

«'Doing democracy' in online communication services»

Christoph MUELLER, Institute for Sociology,
University of Berne, Switzerland

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Abstract:

What is behind the claims that «The Internet» has to be considered as a new «Agora», a true democracy with every citizen having the same right of speech and the same vote? What are the preconditions of such political ideals to be fulfilled in the praxis? And what about the voices contesting this optimistic view, arguing that most parts of the Internet are used as a one-way media, like radio or television broadcasts, with very unequal access, both worldwide and on the level of a specific society?

Most of the claims stating the Internet as a new Agora are referring to multilateral, interactive communication services. Taking as example two chats and two Usenet newsgroups (symbolically) based in Switzerland, I will show some conditions and pitfalls of «democracy online». As the communication services I studied are purely text-based, not moderated, and with very little technical control options (unlike IRC, e.g.), they face some serious problems in establishing and in maintaining a social order.

In my presentation, I will show some aspects on how interactional rules and a social structure are «constructed» by the participants themselves. Theoretically, this part of my research is relying on Erving Goffman's studies of everyday human interaction. Although Goffman's work is explicitly concerned with face-to-face-interaction, it is interesting to find out in how far his conclusions hold for the case of text-based, computer-mediated communication. Methodologically, I am analysing the log files of discourses between the participants of a chat and a newsgroups I observed during two years.

In correspondence with ethnomethodological convictions, I will argue that «democracy» has to be considered as a process, as a kind of «work» that has to be done. Democracy is not «just there», in «The Internet». If democracy exists, it has to be «produced» and maintained by concrete users.

A living online democracy depends on many factors, including technology offering specific possibilities and constraints, and users shaping the technical means in order to follow their goals. Of course, communication services of the Internet do have the potential of being true democracies, but it is a hard job to «do democracy»!

Christoph Mueller is a PhD student in sociology. At the moment, he is finishing his research on «online communities in the Internet», a study combining methods of Social Network Analysis as well as Discourse Analysis. He lives in Zurich / Switzerland.

Contact: muellerc@soz.unibe.ch

Christoph MÜLLER, Mainaustr. 34, CH-8008 Zurich / Switzerland

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<http://www.soz.unibe.ch/forschung/ii/virt/>

1. Introduction

Some early enthusiasts have argued that «The Internet» has to be considered as a new «Agora», a true democracy with every citizen having the same right of speech and the same vote.¹ Other voices have been contesting this optimistic view, arguing that most parts of the Internet are used as a one-way media, like radio or television broadcasts, with very unequal access, both worldwide and on the level of a specific society. For example, several studies pointed to the fact of a «digital divide» both on a worldwide level and in nations or cities.² Other studies revealed that differences both in access and in power are often based on gender and race.³ The low-hierarchical, distributed technological structure of the Internet does not guarantee, *by itself*, the rising of an «Agora».

In my presentation, I will ask about the conditions for democratic political ideals to be fulfilled in the praxis. I will concentrate on text-based, multilateral, interactive communication services, taking as example two chats and two Usenet newsgroups, all (symbolically) based in Switzerland.⁴ The aim of my presentation is to compare the strategies users apply in defining the frame of interaction and especially in managing disturbances.

Sooner or later, every community faces problems of maintaining its social structure. This is especially true for text based «online communities» on the Internet: The easy entry and exit options, the lack of formal membership, the absence of formal moderation, and the restriction of interaction to text make it difficult to establish rules, to sanction unwanted behaviour, and to maintain stability and continuity. As the users of such services have to organize themselves and their social world *by concrete interaction*, they are facing serious problems in establishing and maintaining a social order.⁵

The *empirical part* of my research is based on two methodological approaches: (a) a quantitative survey with personal face-to-face interviews revealing socio-demographic data and ego-centered networks of 101 frequent users of chats and newsgroups, and (b) a qualitative discourse analysis studying the online behavior of the participants of one chat and one newsgroup.⁶

To provide a better understanding of the context of the arguments I am going to present, I will start with a short overview on sociodemographic data of the users I interviewed.⁷ The respondents in this sample are quite young, with an average age of 24 years, ranging from 14 to 51 years. More than

¹ E.g., HAUBEN 1995, RHEINGOLD 1993, NEGROPONTE 1995.

² E.g., CASTELLS 1996, BROOK / A. BOAL 1995, LESSIG 1999, JORDAN 1999.

³ HERRING 2002, CHERNY 1994, EBO 1998, BURKHALTER 1997, REID 1997.

