CHAPTER EIGHT

wahlkabine.at: Promoting an Enlightened Understanding of Politics

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Even though Jean-Jacques Rousseau promoted categorical principles of participation and inclusion, he remained sceptical as to whether members of a republican society could actually be regarded as citizens. In his most important work, *The Social Contract*, however, the French 18th century philosopher described the importance of a legitimate political order and of legal institutions. Reframing these early ideas of republican government into today's realities, it makes sense to identify the characteristics that, according to Robert A. Dahl, a polity must achieve in order to qualify as democratic: effective participation, equality in voting, exercising final control over the agenda and, last but not least, gaining enlightened understanding.

There is no doubt that Austria has to be considered a young democracy. Robert Dahl's point about "enlightened understanding" is therefore of particular relevance: the people must know enough about what is going on and have access to uncensored sources of information, so that they know how to participate in their own best interest (Dahl, 2005). We all know that TV, newspapers, and magazines are societal players who exert considerable influence on public opinion. We are also well aware that the so-called mainstream media frequently does not facilitate enlightened understanding, as news coverage in pre-election times tends to focus on a candidate's personality instead of their policies. It is therefore the questionable quality of the informa-

tion that impedes citizens who want to take their role as responsible citizens seriously, and not so much an overwhelming inundation with data that is often referred to as the curse of the Information Age. As a result, voters often have difficulty determining a party's position, which can be identified as one of the reasons for an alleged "discontent with politics" – and politicians.

On the other hand, *wahlkabine.at*, Austria's most successful voting indicator and political orientation tool, provides clear information. It lists questions about topical issues in regional or national politics, gives access to all the answers and comments given by the contending parties, and a comprehensive glossary, which is regularly updated and expanded, provides background information about topical issues. Additional information comes in the form of interviews with politicians, texts, or teaching materials that can be used at schools. In a paper on e-democracy and online voting assistance tools, Fivaz and Schwarz (2007) argue that such tools can "enhance and strengthen fundamental democratic principles like political participation, transparency and accountability".

Needless to say, vote match tools do not, cannot, and should not serve as substitutes for independent reflection and responsible decision making, as *wahlkabine.at* points out repeatedly. This statement can be found on the website as well as in the course of the online tool. The site does not consider itself a "voting advisor" so much as a "political orientation tool": it refrains from telling users who to vote for, and draws attention to the fact that 25 questions online should not be taken as the sole basis for a voting decision, as many other parameters have to be taken into consideration.

Neither does *wahlkabine.at* serve as a suitable tool to examine political commitments or party memberships. Yet

this is precisely the point where the project has met with the suspicion of political parties. In the most severe instances, there were threats of litigation or funding cuts – clearly attempts of censoring a tool committed to maintaining its independence vis-à-vis political interest groups.

So what does *wahlkabine.at* do? First and foremost, it tries to raise awareness for political issues and offers guidance concerning party policies on current issues. And what is more, it is fun. The majority of users who send feedback or have been interviewed state that they were interested in *wahlkabine.at* because they perceived it as a "fun gadget". They were "curious" to see whether their results would reflect their actual voting behaviour, and it was a "game" for them. The guiding idea behind the project was to create a *cool tool* capable of awakening an interest in political content, to make political positions visible, and to promote reflection and debate. So far, *wahlkabine.at* has fulfilled this goal – and has shown that the buzz phrase "disenchantment with politics" cannot always be easily applied to voters just because they decide to abstain from voting.

Declining voter turnouts and a seemingly low interest in politics are a serious problem for democracies worldwide. As Monika Mokre, president of the Austrian Society of Political Science until 2009 and researcher at the Austrian Academy of Sciences, states,

> "the buzz phrase 'disenchantment with politics' is often used to denote that voters are not interested in the intricate workings of politics. By defining the problem as a general mental condition of the citizens, it is, at the same time, removed from the realm of political responsibility. Parties contesting in elections adapt to the (assumed) wishes of the voters by increasing personalization and by adopting commercial marketing strategies. Frequently, these forms of mediating politics are taken up and re-enforced by popular media. In addition, ever increasing numbers of opinion polls and quizzes

about the outcome of the elections contribute but little to evoking genuine interest in the voters, for the central task lies in politicizing voting decisions, i.e. in linking them to political contents. This goal cannot be reached by expecting citizens to search for a particular party position in its platforms, manifestos, and advertising brochures. Instead, easily accessible and attractive new instruments must be developed to disseminate information before elections"[1].

She identifies *wahlkabine.at* as an instrument that catches the attention even of people who would not normally consult magazines or websites about politics, the tool's main attraction being that it can be perceived as a "game" that nevertheless yields interesting results.

