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NGOs in the German Local Public

Democratizing Governance or Reshaping Corporatism?

"Maybe subjectivity and community develop across distances and in unpersonal institutions? Maybe we have to accept that the investment into the garbage can of the local does hardly pay off anymore?"

(Richard Sennett, DIE ZEIT 4/6/2000, transl. S.L.)

Introduction: Local political communication and civic engagement

Local political communication research looks like a rather disparate subfield within the context of political communication studies. In many textbooks or major works on political communication it does not even exist. This is even more surprising since the local, as a category of analysis, has in the last decade spurred an impressive body of research in sociology, political science and geography (see f.e. Parry 1992; Berry 1993; Judge et al. 1995; Pratchett/Wilson 1996; Mayer 1996). While for some time it seemed that with the rise of globalization the local would turn into a negligible quantity, recent globalization research exposed a renewed interest in the local (see Sassen 1996; Castells 1996; Rosenau 1998). The local, at the turn of this century, seems to have become the marker for reality against virtuality, for presence against abstraction, for citizen participation against the hegemony of global capital interests and for the space of „real places" against the vague "space of flows" (Castells 1996: 425). Yet this renewed interest in the local not only as a counterforce but also as a site of the global, has not as yet taken root in communication research. Those researchers who are concerned with local aspects of political communication are therefore almost unequivocally critical of the lack of sufficient representation of the local within the field (see Cox/Morgan 1973; Franklin/Murphy 1991; Kaniss 1991; Graber 1997: 313). Existing studies tend to focus on the local media, while those dimensions which make the local truly original: namely the possibility of face-to-face political communication, the shared system of experiences and knowledge within the local political public as well as a shared interest structure in sustaining the local as a habitat, have not been incorporated into research designs to analyze local political communication processes. My own work focuses on one specific aspect of local political communication in which the above mentioned dimensions cristalize. I analyze shifts in communication processes that have been produced in recent years by the incorporation of NGOs into local governance schemes. More specifically, I

am interested in the potential for participatory democracy that such new communicative and decision making structures entail.

The NGOization of local political communication

The NGOization of local political communication refers to a development in which a new set of professionalized advocacy actors has entered the local public sphere. New NGOs distinguish themselves from traditional interest groups like taxpayers' associations, homeowner leagues or agricultural councils by their less economically and personally but more politically oriented agenda. NGOs have developed as a response to attempts by social groups to secure political, social, and economic equality, a sustainable environment, as well as ethnic and religious peace (see Fernando/Heston 1997). Preliminary results of my research show that these 'movement-turned-organizations' with their emphasis on professional communication and planned action, transnational networking and local agenda-setting have become increasingly strong and accepted local political communicators. While local government officials often have reacted negatively or skeptically to social movement actors (see Murphy 1976: 149), non-governmental organizations, which can be seen as the 'professionalized' off-spring of new social movement initiatives, are better locally positioned to communicate and negotiate with local authorities. Local NGOs make use of ICT and/or direct cooperations to exchange information with other NGOs to plan joint strategies or coordinate their activities. Thus they gain political leverage on the local level as visible and resourceful actors. NGOs also circumvent the problem of dependence on local funding and therefore dependence on those who distribute it by acquiring grants directly from state, national but increasingly transnational, funds. Some local NGOs thus have strong financial backing from sources beyond local business and government which make them attractive voices to hear and to involve locally. Another development which has contributed to the rise of NGOs in local political communication processes is increasing privatization of local social services and urban development projects. NGOs take over services which traditionally have been delivered by local authorities, which also contributes to the opening up of traditional communication routes. My research shows that local authorities in four selected Western European countries have doubled the intensity of communication with local NGOs between 1990 and 1999. While there are country specific variances as to content of communication, primacy lies in informational exchanges as well as cooperations to finance local projects. Local authorities claim that their communication with NGOs had positive effects by deepening government knowledge about issues, helping to generate public support and enabling more in-depth discussions of policy initiatives.

With NGOization of the local public sphere, established communication processes change and sources of power and influence on the local level shift. Traditional German neo-corporatist communication patterns implode as NGOs gain acceptance as strong informational sources, professional local project planners as well as, in some cases, sources of financial power to the local community. NGOs alter communication processes in several ways:

First, they help to bridge existing communicative rifts between the German local state and its citizenry. Second, they replace 'traditional' models of citizen participation which tend to be single issue oriented and narrowly timed, thus practicing participation more continually and in regard to a broader scope of local issues. Third, local NGOs have become competent voices within the established media for commentary and legitimate expressions of citizen opinions. And fourth, NGOs have become themselves organizers for local political communication processes among citizens.

In sum, we can identify three sets of changes in communication patterns which the entry of NGOs in the local public sphere has produced:

Complexity of scale

Negotiation and mediation of political decision-making on a local level now includes an increasing number of communicative agents. There is a new complexity of scale in local political communication, with NGOs being at the forefront of using electronic media to convey their agenda, forming trans-local coalitions to support local agendas and involving transnational institutions on the local level.

Agenda setting

Traditional local government agenda-setting is being challenged by NGOs using professionalized means to publicize their local agendas. Nondecision-making on the local level (Bachrach/Baratz 1963), that is the "practice of limiting the scope of actual decision-making to 'safe' issues by manipulating the dominant community values, myths, and political institutions and procedures"(ibid.: 632) has also undergone changes with the rise of NGOs. In addition, the media have via NGOs better access to informed citizen voices - and NGOs demand that the media be sensitive to their agendas. Local political communication processes in turn become easier to access for other local actors as well.

Democratization of the local public sphere

The NGOization of political communication has positive effects on participation within the local public sphere. Ultimately, the NGOization of local politics has been a central factor in changing local government into a system of governance. Local governance indicates the shift away from decision-making processes in which local authorities were the central actors to one where decision-making and service provision is shared among a wider range of public actors (see Pratchett/Wilson 1996: 3). Different fora enhance and alter the decision-making processes within local bureaucracies, more actors are involved in planning and provision, and therefore new routes of political communication are added to traditional ones.

The NGOization of local political communication - co-opting voices or extending democratic participation?

At the same time as NGOs have contributed to the democratization of the local public and government, NGOization also spurs new political and social divisions on the level of the local community: There is an increasing division between big, resourceful and diversified NGOs on the one hand and small, financially less potent, single issue oriented NGOs on the other hand. Local bureaucracies make use of resourceful NGO-collaborations often at the expense of the integration of small NGOs into the political process. There is secondly the tendency by local governments to functionalize NGOs as local gate keepers *against* citizen involvement. NGOs for example are asked to organize discursive settings for citizen participation and thus are being paid to filter and channel public opinion in lieu of the actual decision making bodies. Finally, co-optation of large and resourceful NGOs, in which many local former political activists have found jobs, entails the danger of losing radical political voices in the local communication process.

In sum, the incorporation of NGOs into local governance schemes produces ambivalent results in regard to the democratization of civic engagement in Germany. While we can trace the pluralization of public voices and increasing political leverage of ex-social movement actors, it also seems that without a committed citizenry that holds NGOs accountable to political perspectives and goals, the present process might lead merely to a redistricting of the terms and boundaries of political marginalization.