⁴ The data for this study was collected between 1998 and 2000 in the research project «Virtual Communities – The Social World of the Internet», directed by Prof. Dr. Bettina HEINTZ, based at the University of Berne (Institute for Sociology) and funded by the Swiss National Science Foundation (social science Priority Programme «Switzerland: Towards the Future»). The following presentation is a part of my PhD thesis studying «online communities» in the Internet.

⁵ As Erving GOFFMAN showed, this is the case in a lot of everyday (offline) situations as well (GOFFMAN 1963, GOFFMAN 1967). However, in online settings this task has to be complied relying on text only. One of the aims of the research is thus to find out to what degree Goffmans framework for studying everyday interaction may be applied in studying online interaction (as RUTTER / SMITH 2000 have shown for the aspect of Self-Presentation in the case of a Newsgroup). — For a broad study on non-hierarchical social «design principles» in governing different (offline) «commons» without referring to an external «Leviathan», see OSTROM 1990.

⁶ Accordingly, my analysis is based on (1) a quantitative data set with information of 101 frequent users of chats and newsgroups about their personal networks, collected in summer 1998, and two qualitative data sets: (2a) A collection of all messages published in the USENET newsgroup <ch.talk> between October 1997 and October 1999 (N=30'000), and (2b) large corpus of about 300'000 lines (about 13 MB ASCII text) of interaction data of a telnet-based chat, logged during the same time period.

⁷ The sampling procedure and some data on the respondents, especially on their personal networks, are described in the final report (in german) HEINTZ / MÜLLER 2000. For some preliminary results in english, see MÜLLER 1999.

half of all them are following an educational programme and the same percentage is still living at their parents home. Only 11% of the respondents are female. One third of respondents are following or finished a professional formation as computer technicians or computer engineers: they can be regarded as «computer freaks». Intensive «power-users» declared being up to 60 hours per week online.

In the next two parts of my presentation, I will explain some conditions and restrictions of «democracy online», taking two technically different examples of online communication services.

2. First example: A simple telnet-chat

The first example relies on data from a telnet-chat based in Switzerland. Compared to other chats, it's quite a small service, but it is running for several years now, and it is used by about 1000 users, with, on average, 1 to 50 of them being logged in at the same time.⁸ About 100 nicknames have to be considered as «regulars», as they are logged in several times per week. Access to the chat is provided by the «low tech» telnet protocol, offering high speed in exchanging the user's messages. Like most other chats, it is strictly text-based, with a very simple command structure. When a potential user wants to log in, s/he is first asked to «type your name».⁹ Once logged in, there are only nine commands available (Table 1):

Table 1: Nine commands of the telnet-chat:

/n name <name>	log in change nickname
/s show	show who is here
/c channel <channelname>	create new channel change channel
/w whisper <user>	private peer-to-peer conv. w/user
/j journal <nickname>	who was here?
/a action	
/t time	
/h help	
/e exit	

With the exception of an «entrance» channel, called «1», there are no predefined channels. Instead, every user can create a new channel by typing the command /channel, and s/he can join a channel created by someone else by typing the same command. This simple structure differs in some important aspects from other Internet chats:

⁸ Here, the notion «users» refers to «nicknames». As there is no formal membership and the names are not protected by passwords, it is difficult to count the exact number of participants. Every user logging into the chat is asked each time to indicate his or her nickname. Therefore, every user is created for one session only, and even simple typographical errors writing a name are producing new «users». Further, a person may log in with different nicknames, even simultaneously, and different real persons may share a common nickname.

⁹ The original question is «Gib Deinen Namen ein (oder /Show, /Exit, /Help):». Else, this potential user can ask the program about other users already logged in [/show] or ask for help [/help].

- Nicknames are not protected by passwords. Therefore, they can be hijacked.
- Participants remain strictly anonymous, even to the chat operator
- There is no «ignore»-command, that is: it is impossible to individually filter out other users, e.g. because of unwanted behavior.
- There are no possibilities to «kick» or to «ban» other users.
- There are no «channel operators».
- The chat is not formally moderated.

