

**Internet-based Communication:
Ideological Orientations and Canadian Party and Interest Group Strategies**

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Many observers, and particularly those with a passionate affinity to net-based information- and communication technologies (ICTs), regularly express their disappointment about the fact that most political parties and interest groups only take advantage of a rather narrow range of the broad technical communication possibilities that have been made available since the advent of the Internet. And indeed, already a cursory examination of political actors at the intermediary level reveals that a high degree of selectivity with regard to the adoption of ICT-applications offered to members, supporters and citizens seems to be at play. Moreover, significant differences can be observed between intermediary organisations in terms to their internal and external communication strategies.

The purpose of this paper is to contribute to the development of a better understanding of the factors which structure and guide the explicit and implicit decisions of intermediary organisations to take up certain ICTs and way they are applied. Of particular interest is the role of the fundamental ideological orientations and visions of democracy carried by the parties and interest groups. It will be argued that fundamental political values and ideological factors exert considerable influence on the organisations' decisions to take up, configure and implement the technological artefact of an ICT-application and the subsequent design of their net-based communication strategies.

Information and communication are at the core of political processes, and democracy can be viewed as a specific way of communication between and among the ruled and the rulers. It can be expected that the way political communication is organised is related to and has effects on the quality of democracy (Pal 1998: 106). Hence, it comes at no surprise that innovations in the field of ICT have frequently been accompanied by contentious debates about the effects of new communication technologies on politics and society at large. The same holds true for the most recent media revolution. The discourse on the political and democratic prospects of communication based on digital networks basically falls into optimistic and pessimistic positions. Moreover, both fundamental positions tend to succumb to technological fallacies of democratic theory (Kersting 2000: 24).

Theories which postulate the social construction of technological artefacts (Bijker 1995; Pinch/Bijker 1997; Sclve 1995; Sholle 2002) emphasise the high degree of "interpretative flexibility" which characterise the initial processes of attaching symbolic-semiotic meaning to emerging technologies before the artefacts receive their ultimate meaning in the processes of "stabilisation" and "closure" (Bijker 1995; Hoff 2000: 14f.; Degele 2002: 101). The large space available for interpretations strongly shaped by ideology and interests in the early phases of technological diffusion is reflected by the assessments of the new media's potential to powerfully transform politics, economics, culture and society. This is particularly

the case with regard to the ICT's impacts on democracy as the expected risks and chances associated with digital network communication in politics are shaped by the underlying normative concepts of democracy. As such, the debates about the contours of 'digital democracy' are normatively charged in at least two respects: On the one hand, the empirical evaluation of the comparatively young technology remains to be challenging due to the lack of sound empirical data, opening considerable leeway for normative speculations (Fisher/Wright 2001). On the other hand, any research in the area of democracy and democratic theory—descriptive as well as prescriptive approaches—is tied to the normative premises of the respective political-ideological camps (Schmidt 2000: 23). Thus, in order to better understand the broad range of political and democratic expectations associated with the new media technologies by different actors, it is useful to know which model of democracy is being aimed at because the expectations of the effects ICTs have on political communication are considerably determined by the implicit and explicit conceptualisations of technology, communication and democracy (Barber 1998: 585; Dijk/Hacker 2000: 209).

The paper consists of two main parts. In the first section, the internet-based communication strategies of eight Canadian parties and interest groups will be analysed. For that purpose, a classification model for the main communication patterns is introduced. In the second part, a heuristic model which systematically links the empirically identified patterns of political online-communication with basic models of democracy is developed. Finally, the results of the empirical analysis will be applied to the model.

Communication Strategies of Canadian Parties and Interest Groups

Intermediary organisations such as political parties and interest groups are predestined if the interplay between the application of ICTs and procedural and/or structural change are to be examined. Particularly because intermediaries are placed between social life worlds on the one hand and the centre of political decision-making on the other, they make important communication channels available and thus fulfil fundamental functions such as social integration and the articulation and aggregation of interests. Hence, the often diagnosed motivation and legitimacy crises in western democracies (Habermas 1977: 106; McGrew 1997; Skocpol/Fiorina 1999b; Norris 2002) can be directly observed in parties and interest groups. Consequently, the analysis of political intermediaries allows for interesting insights in the democratic potentials of ICTs.

