

Internet-based Citizen Participation in the City of Esslingen Relevance – Moderation – Software

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In Esslingen wurde im Vorfeld einer formalen Bauleitplanung eine Internet-basierte Bürgerbeteiligung als Bestandteil einer vorgezogenen Bürgerbeteiligung durchgeführt. Anhand dieses Beispiels zeigen die Autoren auf, dass das Potenzial Internet-basierter Bürgerbeteiligung vor allem von dem diesem Angebot zugewiesenen Zweck abhängig ist, also von der damit verbundenen (zugesagten) Ergebnisverwertung durch das politisch-administrative System. Weiterhin versuchen die Autoren zu belegen, dass – neben einer für die Bürger erkennbaren Gesamtstrategie – die aktive Gestaltung Internet-basierter Bürgerbeteiligung ein zentrales Erfolgskriterium im Hinblick auf Qualität und Relevanz (Glaubwürdigkeit) des Angebotes und der gesamten Planung darstellt. Eine zentrale Rolle wird dabei einer Konfliktanalyse im Vorfeld, einer aktiven (Online-)Moderation während und einer Ergebnissicherung im Anschluss eines Verfahrens durch allparteiliche Dritte zugewiesen. Anhand des Mediationssystems Zeno werden weiterhin Funktionen und Anforderungen an informatische Werkzeuge als Moderations- und Beteiligungsplattform aufgezeigt.

1. INTRODUCTION

As part of its contribution to a German federal multimedia project, Media@Komm, the City of Esslingen aims to use information and communications technology to help it evolve from a classical bureaucracy into a modern service organization for citizens and business. In addition to providing various administrative services online, citizens shall be provided an opportunity to participate in the political process.¹ In the future, Esslingen would like to integrate online public participation into its standard city planning procedures and practice. The first pilot project of this kind used the Internet to conduct a public discussion as part of an “early public participation” procedure, before carrying out the formal, i.e. legally regulated, planning procedures. In the context of a highly controversial plan to rezone an agricultural area for residential use, Internet groupware was used to support a public discussion over a period of four weeks.²

The controversy was classic. The large political parties represented in the city council were in favor of rezoning an agricultural area to allow the construction of housing for families. The current residents of the affected area of the city, however, anticipated disadvantages in the form of increased traffic and the loss of nearby recreational and natural areas. They also doubted the need for additional family housing. These citizens founded an active initiative to oppose the plan and the local newspaper repeatedly reported on the conflict. In other parts of the city similar development projects were meeting comparable resistance to the development and land use policies of the governing politicians and city administration.

From May 21 to June 21, 2001, the citizens of Esslingen were given the opportunity on the city’s web site to view information about the development plans (including maps, draft plans, and expert opinions) and to make comments on the plan in a moderated discussion forum. At this time, a decision had not yet been made by the city council regarding the plan, so that the Internet discussion preceded the formal planning process. Nonetheless, the majority of the city council had already signaled its support of the plan, which was already in an advanced stage. Thus it was clear from the beginning that the online debate would not be likely to dissuade the council from going ahead with the plan.

That said, the city planning department and the city council did promise to take the comments of the citizens made during the online discussion into consideration before taking further steps. The online information and discussion forum complemented a circa four hour town meeting in the city hall. At this public meeting, the planning documents and expert opinions were presented by the city and citizens were given an opportunity to ask questions and express their criticisms and concerns. This event was used as an opportunity to announce the Internet discussion forum and distribute handouts with further information.

The online discussion process was organized, managed and moderated by Hans Hagedorn, Oliver Märker, and Matthias Trénel. They developed the process model guiding the online discussion and a plan for embedding the online discussion in the existing administrative procedures of the city. The main goal was to assure the practical relevance of citizen participation, both during and after the online discussion.