Compared with other chats, especially IRC (Internet Relay Chat), the possibilities of users to act are very restricted and there is no formal role structure.¹⁰ However, it is obvious that this chat as well needs at least one (human) operator. In this case, the chat is technically operated by its founder, a computer programmer of about 40 years. He is often logged in, sometimes passively, doing other work while keeping a chat window open in the background of his computer, sometimes actively interacting with other participants. Although he has – at least theoretically – a very strong power, e.g. to «kick» other users, he does not interfere, according to his conviction that the users should organize themselves in an autonomous way and that they should resolve their problems by discussing them.¹¹

However, during the whole research period, some users attempted to bypass the restrictions and to intervene by other means than by discussing, especially by kicking other users out of the chat, e.g. using special «blue screen DOS attack» software.¹² This is strongly against the aims of the chat operator, who maintains his conviction to keep the chat as simple as possible, precisely in order to avoid a separation of users in «techies» (mostly male) and un-savvy (mostly female).

According to my observations, the most common case of disturbances in this chat is *flooding*, especially by «copy-pasting» sentences or even characters. In doing so, one user is dominating the whole chat conversation, and this is exactly the opposite of «free speech». In order to avoid such dominance by one single user, the operator changed the software code: If a user sends the same text several times in a very short period, s/he will be automatically kicked out. According to the operator, this is the only «bot-like» function of the chat program. It is important to note that this rule is executed by a «neutral» computer script and that it applies for every user the same. Therefore, it can be regarded as democratic, in the sense of a democratic justice. However, by definition, this script can be applied only ex-post, *after* the damage occurred. Further, the faulty user -- lets call him «badboy» -- may log in again immediately, and s/he may even write a script executing the algorithm {if (kicked) then (log-in-again)}.

¹⁰ On IRC (Internet Relay Chat), there are commands like /kick or /ban to exclude other users, and there is a hierarchical role structure with channel operators and IRC-operators having special powers. Partly, such roles are delegated to «bots» (LEONARD 1996). Other chats are moderated, by human beings or by technical means («bots»), e.g. programmed to look at specific keyword like «Hitler».

¹¹ This statement, as well as the following, are based on personal, partly face-to-face interviews with the founder and operator of this chat. – Ideologically, the operator follows the strong ideal of a «herrschaftsfreier Diskurs» [autonomous, non-hierarchical discourse], as it was formulated, e.g., by Jürgen HABERMAS 1990(cf. POSTER 1997).

¹² At the time of the fieldwork, the most common methods for kicking other users were so-called «blue screen attacks»: Applying special software tools, the target computer was attacked by sending a lot of requests, like «ping» commands, in order to produce an overflow of data (like a local DOS-attack, denial of service attack), or by exploiting software bugs, mainly in Windows-95 operating system. In order to be able to execute such an attack, the target's IP-number has to be known. Therefore, some users did not only ask the target for the IP-number (a case of «social engineering»), but tried to intrude the chat server by «backdoors».

There are different ways of reacting if confronted with unwanted behavior:¹³

a) ignoring — As there are no technical means for filtering «badboys» neither individually nor collectively, this is very difficult to ignore users. Excessive flooding is very disturbing — comparable to a drunken person in a pub or a café, shouting incessantly — and it makes it extremely difficult to continue a «normal» conversation.

b) exit — This is a sub-optimal strategy because it represents a failure and the goal of a participant, «to chat», can not be pursued. A gradually different form of exiting is to change to another channel, but this strategy is sub-optimal as well, because the «badboy» can easily follow.¹⁴

c) discussing / convincing — The third strategy has at least two subtypes, both of them denouncing the «badboy»: (a) a classical form is to *rationalize*, to present arguments, but this strategy often fails, because «badboys» often ignore rational arguments; (b) other sub-forms are *parodizing*, e.g. by taking the role of «badboys mother» and telling him that he now really has to go to bed.

(d) tit-for-that — A fourth strategy is following the «tit-for-that» rule, imitating the bad behavior and «shouting» or provoking as well. This is a suboptimal strategy as well, as the goal of chatting can not be pursued neither.¹⁵

Except for the «exit-option», all these strategies demand a continuous, active intervention of users, even the «ignore-option». As there are no easy, convincing strategies to resolve conflicts *inside* this chat, some participants tried to find *external solutions*, that is (a) appealing to the operator to «stop this», or (b) trying to find out who the badboy was, in order to attack his computer with technical means.

After a continuing serie of disturbances, mainly by one single «badboy», lasting for several months, the chat operator suddenly decided to shut down the chat server in august 1999. His main reason for doing so was not that he was explicitly opposing the racist behavior of the «badboy», but that more and more participants adressed him asking him to stop the harrassments. As he explained in a personal interview and in an open letter to the users, a lot of participants were requesting «technocratic solutions» to resolve the problem, like to renounce the anonymity, to publish the IP-numbers of all participants, or to provide «old» users with the special permission to kick other users. These requests were strictly against the operator's ideals that the users should organize themselves in resolving problems, and as he declared, it became too arduous and too annoying for him to listen to the complaints, so that he could not follow his ordinary work anymore.