In an attempt to develop a better understanding of the digital communication strategies of political intermediary organisations and the role specific contexts, different circumstances and rationales play, a broad range of cases for the empirical analysis was selected. The eight Canadian organisations differ with regard to

their potential to exert political influence, their ideological position, their social basis and their organisational structure. The following parties and interest groups were analysed:¹

- Canadian Reform Conservative Alliance (Canadian Alliance, CA)
- Liberal Party of Canada
- New Democratic Party (NDP)

- Campaign Life Coalition (CLC)
- National Automobile, Aerospace, Transportation and General Workers Union of Canada (Canadian Auto Workers, CAW)
- Canadian Civil Liberties Association (CCLA)
- Canadian Federation of Independent Business (CFIB)
- Council of Canadians

Modes of Communication

Political intermediaries may choose from a large number of different ICT-applications. Apart from adopting a specific mix of applications for their communication purposes, the parties and interest groups can use these technologies to reach certain objectives and thereby apply different degrees of sophistication and complexity. In order to develop a better understanding of these selection processes and the strategic decisions, it is important to contextualise the ICT-applications used by the organisations. Thus far, many empirical studies on the use of internet-based applications for political communication have followed a rather narrow approach by focusing on the ‘front-end’ of the publicly accessible WWW. As a result, these studies operationalised the patterns of technology adoption by using straight-forward indicators such as the existence or non-existence of certain web-based features.² However, in order to grasp the underlying rationale, strategy and the institutional connectivity of the application patterns, a deeper and multifaceted approach seems more appropriate.

To this end, a classification of main the patterns of information transmission will be applied. This concept, which was developed by the communication scientists Bordewijk and Kaam (1982) and modified by others (Rafaeli 1988; Williams et

¹ The empirical analysis was carried out between September 2002 and April 2004. Apart from using qualitative methods for the website content analyses, 44 interviews (mostly face-to-face) with representatives of the selected organisations were conducted. The information base was complemented with internal documents provided by the organisations. The detailed results of the case studies are published in Lindner (2007).

² For instance, a common indicator is the availability of an online contact form (cf. Norris 2003: 27ff.).

al. 1988; Jensen 2002; van Selm et al. 2002), is based on a qualitative hierarchy of four main patterns of information transmission. With this classification, a very broad range of ICT-applications can be assessed with regard to their degree of interactivity as well as to the extent to which the communication process is being controlled by the participants.

The four main patterns of information transmission are defined as follows:³

- *Allocution* is a one-directional pattern of information transmission distributed by a central sender. This centre controls the disseminated information in terms of content, time, speed and carrier technology. In the area of digital network technologies, static information supplied on websites fall into this category.
- *Consultation* is a transmission pattern characterised by information which is centrally produced and controlled. However, the decisions about information selection, the time of its retrieval and the form of its utilisation are chiefly in the hands of the local participants.
- *Registration* is characterised by the collection, processing and storage of information by a centre; the information however, is made available by the local participants. The centre controls the issue area, the timeframe, and the carrier technology, whereas the local participants decide which kind of information—if at all—may be registered. Conventional manifestations of this pattern are questionnaires, ballots or observations. Digital networks offer numerous applications to register information such as online-voting, online-membership forms or surveillance systems.
- *Conversation* (or *dialogue*) is defined as a communication pattern in which both the generation of information and its distribution are largely controlled by the decentred units. Content, time and speed of the information exchanges are largely designated by the local participants, while the carrier technology is usually chosen by a central entity. Traditional examples of conversation are public gatherings and debates as well as variants of informal information exchanges. The digital equivalents are online discussion groups, bulletin board systems, internet relay chats or groupware systems.

Theoretically, all four patterns allow for information exchanges in the vertical and the horizontal dimension. Nonetheless, allocution, consultation and registration mainly appear in the vertical dimension of communication, whereas conversation predominantly features horizontal information flows. An example for conversation in the vertical communication dimension could be a debate between representatives of government and members of civil society. Likewise, in some cases the patterns of allocution, consultation and registration can be performed horizontally. However, these instances seem to be rather uncommon.

³ Based on Jensen (1999), van Dijk (2000: 45ff.) and van Selm et al. (2002: 192f.).

This classification scheme can assist in the analysis of the parties' and interest groups' ICT-applications because the configuration of the communication patterns each case study reveals delivers an indication of an intermediary organisation's approach and strategy to communication. Additional analytical insights can be gained by comparing the respective shares of the four patterns and the relative strength of vertical and horizontal information exchanges in different organisations.

With regard to the four main patterns of information transmission, the empirical analysis of eight intermediary organisations revealed the following:

(1) The information transmission pattern *allocation*—as to be expected given the comparatively low costs associated with this pattern—overwhelmingly dominated the information and communication activities of all eight cases. Significant differences between the organisations could be observed with regard to the type and scope of information offered to the users. Generally, the political parties presented rather shallow policy-related information; substantial background information was hard to find. Only the NDP made available substantial documents at least in a few selected policy areas. The general observation of superficial information offerings among the political parties also applied to the CCLA and the CFIB. Campaign Life Coalition, CAW and Council of Canadians, however, presented comparatively large amounts of substantial policy-related information.