2. CONCEPTUAL FOUNDATIONS AND IMPLEMENTATION

An evaluation of the online discussions depends critically on the evaluation standards applied. From the perspective of the minimal standards required by law, an online participation procedure would be evaluated differently than from the perspective of innovative ideas on the “outskirts of current practice” (Selle 1996), characterized by an appreciation of the cooperative approaches to planning

¹ <http://mediakomm.esslingen.de/MediaKomm/main/projekt/doc/index.htm>

² <http://forum.esslingen.de/buerger/>

known as the “new planning culture” (Selle, 1996; 2000). The basic principles of this and many other informal methods of participation (Beckmann and Keck 1999) are, among others (Märker 1999):³

- Enable participation as early as possible
- Involve as many citizens with as many different interests as possible
- Pay particular attention to involving those directly affected
- Assure equal opportunity to participate
- Remain open with respect to both process and results
- Assure communication is dialogical
- Moderate by neutral or impartial third parties
- Integrate multiple perspectives
- Initiate learning processes
- Develop a common view of the problem

Allow participation in the decision-making process. The goal is not only to improve the quality of the plan or decision resulting from the planning process, but also to improve the planning process itself, making it fairer and more democratic. This in turn will tend to increase the acceptability of the plan (Röhl 1993).

The design and conception of methods for online citizen participation should be oriented towards these ambitious goals of the “new planning culture”. On the other hand, the realities of city politics (Kreß 2000), i.e. the current practice of city planning and its resulting culture of participation, which typically respects few if any of the above principals, cannot be ignored. This means that citizen participation procedures usually cannot achieve more than the existing context of communication and power relationships allow. That said, there are still some opportunities waiting to be taken advantage of and, ideally, these can lead to a learning process in the sense of the new planning culture. Opportunities for more participation, whether they make use of computer networks or not, only make sense when they can be made practically relevant for the existing planning process. The establishment and securement of this practical relevance must be a central part of every participation concept.

Communication always occurs within some context. Communication for its own sake, isolated from some practical situation, makes little sense. Fliers or pamphlets providing information but not announcing subsequent events are just as useless as round table discussions which do not result in working groups or other measures to take action. Therefore, behind every communication activity there should be a plan with goals and tasks. This plan should include general public relations tasks, such as cooperation with the local media. Equally essential are references to and synchronization with any related procedures. Ignoring such measures will raise the suspicion of irrelevance of the offered opportunity to participate in the online discussion or of the incompetence of the persons organizing the event. And this would certainly result in negative repercussions (Selle 1996, pp 207-208).

In addition to assuring external relevance, it is important for the an impartial third party to actively manage and moderate the participation procedure, to maintain its internal relevance. In the case of online participation procedures, special purpose moderation software is useful for supporting the moderation team in performing this work (figure 1).⁴

2.1 Embedding the Online Participation Process – Assuring External Relevance

In the Esslingen pilot project, it became clear very early that the prior planning history of the Egert development area, which took place without involving the public, would be a controlling factor also for the online participation process. This led a member of a local citizens initiative to say: “Why should I participate in a ‘virtual room’ when I haven’t yet been taken seriously in real ones?” The “suspicion of irrelevance” (Selle 2000), i.e. the suspicion that the sole purpose of the offer to participate online was to demonstrate the use of information and communication technology in the context of a federal research and development project, Media@Komm, was a critical issue and a source of uncertainty from the beginning of the projects, both for the citizens and for the moderation team. A definite commitment to take any results of the discussion into consideration did not exist, nor could be assumed that the city’s planning process had not yet resulted in a fixed plan.

Nonetheless, because the participation was to take place before the begin of formal planning procedures, there was still sufficient room for the pilot project, within realistic limits. The efforts of the moderation team began, respecting the principles listed above of the new planning culture, by openly explaining the real purpose and scope of the pilot project and not pretending to place this experiment, however innovative it may be because of its use of the Internet, on the same level as other cooperative planning approaches. After a careful analysis of the prior history of the housing development project, the moderation team announced the online participation pilot project to be an additional “public hearing”. Exaggerating the importance of the project would have risked disgruntlement; downplaying the project would not have motivated participation, dooming the project to failure. It was therefore sensible to openly admit the political situation, namely that it was clear that a large majority of the city council was in favor of going ahead with the housing development plan.

³ See also (Renn and Webler 1998; Rittel and Webber 1972; Rittel and Webber 1973; Selle 1996; Selle 2000); regarding mediation see (Förderverein für Umweltmediation e.V. (no year); Troja 2001; Zilleßen 1998); for information about Procedural Justice see (Leventhal 1980; Röhl 1993)

⁴ The importance of moderation software should not be exaggerated. Although useful and helpful, the best mediation software cannot compensate for failures in the preparation, planning, and management of the participation process. In particular, a good participation platform will not be used if steps have not been taken to assure the external relevance of participation. Conversely, even a modest system in terms of technical features can be effective if the process has been well managed.