¹³ These strategies can be observed by studying other kinds of disturbances as well, like sexual harrassment (often: male users offending females) or racist or other xenophobic verbal attacks. Cf. MACKINNON 1995, KOLLOCK / SMITH 1994, MCLAUGHLIN, OSBORNE AND SMITH 1995, DUVAL SMITH 1999, and for a classical approach in sociology the work of Albert HIRSCHMAN — A note on methodology: For a systematical analysis of «bad behaviors» and reactions to them, the logfiles were scanned applying the UNIX 'grep' command, looking for keywords indicating conflicts, like (translated) «fuck» or «stop».

¹⁴ This was changed at the occasion of a software update in december 1998, when the possibility for channels protected by passwords was introduced (see below): «normal users» then could create a new channel and spread their password by selectively «whispering» it to other participants.

¹⁵ For a general discussion of this problem in game theory see KOLLOCK 1993, COLEMAN / FARARO 1992.

For a lot of regular users, the closing of the chat was a shock. In an online forum they explained that the chat was «like a family» for them. They were very upset about the fact that one single badboy was able to close their «home». Subsequently, some users switched to another existing chat, some even installed another similar chat by themselves, and some tried to organize the users in a formal «association», creating a so-called «chat-commission» (in september 1999).

However, none of these solutions was convincing, because (a) the other chats were not considered «as good as the original»; (b) the new chat missed a critical mass of participants.¹⁶; and (c) the user's «commission» had only about five members and could by far not claim to represent a majority of all users.

After a lot of offline discussions with regular chat users, the operator then decided to re-open the chat after four months (december 1999). At this occasion, he introduced a new command which allowed users to create channels that are protected by a password. With this simple feature, participants could establish their «private rooms», places representing a kind of «safe harbours», relatively free of disturbances and of intrusions.¹⁷ At the same time, the operator made a personal agreement with the «badboy», fixing some rules of conduct: The «badboy» was still allowed to participate in the chat, but he had to renounce to provocations, or to remain in a separate channel.

What we can learn from this example is that the main problem for establishing «democracy» in this chat was its weak structure, both on a technical level (with only very few commands and possibilities for action), and on a social level (with a very weak role structure, no organization, no procedures, no written rules) – I will come back to this point in the conclusion.

3. Second example: A Usenet newsgroup

My second example is based on data gathered from a Usenet newsgroup called ch.talk, a service with a stronger structure than the chat discussed above, but still strictly text-based and without a formal moderation, that is: without a formal role structure and without a formal social hierarchy. In this example, I will try to show two different dualities: The first duality is about the interplay of relatively fixed structures and concrete actors and actions. The other duality is about «local» vs. «universal» norms and rules in text-based, not moderated online services: On one hand, as we all know, norms and rules are culturally diverse, on the other hand, there are some «Internet-wide» rules of conduct, like some «netiquettes», and of course there are standardized technical protocols of Internet message exchange.¹⁸ Compared with the chat discussed above, the newsgroup has a stronger structure, based on the following three elements:

¹⁶ On critical mass, see MARKUS 1990.

¹⁷ It is still possible to address another user by «whispering», that is by direct peer-to-peer-communication. Further, to invite someone else to his or her protected «private channel» by spreading the password does not guarantee in any way that this person may not be (or become) intruding him/herself.

¹⁸ E.g., HORTON / ADAMS 1987 on the «Network News Transport Protocol» NNTP (RFC 1036), or RFCs about standardized protocols on different layers like TCP/IP. — Although often referred to in the singular, there is not only *one* Netiquette. It would be an interesting project to compare the codes of conduct in different parts of the Internet and Usenet.

a) *archive:*

As an *asynchronous* communication service, ch.talk has a «memory»: Depending on the configuration of different newsgroup servers, messages are stored for about two weeks or more. Further, there are commercial services like <dejanews.com> (now <groups.google.com>), with a very large archive of newsgroup messages dating back several years. As the messages are archived, social monitoring is relatively easy (as long as the participants use a consistent sender name). Still, sanctioning remains very difficult.

