and traditional media observe the Internet, the blogosphere and the podosphere very thoroughly, being well positioned online is not just a chance but also a must to get attention and exert influence offline.

Besides, podcasting can help diminish the *SD*-community's dependence on established media and journalists. Journalists, especially in Germany, have frequently expressed their discontent with the notion and concept of sustainability. They claim that the term is too technical, too unpopular and too hard to communicate, especially the social pillar of the concept and particularly in a visual medium. Quite a few research and development projects were undertaken to either teach journalists about *SD* or to collaborate with media institutions to anchor the concept in certain shows. Podcasting offers two opportunities to diminish this dependence:

Firstly, it allows bypassing these transmitters in the beginning. Citizens, activists, scientists etc. can publish their stories by themselves. If they have a good story or make a good point and if they are well connected online it is likely that they will get a fair share of attention. If they don't feel comfortable as communicators or lack the necessary media literacy they will – just as *EarthLink* - find the needed talent online. In the end, traditional media might even pick up their story. A fundamental thing to understand about such a procedure is that it resembles rather an iterative development process than the traditional understanding of publishing. Of course, stories published online shouldn't be incorrect but they don't have to be perfect in the beginning, especially concerning the form. Quality assessment doesn't take place excessively before publishing; it is done collectively in a community. The Free Software- and Open Source Movement have successfully established this kind of publishing. Their dictum reads: "Publish early, publish often. Given enough eyeballs all bugs are shallow" (Raymond 1999: 38). The stronger this community, the better the story will be, the more attention it will get and the more likely it is that it will be taken up by mass media.

Secondly, podcasting is an effective way to enhance and correct traditional media. As such it also diminishes the *SD*-community's dependence on traditional media. Since journalists function as transmitters between citizens, activists or scientists and a broader public and since they work under a number of limitations (e.g., length of an article, duration of a spot, investigation deadlines) they have to filter what they regard as relevant information and by doing so they might miss a point their informants regard as essential. Podcasting gives these informants a chance to correct, comment or enhance journalistic products. Such an action is called podfisking in the podosphere. It stands for: A point-by-point refutation of a news story. A fisking is supposed to be witty, logical, sarcastic and ruthlessly factual. The procedure of podfisking is similar to what is called negative campaigning or a watchblog in the blogosphere (Abold 2006: 5). Podfiskings and watchblogs can of course be understood as deliberation processes.

*Anti-Thesis 3: Podcasting is dangerous for the existing SD-community*

The first argument to object Thesis 3 concerns the aim to bypass traditional transmitters like journalists. It can be argued that new grassroots media don't make transmitters obsolete per se despite this famous slogan within the podosphere: *We don't need no stinking transmitters!* Even in the podosphere or blogosphere people are needed who transmit attention to certain issues. What actually take place are an exchange of transmitters and a change of a reputation system (Rheingold 2002, S. 113ff). Critics may argue that the new transmitters might understand the concept of *SD* even worse than traditional mass media journalists and that the new reputation system will strongly depend on media literacy and ICT-affinity and as such be even less compatible to the ideas of *SD* than the reputation system of traditional media. Optimists may answer that this exchange of transmitters is a chance for the *SD*-community to become transmitters themselves and anchor ideas of *SD* in the evolving reputation system. They may point to the Free Software Movement, which implanted ideas of freedom and fairness into their reputation system. Certainly more empirical research is needed to better understand the evolving reputation systems within podosphere and blogosphere.

Another argument against Thesis 3 concerns the idea of interactive publishing. Even though this kind of collaboration may be successful for functional works like encyclopedias or software, it fails for works of self-expression. Again empirical research is needed a) to better understand under which circumstances collaborative publishing works and b) to comprehend the diffusion process of information from online-communities to mass media.

Finally the idea of enhancing traditional media can be objected by pointing to legal constraints. Copyrights hinder people from transforming traditional media's products. Since copyrights have been enforced vehemently in the recent past and scope and duration of copyrights have been widely expanded (Lessig 2004: 116ff) using podcasting in such a way is illegal, even dangerous. Not only could a podcasting actor from the *SD*-community be sued. He could also discredit the whole community. Furthermore traditional media as a partner to disseminate the idea of *SD* might get lost. This claim indicates that legal

constraints have an impact on how far grassroots media can function as catalysts of deliberation. The claim cannot be objected directly it can only be argued that not the legality but the legitimacy of podfisking is of interest here. But this only indicates that a strong ethical debate is needed, which centers around the questions, how our Digital World shall be organized, whether digital communities are mainly understood as market places or as participation and deliberation platforms and what sustainability means in the Digital World (Mocigemba 2006b).

This text introduced a new means of communication through which such ethical questions can be deliberated. P4P certainly is an interesting and promising strategy to enforce participation and deliberation, strengthen civil society and thus support *SD*. But the last section of this text made clear that more research is needed to evaluate the potential of digital grassroots media to support *SD*.

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