

How to Grow? Online Consultation about Growth in the City of Hamburg: Methods, Techniques, Success Factors

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Abstract. This paper is concerned with the online public engagement ‘Leitbild Metropolis Hamburg – Growing City’ which has been conducted in the context of the EU project DEMOS (Delphi Mediation Online System). The result of DEMOS is an innovative Internet platform facilitating democratic discussions and participative public opinion formation. The test of the DEMOS approach and the software system during the online discussion in the City of Hamburg was one of the most successful projects in electronic democracy or participation ever conducted on a municipal level. The paper introduces the DEMOS approach and system, describes the political background of the discussed ‘Leitbild Growing City’ and the results. The authors try to identify success factors for online public engagement projects.

1 Introduction

As Coleman and Götze stated in their latest report about online public engagement in policy deliberation, “almost all cases one finds are frustrated by the same two problems: too few people knew about them (and) governments fail to integrate them into the policy process or respond to them effectively” ([3, p. 35]). A recently conducted experiment in the City of Hamburg (Germany) seems to be an encouraging exception. In co-operation with DEMOS¹, the local government initiated an online consultation, asking their citizens to discuss the ‘Leitbild Growing City’. The discussion was accompanied by intensive advertising and resulted in condensed ideas which were then evaluated by an expert jury and recommended to Hamburg’s First Mayor for implementation. In the following section, the background of the discussion and its results will be described (2). Chapter three is concerned with a general evaluation taking a closer look at participation issues and moderation strategies (3). Finally, success factors for e-participation will be discussed (4).

¹ DEMOS (Delphi Mediation Online System) is a RTD project under the 5th Framework Programme of the EU (IST) and is being developed by a research consortium of eight organisations from five different countries. For more information see the project website: <http://www.demos-project.org>

2 Online Public Engagement with DEMOS in Hamburg

Faced by the changing geographical situation in Europe after the falling of the eastern borders, the local government of Hamburg developed a concept called ‘Growing City’ to cope with an increasing competition among European cities. It comprises the following goals: increasing the number of inhabitants, increasing economic growth, improving the traffic situation, increasing available apartment and industrial areas, increasing the international attractiveness and awareness of Hamburg.

DEMOS was chosen for an online public engagement to discuss the implementation of the new ‘Leitbild’ and to communicate its goals. The DEMOS approach aims to powerfully support the public debate online. It consists of two complementary parts, the participation methodology and the technical platform.²

The DEMOS *technical platform* provides tools for helping the participants to break up into sub-groups (user management), conducting surveys and collaborating on joint statements (discourse management). One of its most important components is the graphical user interface (GUI), as it communicates the underlying concept of DEMOS to the users. It has to visualize complex functions like forums, libraries, news section, process overview, personal bookmarks and mails. All functions are served by a powerful backend system, build upon only mature, well-supported, and widely used technology.³

The *participation methodology* integrates different sociological methods in the so-called ‘DEMOS process’, which provides support for three phases of discussions: broadening, deepening and consolidating the discussion. Ideally, this structured discussion process leads to political consensus. In practice, participants may continue to disagree, but the reasons for the disagreement will have been made clear and comprehensible. The participation methodology is also concerned with questions of motivation and how to relate the discourse to the political process, e.g. identification of suitable subjects, adaptable rule systems to encourage active participation, addressing problems of result implementation.

To integrate the results of the online discussion into the policy process and to democratically legitimate them, it seemed sensible to stage the discussion as a contest of ideas. All participants could mutually propose, elaborate and evaluate their particular ideas in a discursive process. The ideas would be evaluated and six of them recommended to the senate for implementation. Thus, the democratically elected local government still determines the city’s policy and at the same time opens up a modern way to participate in the political process for its citizens.

The results surpassed expectations. During the four weeks of discussion, 265 out of almost 540 participants who had registered for the discussion wrote ca. 3900 individual contributions. The debate was characterised by a constructive and creative atmosphere, by highly engaged participants and by clearly focused contributions. For the ‘Leitbild’ of a growing city, the debate produced one of the most detailed elaborations, resulting in 57 ideas extensively elaborated by the participants. In the meantime, the debate helped to make the new political scenario widely known among the citizens of Hamburg.