b) *charter, FAQ, netiquette:*

The aim of ch.talk is formally fixed in a so-called *charter*. It is broadly defined as to discuss topics regarding Switzerland, e.g., discussions about Swiss politics. As in other Usenet newsgroups, the charter is the result of a formal democratic procedure: In order to define the aim of a newsgroup or to propose a new group, every person can propose a formal «*Requests for Discussion*» (RfD). After a one-month period of discussion, the request may be revised and relaunched. Then, a «*Call for Votes*» (CfV) is carried out. Every Usenet user may give one vote about the proposal. The voting procedure has to be carried out by volunteers: someone has to collect the votes. Results are made *public* in the sense that the names of all voters are published, including their vote (yes or no).¹⁹

However, as the charter defines a minimum of YES votes necessary for any change, this democratic procedure can only work if there are enough people giving their vote. This happened to be a problem for the newsgroups of the relatively small ch.* hierarchy. After some attempts to establish new groups failed, the voting rules were changed in order to simplify to creation of new groups: Instead of the old criterium «100 more votes on YES than on NO», a new criteria of «at least 60 votes on YES» was established.²⁰

The charter for Swiss newsgroups also defines some *rules of conduct* on what is allowed and what is not allowed in these newsgroups. For example, it is stated that «Binaries should not be posted to these groups», or «In general, cross-posting among ch.* newsgroups is strongly discouraged.» Speaking generally, the charter defines what *language* should or should not be used in the ch.*-newsgroups - that is: «social language» like german, french, english, as well as technical languages, like HTML, MIME, ISO-8859-1 or «Quoted-Printable».²¹

¹⁹ Although Switzerland has a tradition of direct democracy, this procedure is not typical for this nation only, but for the whole Usenet (cf. REYNOLDS / POSTEL 1987) – it is like a very simple prototype of «e-voting». In a similar way, the *technical standards* of Usenet and Internet are not defined by some «general manager», nor by an international standardization agency (like ISO), but as a result of discussions among system operators and users, following the ideal of accepting the technically «one best way» (– although this ideal is not always fulfilled in practice..., HOFMANN 1998). As the voting procedure is following written rules and the results are made public, the procedure itself provides a relatively strong legitimacy (LUHMANN 1983).

²⁰ Before the «referendum» in summer 1999, the two criteria for establishing a new newsgroup in the ch.*-hierarchy were: ««For a group to pass, YES votes must be at least 2/3 of all valid (YES and NO) votes. There must also be at least 100 more YES votes than NO votes.» In June 1998, the establishment of <ch.finance> failed although there were more than 2/3 of Yes votes (100:22), because the difference between Yes and No was less than 100 votes. The same happened to the attempt to establish <ch.talk-suisse-romande> (100 yes:33 no), as well as, in April 1999, <ch.comm> (104 Yes: 9 No). The second criteria was then changed to: «For a group to pass, ... at least 60 votes on YES [must] have been given.» The main argument was that «The hurdles for the creation of a new group are too big and allow it to a very small minority to rattle the will of a big majority.» (1. RfD New voting rules for the ch.*-newsgroups, June 1999, <http://www.use-net.ch/#>)

²¹ For the rules of conduct formulated in the «Charter for newsgroups of the ch.* hierarchy» (<http://www.use-net.ch/charter.html>), see Appendix. Further, other guidelines of conduct are formulated in a document called «*Frequently Asked Questions*» (FAQ) as well as in different «*Netiquettes*». Unlike the «official» charter, these documents have not been approved by a voting procedure. Therefore, they have less legitimacy. In a strict sense, they are nothing more than the result of the personal opinion of one user. In a broader sense, however, they claim to

c) *tradition*

Analyzing the content of the norms of conduct both fixed in a document and discussed in interaction, it is striking that they are very often referring or to technical norms (like standardized protocols, e.g. NNTP), or to «traditions of the Usenet culture». Thus, the declared intention of the documents and of most of the interactional interventions is «to help new users to find their way», or: to adapt their behavior to a certain «Usenet culture».²² This reference to a claimed tradition and to the mythology of the Usenet (and Internet) provides legitimacy, similar to the mythologies and invented traditions of nations.

