

This text has been translated from German, and formed part of my assignment in the final module of my BA course, about the influence of media on public participation processes, based on the example of Stuttgart 21. Stuttgart 21 is the name of a project to build an underground station in Stuttgart, which was planned for decades and met by protests on the commencement of the construction. It became infamous through the violent actions the police took to clear the building site, which was covered by international media as "Black Thursday" in 2010. These events were then followed by mediation between the parties, which reached unprecedented levels of transparency and media coverage.

The role of media for public participation in planning processes

The press is, first of all, a conveyor or a form of conveyance of communication. The term is understood widely for the purpose of this text: It includes conventional mass media (newspapers, television, radio etc.), but also new, interactive media (internet, social networks, blogs etc.). Despite the possibility to publish information online, "selection criteria for mass media publicity need to be overcome"¹ to reach a wider audience.

Journalistically processed content is therefore generally assumed to have a wider reach. In individual cases, the kind of media a remark in the text is referring to, will be clarified.

Purpose of and demands of the media

The media are often described as the fourth power in democracy. They play an important role for the formation of opinion in the population. Essential for this understanding is the freedom of the press regulated through Article five of the Basic Law. A judgment of the federal constitutional court clarifies its intention:

"The free intellectual debate [is] a life element of the liberal democratic order and absolutely constituent for this order (...). It is based decisively on the freedom of opinion, press and information, which are independent and equal guarantors alongside each other. Correspondingly, the basic right of freedom of information is one of the most important requirements for liberal democracy ... Only through its help are citizens enabled to procure themselves with the necessary requirements for carrying out their personal and political tasks, to act responsibly in the democratic sense."²

The media play an important role within democracy, by enabling citizens to form an opinion – and thus participate – through coverage. Information is the most important requirement

¹ Lüdecke & Schulz, 2008, p. 140

² BVerfGE 33, 52, p. 84, BVerfGE 27, 71, p. 81 f.

for public participation. It needs to reach the citizens and flow into the public debate, which is driven by the media. Thus, the media are part of the process of public participation in two ways: First, they communicate information to the citizens, second they are the place where public discourse happens, in which citizens can participate; for example in open discussions on radio, reader's letters to newspapers, their own blog articles or discussions in online forums and social networks.³

In turn, the media also communicate the discussion within the population into the public. Some media are better suited for this discourse than others – the internet for example offers new possibilities. Some other media, like television, only allow one-way communication towards citizens, with little or no possibility for feedback. Media in general communicate information, influence the forming of opinions, and lead and enable the public discourse at the same time.

Establishing transparency for planning projects is one of the tasks of politics. Political transparency is defined as accountability. Primarily it means that information about the planning process and all related facts need to be public to allow for a proper debate among the citizens about the project. All consulted sources attribute the media with the task to spread the information provided by politics and, where applicable, provide additional transparency. This information needs to be incorporated and made available to a large recipient group. The reduction of complexity may not be necessary due to the publication options through the internet, but the actual number of recipients will be smaller without comprehensible editing. This reduction of complexity is one of the tasks of the journalistically editing press, because only they have the possibility to reach the number of recipients that enables a public debate on the topic.

This sometimes causes problems for several reasons. First, "because journalism simplifies complex facts (...) and communicates more towards the past than the future."⁴ Thus, extensive planning projects will hardly ever be portrayed in all their complexity. Through the reduction of complexity by the journalists, relevant details can be missed. Second, journalists apply certain relevance criteria, based on which they choose which information is important and which is not. One example for these criteria are the news factors by Schulz:

Time (current events), proximity (spatial distance to audience), status of actors (social dimension), dynamics (structural characteristics like surprises), valence (positive or negative value of information) and identification (personalization)⁵

These criteria are not met by all planning projects. The less the media see these criteria met, the less reason they have to edit and publish available information. Therefore news

³Lüdecke & Schulz, 2008, p. 132

⁴Bonfadelli, 2007, p. 257f; Dernbach, 2005, p. 183, cited from Lüdecke & Schulz, 2008, p. 140

⁵ Cited from Lüdecke & Schulz, p. 137

coverage will be smaller, information that is made available is not displayed or used at all. This is mostly relevant where supraregional media is concerned, which select out of a larger amount of possible news and need to weigh these against one another. In summary, the media are partially attributed with tasks which they have no interest to complete.

Dr. Heiner Geißlers interpretation of the role of the media

During the mediation, Dr. Geißler kept coming back to certain keywords: "transparency", "trust", and "general public". He often stressed that "the conversations we are having here, are public."⁶

He argues that this new kind of publicity is required, because citizens no longer trust in politics, and therefore expect that decisions are made behind closed doors, and that information is withheld.⁷ To counteract this mistrust, it was necessary for the success of the mediation to make every single step transparent and public: The entire mediation was broadcast live on TV, on large-scale video displays for public viewing, and online.⁸

Dr. Geißler talked about the "modern media democracy, with internet, Facebook, blog and with the possibility for information to reach hundreds of thousands, or even millions of people, with just one mouse click." In this media democracy, "it is the task of politics to give reasons, and explain to the citizens all the decisions that are made, in every phase of the realization of a project."⁹ Especially for longer term projects like Stuttgart 21, political decisions "always and constantly need to be reasoned and explained."¹⁰