² For more information on DEMOS, see [7], [6].

³ The technical system used by DEMOS is based on the Zeno system [5], which has been further developed in the course of the project.

3 Evaluation

An introspection into actual user behaviour reveals some interesting aspects that we see as characteristic for the online debate:

Attractiveness: Due to the public and anonymous character, we can only estimate the number of people who were following the debate with or without registering. During the four weeks of debate, the web server was logging almost 1.4 million page views and 33.740 visits – a huge number, indicating that the number of people following the debate greatly exceeds the number of 538 registered users.

Virtuality: It was often said that the Internet as a medium lets people come together independently from constraints of time and space. Our experiences confirm this assumption. Participants did not only join the debate from the city of Hamburg and its suburbs, but also from other German cities and from abroad – two former residents of Hamburg were participating with a lot of engagement from the United States. Another specific feature was the asynchronous mode of debate. Participants were using almost all times of the day to read or write contributions.

Attracting new targets: The experience with the debate in Hamburg shows that the use of the Internet as a medium for political debate opens the way to reach new target groups, especially young people (16-30) who are typically bored by traditional politics. Politicians say they find it very difficult to reach this target, yet it was prominently represented in the online forum (15,7% of the participants were between 19 and 26 years old according to our user survey, which matches exactly with the Hamburg population). Obviously, discussing via a web-based platform is a form of political participation that is attractive even to young people. On the other hand, older people have not abstained from the debate (28,6% of the participants were older than 40).

Drawing participants in: Attracting citizens to participate is not all. The crucial point is to draw the visitors into the debate and to encourage them to return and engage in a mutual exchange. A look at the number of messages posted gives a good idea of what happened in the debate. In the first week, although the number of active participants was small, more than 1100 contributions were written. This seemed to be the critical mass of contributions needed to get the debate running. Among those who contributed, we can observe the evolution of a real community of users. Most users in DEMOS wrote two to five contributions (31,3%), and a relatively large number of users wrote more than 20 contributions (12,3%). This shows that DEMOS was able to foster sustained participation in contrast to the ad hoc manner of discussion that can be observed in most online (and perhaps even offline) debates.

Interactivity: A plausible reason for the community-building aspect is the interactivity of the debate [10]. Only 273 of all 799 new contributions (i.e., contributions that started a thread) received no reply at all. Almost 80% of all contributions were part of threads with more than three contributions, with an average length of 4,89 contributions per thread (max. 51 contributions). Thus, a participant could reasonably count on stimulating response when he started a new thread. The debate in most times was very lively. In average, a contribution received a reply after one and a half days (and almost half of the contributions received a reply after less than seven hours), so that participants were motivated to check for new contributions every day. Thus, the exchange of opinions was very fast. However, the participants also exploited the advantages of an asynchronous debate and did not ignore older

contributions. The dual character of a highly dynamic, yet thorough discourse can be attributed to the task of moderation, that served to keep the large-scale (and thus dynamic) debate clearly structured, and that helped to involve participants more deeply by reacting to their questions in very short time, for instance.

User satisfaction: The participants' experiences with and reactions to the DEMOS forum were overwhelmingly positive, as the answers to a survey, conducted immediately after the trial, show.⁴ Asked about their satisfaction with the debate, the majority of participants gives a positive vote. No respondent was in full opposition to the experiment, and a vast majority of 97% said they would likely be participating in future online debates. In comparison to other means of taking part in the political discussion in Hamburg, more than 75% of the respondents consider the DEMOS debate to be better.

Another unequivocal result of the survey was that many respondents were praising the effort of *moderation*⁵, which had to be adapted to the case of an open online discourse with large numbers of potentially anonymous participants. The mediating of conflicts in this case was of minor importance.⁶ The users appreciated that the debate was summarised regularly, that the moderators reacted promptly in cases of questions as well as conflicts, and simply that someone was there who took care. Thus, we can conclude that the constant attention of the moderation team was a key factor in fostering a serious and sustained debate.