However, even if the charter of ch.talk defines some rules of conduct and the archives allow users to monitor the behavior of other users in the past, this does not mean that there were no mistakes committed – and criticized by other users. Some critics are focusing on the *content* of messages, referring to *social* standards of conduct. But in most cases, the critics are targeting *formal* mistakes, messages ignoring *technical* standards of conduct.²³ As in chats, a lot of critics are about «flooding».²⁴ Unlike in chats, newsgroup users who are criticizing flooding are not doing so by arguing with their own interests, but *advocating* for users who do not have the very last up-to-date technical equipment and who do not have a fast Internet connection.²⁵ The main argument is to *maintain the accessibility* and the usability of the Usenet for every user. The reference is «the Usenet» (as a part of «the Internet») and its standardized technical norms, like the «Network News Transfer Protocol» NNTP, or the «traditions of the Usenet».²⁶

These documents, protocols, and traditions are building a very important «backbone» of the social structure of the Usenet, because they are all referred to as representing a «common sense». However, they do not *impose* a social order by themselves, and as there is no formal authority

represent a «common sense» of social conduct on the Usenet, based on «tradition»: «This document describes the Usenet culture and customs that have developed over time. (...) All new users should read this document to acclimate themselves to Usenet.» (http://www.use-net.ch/netiquette_engl.html)

²² This can be regarded as a case of «configuring the user», e.g. WOOLGAR 1991.

²³ Critics on content include messages that are topologically incorrect («wrong newsgroup», off-topic) or insulting («flames»); Critics on formal structure include mistakes like a false sender address (<From: >, «Realname»), wrong «quoting» (e.g., citing the whole the message; comments preceding the quotation), sending binaries (instead of «text only»), (excessive) crossposting, or sending duplicates.

²⁴ Critics on «flooding» can refer to multiple posting of an identical message to one newsgroup (duplicates), or to a lot of different newsgroups (crossposting). In a wider sense, «flooding» also refers to messages containing «binaries», like pictures or sound files. And flooding can refer to «wrong quoting», like citing a whole previous message just to add «me too». The main argument expressed against flooding is «technical» in the sense that these messages have a bad «signal-to-noise ratio» and that they are a «waste of bandwidth», that is: a waste of resources, i.e. of bytes.

²⁵ In most cases observed, for example, SPAM (or UCE, unsolicited Commercial Email) is not criticized because of the commercial content of the message, nor because it being «off-topic», but because these messages had no clear subject line or because they contained HTML code or binaries, or because they have been «crossposted» in too many newsgroups.

²⁶ This argumentation on usability is partly based in «neutral», technical reasons, partly in the ideology of a «herrschaftsfreier Diskurs» (e.g. HABERMAS) where Usenet is regarded as a «public sphere» which has to be accessible for all: Every Internet user should be allowed to participate, no matter which operating system or which software program one is using, nor depending on a broadband connection. Similarly, the main argument expressed against various forms of «flooding» is both (a) «technical» in the sense that these messages have a bad «signal-to-noise ratio» and that they are a «waste of bandwidth», that is: a waste of resources, i.e. of bytes, and (b) ideological in the sense that the principles of a worldwide «open access» and of «interconnectivity» are very basic and firm convictions of the Internet structure – as well as very important elements of the Internet mythology (cf. HAUBEN 1994, HAFNER / LYON 1996).

controlling the messages sent to the newsgroup, the participants have to organize themselves in maintaining an order and in sanctioning «bad behavior». Most of the observed sanctions in ch.talk are *complaints*, sent in public to the newsgroup or by private e-mail to the author of the message.²⁷ These appealing sanctions are both denouncing the authors as well as «educating» *all* participants, «setting the rules». Still, there are only very few technical possibilities to sanction unwanted behavior. The most common strategy is to ignore the sender by *filtering* his or her messages. On an individual level, this can be done easily, as most newsreader software offers this feature. But it can not easily be done on a collective level -- and it does not eradicate the problem -- the message still exists.²⁸

Because of these weak technical possibilities, the newsgroup users are facing similar problems of conflict resolution as the chat users and (with the exception of individually filtering out users with bad behavior) they have no other means than the four strategies discussed above (ignoring, exiting, discussing/convincing, tit-for-that).²⁹ However, in contrast to the chat, it is easier for them to find a way for collective sanctions, because there is at least a formal procedure on how collective rules could be established or changed.³⁰

To come back to the two dualities I mentioned: Although there are formal democratic procedures for introducing new newsgroups or changing the «rules of the game», they still have to be applied by concrete actors: In a voting procedure, someone has to start a Request for Discussion and -- later -- a Call for Votes. Someone has to argue, to defend the proposal, someone has to collect the votes, others have to vote themselves. After a decision is taken, someone has to apply the new rules,³¹ to maintain and to update a charter, a FAQ document, a «netiquette» etc. And even without any voting procedure: Someone has to «defend the rules», to argue, to oppose, to denounce or even to fight «bad behavior». The observation of the newsgroup ch.talk shows that there is basically a «core» of active participants taking the role of organizing the newsgroup and of sanctioning unwanted behavior, e.g. by complaining about mistakes of other users. In doing so, they often present arguments and advices on how to do it better, they provide exhaustive explanations for their claims of