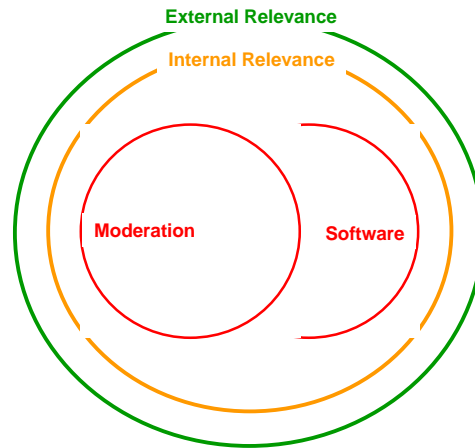


Figure 1: Three main dimensions of internet-based citizen participation:
external relevance, internal relevance and moderation software

The declared purpose of this public hearing on the Internet was to provide a means to possibly improve the quality of the housing development plan while reducing the need for paper or face-to-face communication. Several steps were necessary before, during and after the “online public hearing” to assure its external relevance, especially with regards to creating interfaces between the online communication process and prior communication channels and decision processes:

- **Conflict Analysis.** The analysis of conflicts of interest at the beginning of the project was the main element and starting point for all further tasks. Only given an adequate understanding of these conflicts of interest is a sensible application of (online) moderation techniques possible. In this respect, online procedures are no different than other forms of communication. However, unlike the usual face-to-face procedure, where the analysis of the conflict is to be completed before the first meeting, it happened that this analysis continued throughout the discussion period in this pilot project. Although this can be partially explained by the short period of time available to prepare the online hearing, this is a principal difference to proceedings which include more face-to-face elements. Whereas all significant information must have been gathered before the beginning of a physical meeting, the asynchronous quality of communication on the Internet allows the introduction of new information, or even new participants, at any time during the proceeding. Important partners at this stage included the responsible members of the Media@Komm project in Esslingen, representatives of the city planning department, citizen initiatives and the political parties represented in the city council.

Equally important was contact with the responsible editor of the local newspaper, who was a valuable source of information about the history of the conflict. The analysis showed that the main conflict was between the city council and administration, on the one side, and the residents in and near the planned development area, on the other side. Hardly any conflicts of interest could be identified within these two groups. The main political parties were in agreement and stressed the economic importance of the planned development. The affected residents emphasized the degradation of the quality of their neighborhood. The potential winners of this conflict, the new residents of the area to be developed, did not participate in the online hearing. Although the Internet might make this a theoretically possible, the effort which would have been necessary to contact and involve these future residents was not made.

- **Publicity.** Due to the predictability of the political outcome, the moderation team couldn't guarantee a political impact of the online discussion and decided instead to focus on the interface to the press, in particular the local newspaper in Esslingen, which had in the past played a certain role in moderating the debate. The goal of this cooperation with the press was to open and display the online hearing to a broader public, to create a bit of social pressure for the online hearing. However, the reports of the newspaper about online hearing, although numerous, were too succinct for this purpose.

The second important connection between the online and off-line proceedings was fulfilled by the engagement of the city planning department. Questions and comments by citizens were responded to online by the city planning department in a timely and conscientious manner, to such an extent that one can speak of a real dialog between the citizens and the city administration which was also comprehensible to the many passive observers of the Internet discussion forum.⁵

Additional support was provided by the professional community of experts, who took a relatively large interest in the experiment, due a variety of presentations at conferences, including the Media@Komm conference which took place in Esslingen. This interest was helpful to underline the relevance of the dialogue for the political-administrative system of the city.

- **Involving Decision Makers.** During the preparatory phase and especially during the entire four week period of the online hearing, the moderation team stayed in contact with city administrators and members of the city council and repeatedly encouraged them to participate in the online hearing. Whereas representatives of the city planning department did cooperate and actively participate, the moderation team failed to motivate even a single politician to contribute. Are politicians really interested in new forms of public participation? At any rate, in future efforts of this kind more courage to

⁵ From the point of view of the administration, however, this form of dialog is very time intensive and could only be justified in this case by the experimental character of the pilot project. In the future, it will have to be decided on a case by case basis whether or not such an effort can be justified.

break out of fixed power blocks and engage in an open dialog during one's own opinion building process would be necessary. This would really increase the transparency of the political process and be an important step toward fulfilling the promise of a more citizen-oriented political culture.