On an English language website, *wahlkabine.at* has been described as "an Austrian voter education project [which] aims to increase political participation and voter turnout in local, parliamentary and European Parliament elections in Austria"[2]. But however great the success of *wahlkabine.at* in the pre-election period, its function and significance (e.g., with regard to increasing voter turnout) still need to be properly assessed.

A Council of Europe report on e-democracy states that the "electronic monitoring of parliamentarians can...be organised by civil society, which collects information on parliamentarians' activities and performances and makes this information available to the public electronically" and cites *wahlkabine.at* as an example. Although *wahlkabine.at* is, of course, no such MP watch website, the similarities of MP watch sites and vote match tools are nevertheless vital. The report goes on to say that one may expect that "MP watch websites...once they are well established in the political

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[1] Mokre, Monika. <http://wahlkabine.at/oegpw_statement2008>
[2] <http://www.intute.ac.uk/cgi-bin/fullrecord.pl?handle=20090526-10252575>

landscape...will be followed by the citizen's right to recall their representatives"[3]. This assessment implies that such websites may serve as tools which do not only make politics and policies more transparent. What is more, they might eventually develop into tools used by the public to make politicians more accountable for their decisions. Or, as one user put it in his feedback email to *wahlkabine.at*,

> "It is refreshing to see how the Internet seemingly effortlessly overcomes these obstacles and gives us a view of the future of politics (or so I hope)! It is easy to imagine that future elections could be held like this – just imagine if for once the contesting parties were suddenly required to concentrate on issue-related politics!"[4]

8.1. Historical overview

In the fall of 2002, the Vienna-based Institute for New Culture Technologies/t0 decided to contribute an online project called *wahlkabine.at* ("polling booth") to the upcoming Austrian parliamentary elections. Although the decision seemed spontaneous, it was actually based on solid motivations. After many years of work on the interface between art and culture and information and communication technologies, one of the most important insights concerned the increasing commercialization of the Internet, which had led to a more sober assessment of its emancipatory political potential.

Against this background it became a priority to initiate a project that would allow a playful engagement with the political content represented by the various political parties,

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[3]   <http://assembly.coe.int/Main.asp?link=/Documents/Working Docs/Doc09/EDOC11810.htm>

[4] Anonymous, Sun, 31 Aug 2008, 20:30:44.

and would enable voters to identify their own political affinities. The initial challenge faced by a voting indicator tool of this type in Austria consisted in finding suitable partner organizations that would ensure an extensive reach as well as a solid implementation, combining political science expertise with software programming. In the end, *wahlkabine.at* was carried out by the Institute for New Culture Technologies/t0 in cooperation with the *Gesellschaft für Politische Aufklärung*, an NGO whose goal is the promotion of democracy in Austrian society, as well as the Austrian Society for Political Science. Nowadays, an additional partner organization is the Department of Political Science, University of Innsbruck.

Developed by this group of civil society organisations and university departments, *wahlkabine.at* was an immediate success and has continued to attract hundreds of thousands of website visits. Since its inception in 2002, 68 million questions have been answered online and more than 2.5 million users have finished the various questionnaires. In the run-up to the most recent parliamentary elections in 2008, a new record was established, when 23 million questions were answered and 850.000 users completed the whole quiz – a considerable achievement in a country of only 6.3 million eligible voters, making *wahlkabine.at* one of Europe's most popular online vote match tools. The project has so far been carried out for the elections to the Austrian federal parliament, as well as the parliaments of the nine provinces, and elections to the European parliament. Additionally, one non-election variant was offered during the Austrian EU presidency in the first half of 2006.

In the process *wahlkabine.at* has been established as a popular source of information independent from party affiliations or interest groups, which is considered trustworthy and reliable by voters trying to gather information and

form an opinion in the "pre-voting sphere". It has in fact become a staple of Austrian election times: voters blog about their results[5] and comment on the questions or the party's answers[6]; newspapers interview celebrities about filling in the questionnaire[7]; many web pages and electronic newsletters include the link, and some newspapers have even been known to copy questions and answers for the benefit of their readers. What is more, *wahlkabine.at* is often accessed by pupils whose teachers use the questions as a starting point for debating current political issues in class, and who encourage their students to discuss similar questions with their friends, parents, and siblings. This tendency has also been confirmed in feedback provided by families indicating that the website had provided an important lead for discussions on society and political views between parents and children.