²⁷ The observation of the newsgroup revealed a range of different dimensions of sanctions: a) technical vs. communicative solutions, e.g., ignoring by filtering / ignoring verbally; b) public vs. private solutions, e.g., complaints sent to the newsgroup / to the sender; c) internal vs. external solutions, (e.g., complaints in the newsgroup vs. to the provider; d) individual vs. collective solutions, e.g. individual ignoring vs. collective ignoring; e) legitimate / illegitimate solutions (individual filtering vs. «cracking», cancelling).

²⁸ There are solutions to this problem as well, but they are not considered as legitimate, like cancelling the message of another user. For a discussion on this strategy and the introduction of an automated agent called «CHancelbot», see below.

²⁹ However, there are some possibilities for «external sanctions» in newsgroups as well: If a «badboy» is sending messages from a correct sender address by way of a «normal» (not anonymizing) access provider, users may complain by direct personal email to the sender or to the provider, or even by technically attacking the sender or provider, e.g. by sending «mail bombs» (Denial of Service attacks).

³⁰ For example, in April 1999 a majority of participants of newsgroups in the ch.* hierarchy decided to introduce a so-called «CHancelbot», an automated agent executing the task of cancelling (deleting) «faulty» messages sent to ch.* newsgroups, following specific criteria. (Müller 2002). Further, on an international level, there were different attempts to apply a so-called «Usenet Death Penalty» (UDPs) against all users with a sender address containing @AOL. This very severe sanction would have filtered out every Usenet message sent by a AOL-user. Although several «Call for Votes» on such UDPs were sent out, the death penalty was never «executed». Still, these examples show that if newsgroup users want to change the rules of the game, at least they can rely on a formal procedure with a relatively strong legitimacy to do so.

³¹ Once a majority decided to introduce a new newsgroup, or to remove an existing newsgroup, the newsservers of the Usenet network have to be reconfigured. This is done by an encrypted «control message» someone has to send out an encrypted «control message» to the Usenet newsservers. Formally, such a control message is very similar to a «normal» message (NNTP, RFC 1036, HORTON / ADAMS 1987). The operators of the newsservers then may or may not accept the «control message».

what is right and what is wrong, often linking to documents like the Charter, the FAQ or Netiquettes. Although these documents are very important in legitimizing claims for a certain order, such structures are not a sufficient condition for an online democracy: They must be maintained and applied by concrete actors.

On the other hand, it is very difficult to establish a democracy without a minimum of structures. These structures, however, have to be flexible. For example, it is useful for a small country like Switzerland to reduce the minimum number of YES votes that are needed to establish a new newsgroup or to change the rules.

4. Monarchy, anarchy, democracy, technocracy...

To conclude: In this analysis, I compared two technically different online communication services of the Internet. Chats are based on synchronous communication, newsgroups are asynchronous services. Still, I would argue that there are more important differences beyond this difference in synchronicity:

In the telnet-chat observed, the main problem for establishing «democracy» lies in its weak structure, both on a technical level (with only very few commands and possibilities for action), and on a social level (with a very weak role structure, without organization, procedures, or written rules). Further, because of the strict anonymity of the participants, there are no direct feedback channels outside of the chat, neither to address users directly by email, nor to contact their access providers.

The only person having the possibility to intervene or to change the structure of the chat is the founder and operator of the chat. This situation has to be characterized as a *monarchy (or autocracy)*.³² However, as the monarch is hardly ever intervening, it is more like a «sleeping monarchy». Instead, the political form of this chat has to be described as an *anarchy, with parts of a technocracy*.³³ The political form of an anarchy offers a lot of freedom, but at the same time, it is very unstable. The fact that neither the channels nor the nicknames of this chat are fixed, but that they have to be constructed every time *ex novo*, can be regarded as a simple example for this instability. In sociological terms, this chat is not an organization at all, but it has to be regarded as a «simple social system» based on mere interaction, without any structure.³⁴

As long as there is no stronger structure and as long as the users are not organized in any form, they have no real means to change the rules of the game. In the case discussed above, even if the users would have wanted to decide as a collective about changing the technical structure of the chat (e.g., to introduce a command allowing to ignore other users), they would not have had a possibility to build a «volonté générale», for example by carrying out a vote or a referendum on their request. Lacking any kind of organization or formal procedure, it is impossible for them to establish a «democracy».