- **Securing and Applying Results.** From the beginning, the responsible committee of the city council promised to acknowledge the online hearing and take its results "into consideration" in any subsequent formal planning phases. To enable the fulfillment of this commitment, the moderation team documented the entire online hearing and prepared a summary of the discussion, in collaboration with and approved by the active participants.⁶ The summary has been also published on the Web. A member of the moderation team presented the results in a talk during a meeting of the building committee, which admittedly did not prevent the committee from proceeding with its preconceived plan.

By these means, it was possible to achieve a certain, if modest, practical relevance for the online hearing. During the four week period, twenty-two persons participated actively, submitting over one hundred, sometimes very comprehensive, messages. On the basis of an analysis of web server log files, it can be conservatively estimated that approximately fifty to eighty other users accessed the site to obtain information about the planned residential development and to follow the discussion. Given the short period to prepare the online hearing, the prior history of the development project and the small geographical area affected, the online hearing can be considered to have been successful.

Next to the measures focused on the procedural framework, great care was taken to manage and structure the online hearing itself. These efforts aimed to assure the relevance and effectiveness of each of the contributions and contributed greatly to the acceptability and authenticity of the process, the motivation of the participants, and last but not least the potential of the results. Thus, in practice there is no separation between internal and external relevance; they are two sides of the same coin. The distinction between these two kinds of relevance is primarily of theoretical interest.

2.2 Moderation: Internal Relevance

In addition to embedding the online hearing in the administrative process it is important to actively structure and manage the hearing itself. Just as in "real" town meetings and other kinds of discussion groups, competent moderation is decisive for achieving practical results. Therefore, in the online hearing of the City of Esslingen, the tasks of the moderators were not limited to preventing offensive contributions or reminding participants to stay on topic. Rather, the most important tasks of the moderation team included:

- **Structuring and focusing the discussion.** On the basis of the conflict analysis and the prior history of the planning process, the moderation team formulated and presented a series of clear and simple questions to the forum. During the course of the discussion, the emerging structure of the discussion threads was continuously improved by the moderators, with the agreement of the participants, and new subforums for particular issues were created. In subforums, the moderation team opened the discussion by presenting a summary of the discussion thus far on this issue and formulating specific questions to address.
- **Assuring lively debate.** An effort was made to create the impression that forums were being extensively, continuously and competently moderated. The moderation team presented itself, complete with photos. Questions or suggestions were always promptly and personally answered. Timely and personal feedback helped to create and preserve the internal relevance of the process. At no time should there be the impression that the forums are not being actively managed.
- **Encouraging and developing argumentation.** To facilitate a maximally effective discussion, participants were personally requested, by e-mail, to comment on particular other contributions. Since the discussion about the planned development did not begin with the online hearing, the moderators had an opportunity to initiate the online discussion by copying position statements in newspaper articles, pamphlets and letters to the editor into the online forums and then personally requesting various actors to comment on these positions.
- **Encouraging Feedback.** In a separate discussion forum, the moderators encouraged the participants to make comments and suggestions about the online hearing itself. This discussion was used to improve, where possible, the quality of the online service during the hearing. For example, references on the front page of the web site to external information sources were simplified in a way suggested in this discussion forum.

The three moderators took turns working for three day periods. This enabled a timely moderation for the entire four week period of the online hearing. Providing a continuously moderated, asynchronous online forum over a longer period of time, including weekends and holidays, is very difficult to achieve. These problems are compounded by the inherent difficulties of interpreting texts. An advantage of having several moderators is that they can consult each other for advice about interpreting particularly vague messages, to avoid premature action which might give the impression of partiality. The advantage of having a moderation team is obvious, but the required teamwork implies frequent and time intensive collaboration via e-mail or telephone conferences.