This means some kind of "modern enlightenment," as "men emerge from their 'not self-incurred minority' and are thus 'enabled to think for themselves at all times,'"¹¹ and can therefore judge facts for themselves. The mediation was therefore an "addition to the democratic constitution, (...) a project of direct citizens' democracy in a civil society."¹²

In times of media democracy, democracy itself can, according to Geißler, "no longer function as in the last century."¹³ The media support this constant enlightenment about individual steps,

⁶ Mediation transcript Stuttgart 21, 22.10.2010, 10:05-10:06

⁷ Mediation transcript Stuttgart 21, 22.10.2010, 10:15

⁸ Mediation transcript Stuttgart 21, 22.10.2010, 10:05

⁹ Mediation transcript Stuttgart 21, 22.10.2010, 10:11

¹⁰ Geißler, 2010

¹¹ Geißler, 2010

¹² Mediation transcript Stuttgart 21, 22.10.2010, 10:05

¹³ Geißler, 2010

“contrary to what usually happens in our bulletin-democracy, so that messages, news, are passed on to the citizens, practically from the top down. However, they have no possibility to verify all of this information.”¹⁴

This ability to verify is now available through the help of the media. During the mediation, arguments could be deduced and explained in context, rather than just single aspects being published in media statements. In Dr. Geißler opinion this is the most important task throughout the mediation.¹⁵ Without the collaboration of the TV stations this would not have been possible in his opinion.

To Dr. Geißler the media are an indispensable support in modern democracy. Also, one of their central tasks for him, is to report the information made transparent by politics to the citizens, so they are enabled to inform themselves, and based on this, form their own opinion. Most important to Dr. Geißler is that citizens can participate in the events directly through the media, instead of being served with filtered and edited information. Through the broadcast on TV or online they can watch the entire process and retrace the presented arguments in a dimension that was not available before. Only this is appropriate for the modern media democracy. The media are a tool of modern enlightenment and democracy.

Comparison & Conclusion

All sources, as well as Dr. Geißler, attribute the media with the task to support public participation by supplying information about planning projects to the citizens, so they can form an opinion. This is problematic, because there is no way to impose the media (in the sense of mass media) to actually fulfill this task. The media have an interest in doing so to some extent – as far as it serves their own purposes, increases their ratings or sales figures. But if a planning project does not meet their relevance criteria, and is not interesting enough for them to report about, then this reporting does not happen, and the task that is attributed to them, stays unfulfilled.

The public participation for Stuttgart 21 was certainly insufficient. There was no continuous information of the citizens about the current planning status, information was not proactively carried into the public by the persons responsible. Transparency was only established during the mediation and thereby much too late. The news coverage during the planning process was limited. However, the question must be asked whether a higher news coverage would have made a difference, because relevance criteria not only go for the media, but also for the recipients, the citizens. If they are not interested in a process, more news coverage will not change this either. The biggest headline is useless if no one is interested. In this respect, media and recipients mutually control themselves.

¹⁴ Geißler, 2010

¹⁵ Geißler, 2010

Before the start of the construction, neither the media nor the public had much interest in the project. It was abstract, the news value was low, so not even the 60,000 collected signatures caused a media response. The mistakes that were made in the public participation process, like strange contractual clauses or rising costs, which were revealed during the mediation – all of these facts on their own were not relevant enough. This changed with the start of the construction: suddenly there was a direct connection to the daily life of the citizens, and therefore a huge public interest. This increased the news value and jumped the boundary of the relevance criteria of the media. This leap was only possible because of this connection.

Politics cannot intervene here and stipulate the news coverage to the media if these do not want to – at least not without restriction of the freedom of the press. The public service broadcasting organizations are bound to their public commission to “fulfill the democratic, social and cultural requirements of society”,¹⁶ but they alone cannot achieve everything, and also work according to the same relevance criteria themselves, to decide on how they fill their limited broadcast time. So hope remains that the media realize and live up to the new expectations of them, as well as to the higher level of responsibilities they have for that reason.

What is new today – and one must agree with Dr. Geißler in this – is the new media. The internet allows for every media organization, every citizen, but also every responsible organ in government and administration, to supply information. The complete broadcast and public availability of all documents online throughout the mediation, was unique and unthinkable when the project first started. The continuous information about the project status, and the integration of citizens into this process, can now be improved and simplified through these new possibilities, and reach a wider recipient group with less effort and costs. Most importantly though, to make public participation successful, is not the support of the media, but the participation of the citizens. The media alone cannot mitigate what the politics miss. If public participation is not taken seriously by the persons responsible in parliaments, then the citizens will not take it seriously either. It is crucial for successful public participation that it is not seen and treated as an obligation, but that it is appreciated, and concerns and suggestions from citizens are treated in the same way. Politics need to supply information and need to be willing to let citizens participate in their decision – also and especially when these citizens have different priorities than the committee that makes the decisions.

¹⁶ RStV, §11, Abs. 1, Satz 1

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