Although the website is in German, the content also seems to be of interest to English-speaking residents in Austria or those who follow Austrian politics abroad. *wahlkabine.at* questionnaires have in the past been painstakingly translated into English by various users and were posted on blogs[8], in forums[9], or even on Wikipedia[10], which points to the relevance of the project for people who are interested in Austrian politics but do not understand German well enough to navigate the *wahlkabine.at* home-

[5] <http://forum.rotefalken-wien.at/index.php?topic=6.0>

[6] <http://blog.bassena.org/2008/08/17/wahlkabineat-ist-wieder-da-mit-kleinen-patzern-und-ohne-fritz>

[7] <http://wahlkabine.at/presse/sn020209/filedownload>

[8] <http://www.peter-ould.net/2008/08/18/austria-how-would-you-vote>

[9] <http://www.uselectionatlas.org/FORUM/index.php?action=print page;topic=78731.0>

[10] <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Austrian_legislative_election_issue_questionnaires,_2008>

page. This was one of the incentives to offer the project in both German and English for the EU elections, "for those internationalists that want to give it the Austrian try",[11] as one blogger put it.

The first opportunity towards an internationalisation of the project arose in autumn 2008, when the tool was established in Italy – under the name of *"wahlkabine.it/cabina-elettorale.it"* – as a bilingual service for voters in the autonomous province of South Tyrol (Südtirol). In 2009, an Italian project for the elections to the European Parliament was made possible in cooperation with the not-for-profit organisation "Politica è Partecipazione" and the University Sapienza in Rome. Besides, *wahlkabine.at* took part in the international network VoteMatch Europe (www.votematch.eu) with partner organisations from eleven European countries. The goal of this pan-European tool was "to promote European citizenship, to better inform citizens about elections for the European Parliament, teach voters about the programmatic differences between the contesting parties and to increase voter turnout"[12]. *wahlkabine.at* was particularly interested in this cooperation as Austria has consistently shown a high degree of EU scepticism in public opinion polls since its accession to the European Union in 1995. The Eurobarometer[13] survey carried out by the European Union shows that Austria usually ranks considerably, i.e. 10 to 15%, below EU average. Election turnout had decreased from 67.7% in 1996 to 42.4% in 2004[14], and as for the elections in June 2009, only 21% of

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[11] <http://elections.thinkaboutit.eu/2009/05/wahlkabine-a-decision-help-for-austrian-and-other-eu-voters>

[12] <http://votematch.eu/the-project>

[13] <http://ec.europa.eu/public_opinion/standard_en.htm>

[14] <http://www.europarl.europa.eu/elections2004/ep-election/sites/de/results1306/turnout_ep/turnout_table.html>

Austrians said that they would consider voting[15] (election turnout eventually amounted to 46%)[16]. Seen against this background, it is important to note that in the same survey, a majority of interviewees said they wanted more information about the European Union: only 41% of respondents stated they knew how the EU worked, and 68% believed that Austrians in general were not very well informed about the EU[17].

It is all the more interesting to see, therefore, that Austrian politics have fallen short of fully acknowledging this expression of citizens' interest in political content and have failed to promote it, despite the fact that a political orientation tool of this type is capable of fostering a broad public interest in political questions and issues, and of promoting political debates. This becomes readily evident if one takes a closer look at the history and background of the project. From the very beginning, the *wahlkabine.at* project sought to reach a large audience and play an enlightening role in civic education. Not only did the questions it contained highlight political content that easily gets lost in increasingly noisy information environments, but the depiction of these political questions in the form of lists actually facilitated reflection as to which positions the various political parties actually occupied.

Feedback provided to the editorial team indicates that in a number of users the tool has led to a heightened awareness of the actual content of political statements, and indeed, of any lack of clarity in political positions usually depicted in the media. The feedback feature – a link on the start page of *wahlkabine.at* – allows interactive contact with

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[15] <http://www.spiegel.de/politik/deutschland/0,1518,619028,00.html>
[16] <http://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Europawahl_2009#Wahlergebnis>
[17] <http://ec.europa.eu/public_opinion/archives/eb/eb68/eb68_at_nat.pdf>

the organizers. Thousands of users have made use of this possibility, many of them acknowledging the support the tool had provided in their arriving at an electoral decision. In many instances, users have voiced their dissatisfaction with a caste of politicians increasingly out of touch with the needs and wishes of "ordinary people", and with the severe difficulties of orientation within the political system.

8.2. Method and Realisation

wahlkabine.at is first and foremost considered an interesting alternative to traditional mainstream media as it serves as a quick guideline through party opinions and helps to compare political views of the user with those of political parties. Users fill in a questionnaire of approximately 25 questions. These answers are then compared with those given by the parties contesting within the upcoming elections. At the end of the quiz, users can access a detailed survey of all questions and answers as well as comments given by the parties. As an additional feature, a glossary provides background information about topical issues.

In detail, the three-month editorial process behind each project can be described in four steps. First, a pool of about 70-100 questions is developed by a team of experts on politics, history, and journalism. Before elections on the federal level (parliamentary and EU elections), this team consists of representatives of the *wahlkabine.at* partner organisations, as well as journalists from various newspapers and news magazines distributed across the country. In the case of regional elections, journalists with a focus on regional and local issues are invited to take part in the editorial process.