During the course of the four week discussion, the advantages of actively structuring and mediating the discussion became clearer. The clear questions posed to the participants at the beginning made it easier to structure the contributions well. The good quality of the resulting discussion is evidenced by the relatively high degree of cross references among the contributions, which is not at all typical in Internet discussion forums. This was achieved by the moderators personally contacting participants and requesting replies to particular position statements. The city administration deserve particular mention for its engagement in responding to positions, questions, reservations and criticism. A constructive dialogue between the opponents of the development project and the city planning department resulted. Although initiated by the moderators, the dialogue developed a dynamic which caused it to continue constructively with require insistent prompting. This technique was not at all effective in motivating politicians to participate.

⁶ Active participants provided their email address when taking part in the hearing, so that it was possible to distribute a draft of the summary and ask for comments. Due to the limited time before the next meeting of the committee, it was not possible to carry out a fuller discussion of the summary. This is very well technically feasible, however, using collaborative authoring and editing systems such as the Digital Document Discourse Environment, D3E – see <http://d3e.open.ac.uk/>.

The discussion summaries and subforums for discussing selected issues in more detail were well accepted by the participants and encouraged the participants to go beyond the posting of already known statements.⁷ This helped to keep each of the forums focused on a small number of topics. This structure was also useful afterwards, when documenting and summarizing the online hearing. The inherent advantage of textual communication for documenting the history and results of a discussion is inherited by online forms of participation.

Despite the best efforts of the moderation team, there were some complaints by participants about the organization and structure of the forums. Written communication tends to overwhelm users even after only a small number of contributions. This can only partially be compensated by moderation and it seems unlikely that improved software for online participation would be able to provide a complete technical solution to this problem. The Zeno system used for the online hearing in this project allows a compact outline and overview of the messages in a forum, but here too the number of messages which can be handled by an overview of this kind is quite limited. A common criticism was that other messages couldn't be viewed while writing a new message, to make it easier to refer to them.⁸ Another common request was for methods to filter and sort contributions by date, author, and so on. The moderation team also expressed an interest in such a feature.

Despite such problems, it was possible using Zeno to conduct a good, coherent and constructive discussion. This made it unnecessary for the moderators to have to spend much time handling irrelevant or otherwise inappropriate contributions.⁹ That said, there was one incident between two participants which went so far as threatening a law a suit. In this one case it was necessary for the moderators to retract the questionable messages and request the authors to reconsider their form and content before reposting.

This incident revealed a weakness in the way newly posted contributions were handled by the moderators: to enable a lively debate with minimal latency, contributions were published immediately upon posting, without first being reviewed by the moderators. Zeno has an option which allows moderators to decide whether articles must first be reviewed before publishing or not. Immediate publication has the advantage of increasing the motivation to contribute; the appearance of the published article is a bit of positive reinforcement for the author. In the mentioned incident, the offending message was published for a period of two hours before the moderators discovered and unpublished it.¹⁰ These two hours were sufficient to inflame the conflict.

Zeno can authenticate users with user names and passwords, but this requires prior user registration.¹¹ The moderation team considered registration to be an unnecessary hurdle which would inhibit participation. Instead, all participants used the same "guest" account, which can be used without first having to log in. Security concerns turned out in this case to be unwarranted. All users provided their correct names and e-mail addresses, in the form provided for guests when posting messages. The moderators did doubt the authenticity of one contribution, which was submitted in the name of a person who works for the city administration of Esslingen. The message was unpublished until it could be confirmed that the contribution was authentic and then republished. To avoid such uncertainties, user accounts were then created for this person and other "public figures". These registered users had exactly the same user privileges as the other participants; the only difference being that their contributions were authenticated by the login procedure.

Besides a good moderation strategy, online participation requires a software system or "platform" which has been designed to support moderated discussion on the Internet. Such a system should be easy and intuitive to use and provide a rich set of moderation tools, as suggested above in the discussion about moderation techniques. It has become clear, that moderation techniques and moderation software are highly interdependent when discussions take place online, on the Internet. The next section is about the software used for the online hearing in Esslingen.