Regarding the moderation, the trial exposed a remarkable trait: as if one only has to show a continuous supervision of mindful moderators, the participants in Hamburg did not misbehave seriously, but acted unexpectedly politely and respectfully, whereas in other forums, people tend to disturb the discussion in manifold ways. In correspondence to the strong community that evolved during the debate, the users showed a very high rate of self-criticism and self-regulation. Some of them never even gave up looking for more and more material (i.e. photographs, articles, scientific sources) to support their own suggestions or even the ideas of someone else. Accordingly, the moderators were mostly involved with helping and informing the participants instead of sanctioning them.⁷ Though, most violations of rules the moderators had to deal with were done late at night when some participants became too heated, tried to overrun their opponents⁸ or suggested ideas that were hardly acceptable. As it had to be expected, different interest groups used the discussion to foster their specific issues. Not all of them were interested in constructive debate. But as their attempts were too obviously selfish, the users ignored or even criticised them. Hence, moderators and users – co-operating tightly towards a goal-oriented debate – were able to stabilise the discourse.

⁴ 70 participants answered to the survey. The answers are not representative in a strong statistical sense, however, they confirm the overall tendency observed by the moderators.

⁵ The moderators were Hans Hagedorn, Birgit Hohberg, Oliver Märker and Matthias Trené.

⁶ Moderation is indispensable to stimulate the discussion and to keep it focused, to assure compliance with the rules, and to provide the participants with regular edited summaries, to mention just the most important aspects (cf. [8]). In contrast, mediation serves to resolve conflicts and to keep the debate from running into deadlocks. For more information, see [6].

⁷ Just three times they showed a “yellow card”. No user had to be excluded from the discussion platform.

⁸ By using inadequate generalizations, overstatements or irony without making it unmistakable.

In general the moderators used two different ways to communicate with the users: messages in the forum (one-to-all-communication) and messages in the personal area or emails (one-to-one-communication). The strategy of the moderators was to intervene as early as possible. Nearly all messages concerning violations of rules were sent by email instead of posting them into the forum, in order to not disturb the constructive discussion. Almost all of the admonished participants acted insightfully and changed their behaviour after such an intervention.⁹

4 Success Factors for E-Participation: Marketing, Governmental Responsiveness, and Rewards

Finally, we want to take a closer look at the success factors for e-participation: First, the integration in the political context in Hamburg was crucial for the success: Hamburg's government took its responsibility serious and is about to implement the respective concepts.¹⁰ The concept 'contest of best ideas' allowed to deal with a dilemma of direct participation in representative democracies: To assure a political impact for public engagement without questioning the political leadership of the democratically elected senate. Finally, PR and advertisement measurements including interviews of Hamburg's First Mayor with newspapers and local TV programs took place.¹¹

From the experience within the DEMOS project we can further conclude that potential participants can be attracted and kept involved once they have visited the website, if the e-participation appears rewarding in at least three different regards:

1. The involvement in the debate must have a potential impact on the real life politics.
2. The software system and the GUI have to be rewarding in that the usage will lead to immediate and enjoyable results (instant reward).
3. The communication has to be interactively rewarding. There must be a considerable probability that the individual communication acts will be perceived and answered by other community members.

Compared with what has been achieved in Europe in the domain of online public engagement (e-democracy, e-participation) so far, the trial in Hamburg was successful and the DEMOS concept could be proved. But it also shows how much effort is required to get citizens to deliberate political issues on the Internet. People are still not used to this communication channel in the context of political engagement, nor are public administrations or local governments. Two years ago Coleman and Götze came to the conclusion that online participation is still in its infancy, after having reviewed all documented cases in Europe [3]. With respect to the trial described in this paper

⁹ While some earlier experiments report that moderation is frequently experienced as censorship [4], this was hardly an issue in the DEMOS discussion. Just a few persons expressed their feeling of being misunderstood.

¹⁰ For each concept, a responsible civil servant and a time frame have been indicated. Furthermore, responsible persons from different departments were engaged in the discussion.

¹¹ 25000 flyers and more than 1250 posters were exhibited all over Hamburg, complemented by online advertisements.

and to some recently conducted online discussions¹², especially in the U.S., we can say that online public engagement has in the meantime entered its adolescence.

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¹² See e.g. the National Dialogue on Public Involvement in EPA Decisions [0] or the online public engagement “Listening to the City” in New York [0].