Second, a list of about 40 questions is sent to political parties (i.e. their executive boards) which are already repre-

sented in the Austrian parliament, in the parliaments of Austria's nine federal provinces, or the European Parliament. In order to make smaller parties aware of this opportunity to reach a wide audience, it is essential that parties notify *wahlkabine.at* of their plans to run for office. Therefore, *wahlkabine.at* has recently introduced a "call for candidates" on its website. The parties answer the questions (yes/ no; scale of importance graded 1-3) and also have the opportunity to comment on their answers. All comments are shown at the end of the online application, and can later be accessed in an overview on the website.

Third, in a final editorial meeting the team selects about 25 questions to be included in the *wahlkabine.at* online version. Two criteria are paramount: topical relevance, and distinction between the party answers. Another focus is a selection of questions from a wide range of fields, such as art and culture, economics, education, energy, environment, family, food, gender politics, migration, religion, security, social welfare, or traffic. The editorial team also checks whether answers provided by the parties actually reflect their party line in recent months, and changes positions where deemed necessary.

Finally, *wahlkabine.at* goes online about six weeks before the elections. Users answer about 25 questions by clicking "yes" (agree), "no" (disagree) or "no answer" (neutral). In addition, users have a range of nine grades to indicate whether they consider the issue in question important or not. The online tool then calculates which party's answers correspond most closely with the user's answers. The other parties are ranked accordingly and in descending order. By pinning down parties to provide clear "yes" or "no" answers and to comment on questions, *wahlkabine.at* serves as an essential information portal, not least by providing information on topics which may not even be included in

party platforms and manifestos. *wahlkabine.at* does not only provide a possibility to fill these information gaps; furthermore, all questions, answers, and comments are accessible on the website for years to come. This collection of statements has in fact become an important resource on party positions, and reflects their change over time. In spite of constant lack of support and promotion by the Austrian government, *wahlkabine.at* has thereby become a central source of information since its first launch in 2002.

8.3. Open Source and Privacy

It is a guiding principle underlying the project that absolutely all the data concerning programming and computation must be entirely open: there is full information on the project's goals, its processes and methods, and the weightings applied; the parties' positions are presented in brief summaries. From the very beginning, the project has been committed to the open source principle, according to which the human-readable source code has to be freely accessible. This opens the possibility to view the code, to modify and develop it, and to create a form of cooperation directed primarily against the mechanisms of exclusion at work in proprietary programs (where code is considered "intellectual property" and zealously protected).

One the other hand, one increasingly important indicator of the democratic quality of a society is privacy protection. Even if the general awareness of the importance of privacy leaves much to be desired, there seems to be a gradual awakening to the risks posed by new information and communication technologies. In the last decade, civil society organisations did not tire to draw attention to the restrictions on privacy which were imposed by governments, giving rise to a critical movement that refuses to sacrifice

the most vital rights of the digital information age to a supposed fight against international terrorism.

It comes as no surprise, then, that the use of collected user data has been a prominent question in *wahlkabine.at* – a question addressed in many different ways. Although the start page of *wahlkabine.at* contains a well visible statement assuring users that none of their data will be forwarded to third parties, scepticism seems to have won the upper hand in some users. In fact, none of the results and IP addresses (through which computers and servers could be identified) of any of the users have ever been stored. Given the fact that election campaigns are currently customized around individuals' personal data, it is not surprising that an independent political online orientation tool beyond the reach of political parties generates nervousness. With this in mind, the Institute for New Culture Technologies/t0, an uncompromising defender of privacy rights, and all the other collaborating civil society and academic organizations, consider the protection of these rights as fundamental.

8.4. Conclusion

The unbroken popularity of *wahlkabine.at* certainly serves as a powerful reminder that it is not the oft-quoted "disenchantment with politics" that ails Austria's general public, but rather a profound disillusionment with the political caste, with the no-transparency of decision making, and the lack of opportunities for participation. Seven years after *wahlkabine.at* was first launched, interest in the project has not waned. Quite on the contrary: by expanding into new fields, like a tool developed for the elections to the Austrian Federal Economic Chamber in 2010, by seeking international co-operation, and by offering a wide array of infor-

mation about topical issues, *wahlkabine.at* still takes its role seriously. In her essay, Monika Mokre states that

> "*democracy* remains an empty term if those who are meant to make political decisions, i.e. the people, are not adequately informed on the issues they have to decide upon. By providing easily comprehensible information on relevant political topics in the run-up to elections, *wahlkabine.at* thus provides a central instrument of civic education"[18].

Conceived as a game, a diversion, a gimmick with the very serious underlying ambition to whet the general public's appetite for politics, *wahlkabine.at* will hopefully remain a fixture in the election calendars of years to come.

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[18] Mokre, Monika. <http://wahlkabine.at/oegpw_statement2008>