2.3 Software – Flexible Internet Tool

The Web site for the online hearing of the pilot project in Esslingen¹² consisted of three main areas:

- **Front page.** The front or "home" page¹³ presented a short introduction to the online hearing, describing its aims, procedure, and timetable, the members of the team of moderators, the residential development plans, the current status of the plan, and a list of contact addresses.¹⁴ The front page was updated repeatedly by the moderators to announce the current status of the online-hearing and the follow-up. From the front page, users could access a "shared workspace" containing documents with more detailed information about the residential development project and the moderated discussion forums. Both of shared workspace and the discussion forums used the Zeno system.¹⁵
- **Public Information.** In this part of the Web site, information about the residential development project was made available to the public. This information consisted of documents, or links to documents, stored and managed in a "shared workspace" of the Zeno system. Using the shared workspace, members of the city administration and the moderators were able to easily upload documents and create links,¹⁶ called "references" in Zeno, and to organize this information in a hierarchical directory of folders. Zeno's access control mechanism was used to allow only the moderators and particular registered

⁷ The main forum remained open for all participants.

⁸ This is indeed possible in Zeno, by opening additional Web browser windows. But it seems this method is not apparent or easy enough for many users.

⁹ Possibly one lesson is that the presence of moderators who continuously provide feedback about the status of the forums is sufficient to enable a constructive debate.

¹⁰ In the Version 1.9 of Zeno, used in the pilot project, the original version of a contribution cannot be deleted or edited, only "unpublished", so that it is not visible to anyone except the moderators and the author. If an edited version of the article is published, the original version is preserved for use in helping to resolve eventual conflicts about whether or not the meaning of the original was altered during editing.

¹¹ The registration procedure in Zeno is as follows: the user fills out a form on the web requesting registration and providing his or her name and email address. An initial password is automatically generated by Zeno and immediately sent to the email address provided. From this point on the user can log into Zeno and, if desired, change the password.

¹² <http://forum.esslingen.de/buerger/>

¹³ <http://forum.esslingen.de/buerger/start.html>

¹⁴ An email address was provided for the moderation team as a whole.

¹⁵ <http://www.ais.fraunhofer.de/MS/zeno/zenoSystem.html>

¹⁶ Including a link to the home page of the citizen's initiative which formed to oppose the development plan.

members of the city administration to make modifications while allowing everyone, including unregistered guests, to view the information.¹⁷

- **Moderated Discussion Forums.** The discussion forums were also realized using Zeno. The front page included a link to the folder in the shared workspace containing the forums. Two forums were provided at the beginning, one for comments about the residential development project and one for comments about the online hearing. The moderators added instructions about how to use the forums and other relevant information and announcements to the “description” fields of the folder containing the forums and the forums themselves. This “description” is prominently displayed on the front page of the folders and forums and provided a convenient place to explain moderation activities, such as the restructuring of message threads, announcements of new subforums, “mini-tutorials” about Zeno features, or announcements of important dates or events.

As mentioned above, in the Moderation section, Zeno’s discussion forums were able to be used successfully to realize and implement the chosen moderation strategy, even though there is room for improving Zeno’s moderation facilities. A few additional features would make it possible to provide a clearer overview of discussions. For example, a basic moderation feature currently missing in Zeno is the possibility to copy or move threads¹⁸ or parts of threads within or between forums. Also useful would be a configurable notification system, to have announcements about activity of interest to be “pushed” to users via e-mail or mobile telephone messages (SMS).¹⁹ It would be nice, borrowing an idea from Yahoo Groups,²⁰ if this notification feature could be configured to automatically forward new postings to the moderators by e-mail and allow them to publish the postings by replying to the e-mails.

In the contributions posted to the forums, users made references to documents in the shared workspace, but didn’t use hyperlinks in these references, even though Zeno makes this possible. URLs are recognized by Zeno when displaying the bodies of articles, but only if they are syntactically correct. A simpler way for creating references would be helpful.²¹ Of course there is the risk that additional functions would increase the complexity of the system, making it more difficult to learn to use. There should be a separate user interface for moderators, so as not to burden ordinary participants with features which are not of interest to them. A completely new version of Zeno has been designed, Zeno 2, and is currently being implemented. This new version will have many of the features proposed here.

3. CONCLUSIONS

Because of the history prior to the online participation event, only a modest contribution was possible, compared to the goals and principals of the “new planning culture”. Thus, the online event was conceived as a kind of “Internet hearing” designed to reduce the communication difficulties of public participation processes. The usual one-way communication of written statements and the stressful two-way communication of public meetings was enhanced with a new form of communication, combining the advantages of both.