³² In his famous article on «A rape in cyberspace», Julian DIBBELL described the steps that have been taken by users of a LabdaMOO to move beyond a simple political system to a democracy (DIBBELL 1993).

³³ Although the structure of this chat is far away from the technocratic organization of IRC, there are still aspects of technocracy, as techno-savvy users are trying to bypass the restrictions of anonymity, «only few rules», and «the same status/rules for all». Further, the operator, although opposing himself to any form of technocracy, is the omnipotent «guru» of this chat.

³⁴ LUHMANN 1975, GESER 1980, TYRELL 1983.

By contrast, the observed Usenet newsgroup can be regarded as an example for a simple *direct democracy* with written rules, representing a constitution (the «charter»), and with a formal procedure on how to change these rules. As the main frames of reference in arguing about right and wrong behavior are relying on protocols and on the technical functioning of the Usenet, ch.talk can be considered as a *democracy with technocratic ideology*. The formal documents (charter, FAQ) are very useful references in so far as they can be regarded as representing a «common sense». Together with the ideology (or mythology) of the Usenet, these documents are providing a relatively strong legitimacy. Further, the archive helps to maintain a memory and a «tradition» the users can refer to, and (to a certain degree) allows to monitor the behavior of the participants.

However, such structures are not by itself a sufficient condition for an online democracy: They must be maintained and applied by concrete actors: People who start proposals («Request for Discussions»), people who organize voting procedures, people who participate by voting themselves. And even without any voting procedure: Someone has to explain, to argue, to denounce, to «defend the rules».³⁵

Although structures are important, I argue that the «democratic structure» of the Internet, based on principles like «access for all» and «free speech», does not by necessity lead to a democracy. The Internet is a relatively open system, and therefore it is to a great extent contingent: It can be, and it has to be shaped by its users.³⁶

What we can learn from the example of the chat I presented is that it is very hard to establish a democratic system without having the possibility to rely on some kind of constitution and on a procedure about how to change the rules. What we can learn from the newsgroup example is that although written rules and a formal procedure are very important, a democracy still needs actors to bring it into living. Both examples show that a true «online democracy» depends on many factors, including technology with specific possibilities and constraints, and users shaping the technical means in order to pursue their goals. Of course, communication services of the Internet do have the *potential* of being true democracies, but it still is a hard job to «do democracy»!

³⁵ These persons have to have some special qualities: they must be of integrity, they must be trusted, they are not allowed to make mistakes themselves. In fact, people defending social or technical rules are often attacked as being «policemen», or «cabals», or even «fascists».

³⁶ For the *social shaping approach* in the Sociology of Technology see MACKENZIE / WAJCMAN 1985, BIJKER / LAW 1992. — It would be interesting to deepen the research on the interplay between social and technical structure in online communication services, especially in what concerns the command structure of chats and newsgroups on one hand, and the technical protocols of Internet message exchange on the other hand, e.g. referring to the approach of «Actor Network Theory» LAW 1991, and especially LATOUR 1991 «Technology is society made durable».

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Appendix: CHARTER: all ch.*groups

(<http://www.use-net.ch/charter.html>)

«This charter is valid for all groups within the ch.* hierarchy if the charter of a certain group does not define it differently. Binaries should not be posted to these groups in any case. Avoid using HTML or other specific text formatting languages. In general, cross-posting among ch.* newsgroups is strongly discouraged.

Contributors may use any written language they would use in Switzerland, as well as English. Dialects are discouraged. Summary translation in a second language is encouraged when the subject can interest all the country. Any message can be answered in the same, or a different language.

Articles should be posted using a ISO-8859-1 capable newsreader. The use of dreaded Quoted-Printable encoding is discouraged. The general rules of the "netiquette" (<http://www.use-net.ch/Usenet/>) apply to these groups.

To effectuate changes within the ch.*-usenet-hierarchy (i.e. creating new groups, alteration of the charter) the traditional voting procedure consisting of Requests for Discussions (RfD) and a Call for Votes (CfV) must be carried out.

The proposal will be put in place, if:

- at least two thirds of all valid votes are on "YES",
- at least 60 votes on YES have been given.

END CHARTER.

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