

PODCASTING – PARTICIPATION YES, BUT FOR WHAT?

Review for “P4P – Podcasting for Participation“ by Dennis Mocigemba

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The author Mocigemba first elaborates his understanding of sustainable development, then he introduces his reader to podcasting and gives an overview of its current use and finally in Chapter 3 he advances three theses and antitheses for a discourse in favor of his claim that podcasting could support SD.

It is very much welcome that Mocigemba has analyzed the latest global internet-based communication technology, popular among young people and some adults, and its potential for SD. It is not necessary to discuss separately whether podcasting as a distribution and communication medium can, under certain circumstances, promote participation in SD processes. The quite modest argumentation of Mocigemba that podcasting is inherently able to play a special role is however one that I am skeptical about.

Given that media are tools, when discussing their use we should not start with the potential characteristics of the media in order to infer their use. Instead, as is customary in every systematic research method, we should begin with the communication problematic and then search for the media-technological solution. By first introducing SD Mocigemba seems to have chosen this path. But this introduction is very abstract. And by concentrating on civil society he enters a terrain that holds for the USA but suffers from difficulties when transferred to Europe. At the same time it is not clear what exactly is the communicative challenge that is to be solved by the podsphere. That is, Chapter 1 is interesting to read but strictly speaking does not lead to the following one. As to the question of which communication structures regarding SD there are in Germany, I recommend not recurring to civil society but to realize that in Germany SD discourse is initiated from the top down. During the first wave of locally initiated agenda movements in the 90s of the last century there were no coordination points at a state or federal level. We could speak of a participatory movement of minorities. However the first agenda meetings were not generally representative of all citizens. These gatherings were platforms for those who had always been engaged, more or less voluntarily, for the environment, the third world and for church and social concerns. The major problem of all agendas was how to reach the “normal citizen”, that is how to achieve a mass participation in the SD process. A solution was never found. After the turn of the century a new governmental strategy could be seen that was based on international agreements about SD and the resulting obligations that created pressure on the federal government to act. The German Council for Sustainable Development, the BLK 21 Program, the National Plan of Action

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for the World Decade of Education for SD, etc. were all founded in this period. The SD communication problem is now more a distribution and acceptance problem, where grass root initiatives are hard to find. But these can appear alongside or against government efforts – and this is perhaps the opportunity for podcasting.

It seems to me to be methodically questionable that in his argumentation the author refers only to the podsphere, which is more of a distribution space anyway. The aspect of participation should require that, when communicating, actors become senders of their own concerns. Audiofiles are in general messages that others have made and that are now able to be re-distributed over the internet. The new phenomena of “blogging” and podcasting are only poorly understood using the classic sender-recipient model. A blogger does not send his own messages but instead should be seen as a distributor, who however also makes an active contribution to communication in what he chooses to distribute and in who it reaches through his clientele. His choice of texts and the possibility to comment on them within a sub-community are his participation in the communication process. Through his industrious collecting of texts and his sensitive reaction to current topics he discovers new target groups, so that he is actively contributing to distributed discourses. This passing on of messages in a blog or through podcasting is understood by Mocigemba correctly as already being a participative act. The question of what is being collected and passed on and of its effect has been inadequately researched. For example, the studies on weblogs in the federal election campaign reviewed in the article by Abold that Mocigemba cites show more that contents already carried by the public media are passed on in a fairly diffuse fashion. My suspicion is that “star topics” and emotionally charged topics are “blog friendly”, which at least occasionally in the SD context could also create a resonance in the blogsphere. It is not immediately apparent to me whether audio files, which do not as a rule elicit a further audio file, can take on a special role.

It is therefore curious that the author hardly goes into the extensive field of internet-based communication. What experiences are there with platforms, with forums, with chats? The enormous commercialization pressure in the internet is not mentioned. Everything that begins in a grass roots way is, as soon as a very large number of users come together, is bought up by the large companies with a commercial interest. Since the author conducts his argumentation at an abstract level and not at a local one he ignores the sobering experiences in Germany with supporting SD discourses (e.g. in local agenda movements) on net-based platforms. While daily forums for finding relationships, for special topics, for hobbies tend to be overrun by visitors – and are well studied by researchers – on the agenda forum of any German town there is a striking absence of participants. Also on the platform for the decade for education for SD (see <http://www.dekade.org/sites/foren.htm>) there are very few posts, most of which are from the providers. Our experience so far teaches us that internet-based communication about SD is extremely unresponsive and functions in a practically completely insufficient way. My suspicion is that if the author had discussed podcasting as a tool within the blogsphere and the variety of platforms, he would have come to a much more modest assessment.

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The discussion in theses and antitheses cannot be sustained by the author. He formulates the antitheses and then immediately brings arguments which are to show that they do not hold for podcasting. There is a lot of citing, which is meant to enhance the scientific basis of the article, but the references are often strained. For example, the reference that there are numerous studies on the political participation of especially young people is meant to suggest that there already exists a considerable potential of politically interested internet users that is usable for SD. If we look at for example a reference such as Abold, 2006, then we can read, first, that the active community of “early adapters” is still very small and that, second, the weblogs are run especially by more extreme parties and their party members and that political blogs are essentially sounding boards or amplifiers of already existing public discourses. This shows me that political weblogs are a poor witness for a noteworthy internet-based participation from below, which is interpreted differently by Mocigemba.

On balance we can only agree with the last sentence of the author “that more research is needed”. But what we already know leads in my opinion to a more skeptical assessment of the opportunities of podcasting for participation than what Mocigemba sees.

Reference

Abold, R. (2006): The audience is listening – Nutzung und Akzeptanz von Weblogs im Bundestagswahlkampf 2005. In: *kommunikation@gesellschaft*, Jg. 7, Beitrag 1 (http://www,soz.uni-frankfurt.de/K.G.B1_2006_Abold.pdf)