Many controversial issues were discussed during the online hearing, both with regards to the particular plans for the residential development project as well as the more general land use and zoning issues. For the residential development project, some issues became apparent which were evaluated in the same way by both the proponents of the project, in particular the city planning department, and the opponents. One such issue is the lack of connections from the new residential area to the local public transportation network.

What were the advantages of holding the hearing online, using the Internet?

- **Information.** Information can be made significantly more accessible to the public. Thereby imbalances between the information available to citizens and the city planning department can be at least reduced and citizens acquire the opportunity to participate competently. In Esslingen, the contributions to the discussion forums directly used and referred to the common pool of information published in the shared workspaces, subjecting the published information to a critical review process. Moreover, the participants actively demanded additional information.
- **Documentation.** Computer mediated written communication “automatically” leads to an archived record of the process. The documentation of the process for the record is greatly facilitated. This was demonstrated in Esslingen, e.g., when it came time to prepare a summary of the proceedings to present to the city council. Especially for the moderators is this advantage apparent. Considering the obligation of public administration to document formal proceedings, the use of the Internet might be worth considering for such purposes as well.
- **Communication.** Compared to the usual way in which citizens are given an opportunity to participate, where each citizen can send a single written letter with comments to the city, with no knowledge about the comments made by other citizens and no response from the city to the particular arguments made, what Selle calls the “one way street model of communication, from citizens to planners” (Selle, 1996, p. 80), where the “discourse model” is reduced to singular messages from critical citizens to the administration, Internet discussion forums can enable authentic and transparent public debates. Compared to conventional public hearings, online hearings can – in a positive sense – decelerate the communication process.²² Multiple issues can be thoroughly discussed in parallel. The quality of formal proceedings could

¹⁷ Although not necessary in the Esslingen project, it would have been possible using Zeno to allow citizens to upload documents to the workspace or to create another workspace for citizens to use to share documents.

¹⁸ In version 1.9 of Zeno, discussion forums consist of a hierarchical “tree” of articles. A “thread” is a subtree consisting of all the articles rooted in a selected article.

¹⁹ For example, to be notified about replies to articles posted by the user or about new contributions on a particular topic.

²⁰ <http://groups.yahoo.com/>

²¹ In Zeno 1.9, there is a command on most pages for copying the URL of the page to the clipboard, allowing the URL to be simply pasted into any text, including the form for writing and posting messages to forums.

²² Internet debates nonetheless should be subject to clear time limits, to motivate participation. Open-ended forums lacks a recognizable purpose or goal and can only be “virtual” in the derogatory sense.

be significantly improved and planning issues could be effectively deliberated. But this potential can only be realized, as the Esslingen pilot project clearly demonstrates, when online discussions are moderated.

The form of online moderation adopted in the Esslingen pilot project was very time and therefore cost intensive. It is true, compared to conventional hearings and other kinds of meetings, that travel expenses for the moderators could be significantly reduced. Nonetheless, reading all the contributions to the forums, answering questions and coordinating the process via e-mail and telephone all costs an enormous amount of time. Thus this kind of online moderation cannot be justified as a cost or time saving measure.

From the point of view of public administration, assuming there is an interest in a real dialog with citizens, this form of Internet interaction is also very time intensive, particularly considering the typical personnel resources of city planning departments. Therefore not every planning project can be put through such a procedure, but rather only those which are especially controversial can be considered. To promote political equality, all public documents about city plans should be published on the World Wide Web as a matter of course.

The online hearing, in addition to being a mostly fair and constructive debate, largely met the new planning culture criterion of dialogical communication, integration of multiple perspectives, and equal opportunity. To what extent this positive experience will have a general impact on the planning culture in Esslingen in the future will have to be seen. Some of the citizens who participated expressed an interest in participating in the further development of the city's land use policies and plans. Between the lines citizens suggested that a standard and obligatory general procedure for involving them in the planning process, a procedure developed in cooperation with the citizens of the community, would tend to promote the acceptability of difficult decisions. But because of past disappointments and the utter failure of politicians to join the online hearing, the mistrust of the citizens vis a vis politics and public administration in general would remain. This confirmed the appropriateness of setting modest goals for the online hearing.

Nonetheless, the Esslingen project suggests starting points for improving dialog of which politicians should take notice. "The willingness to communicate is a scarce resource, which must be used conscientiously if it is to be preserved." ((Selle 2000)p. 18) This is also true for Internet participation.

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