(2) With regard to the transmission pattern *consultation*, only minor variations between the eight cases could be observed. Channels to establish contact with representatives of the organisations either by web-interface or email were existent in all cases; however, in most organisations, users could only reach staff members. Exceptions were observed the CAW and the CA. In both organisations users' messages were received by high-level representatives.

(3) From the perspective of democratic theory, the transmission pattern *registration* covers both rather simple and sophisticated applications. The possibility to become a member of an organisation online was offered by all cases except the CAW. The demand for this service was most pronounced among the three parties, whereas traditional offline recruitment channels dominated among the five interest groups. An explanation for the considerable difference might be the comparatively ephemeral and short-lived nature of Canadian party membership and its instrumental character during leadership contests.

The information traffic pattern *registration* can also be used to facilitate decision-making processes. Most of the organisations covered in this analysis refrained from offering applications to this end. The CA occasionally used non-binding online polls as an element of the party's 'market research'. Generally, the Alliance was strongly in favour of combining plebiscitary procedures with ICTs, but due to

massive internal problems during the review period, the party had to refrain from seriously implementing any of these ambitious plans:

But the party web site really ought to have some kind of voting. The members would love that. And I have no doubt that when we have our caucus web site, we will have some kind of voting possibilities [and] give the people a chance to register their views. The reason why this has not been taken up has to do with the internal problems the party was grappling with during the last few years. (Interview CA, Leader of the Opposition Office 2002)

The CFIB offered its members to participate online in the periodic membership 'ballots'. The only legally binding online vote was carried out by the NDP during the leadership race of January 2003. Other online participation channels were made available as well. With the exceptions of the Liberals and the CFIB, all organisations offered to sign online petitions to their members and supporters. However, the online participation rates were consistently and by far lower than the conventional petitions offered simultaneously. Attempts to mobilise supporters to participate in voluntary political activities were only undertaken by the Liberal Party and the NDP. The Liberals' participation offers were limited to the short campaign periods, similarly as the NDP's e-campaigners. In addition, the New Democrats also actively promoted their thematic oriented advocacy teams on the party's website.

(4) The empirical analysis of the organisations' communication patterns clearly showed that the technological opportunities to offer and facilitate *dialogues* based on equal footing between the participants was hardly ever realised. For instance, the bulk of email-based information exchanges both within the organisations as well as with external partners primarily fulfilled administrative and coordination functions. The comparatively infrequent communications dealing explicitly with policy issues were usually dealt with in highly formalised procedures involving specialised communication departments. Instead of open policy-dialogues which may develop over several sequences of exchange, the official communications were mostly based on standardised responses. Nevertheless, incoming emails do have the potential to indirectly influence the organisations' policy-debates and decision-making processes. If the statements dealing with a particular issue reach a sufficient volume, they become indicators for the opinions and attitudes of an organisation's social base or constituency:

[T]he PMO regularly asks us how many emails we receive on certain issues. Like say on the Kyoto Protocol. So they ask what kind of responses we are getting. It is funny, on that issue we are getting about 45 to 55 per cent against Kyoto. And that is quite amazing, because when you read the newspapers, you get the impression of at least 90 per cent opposing the issue. (Interview Liberal Party of Canada, Communication Department 2002)

The three political parties and to some extent the CAW and the Council of Canadians provided interesting examples for the pattern *conversation* in the horizontal communication dimension. A number of examples suggest that the specific features of digital ICTs can be supportive in the processes of self-organising groups within organisations. The communication technologies enabled like-minded members, which had previously been dispersed, to efficiently connect and develop common policies and strategies in order to influence the organisation's decision-making processes:

I remember 10-15 years ago, you would talk to a few riding presidents that you knew personally. Today, if I had an issue that I wanted to make some statement – which I have – I have set up my own mailing list on my computer of all the riding presidents in Ontario. So I can immediately say to them: 'I'm not happy with this'. And I think that this has had a tremendous impact on LPCO over the last couple of years. [...] So presidents now have the ability to communicate quickly with other presidents to build support, to alert. [...] We are now able to strategise, communicate, someone would say 'this is what we hear, this is what they will lay on us at our meeting', and we could therefore strategise around that, and do it quickly and do it right up to the last minute before going off to the meeting. (Interview Liberal Party of Canada, Constituency Association Ottawa-Vanier 2003)

The cases of the Liberals and the New Democrats also underline the importance of intermediate organisational structures between head quarters and membership as additional vantage points for the processes of interest articulation. In those parties and interest groups with a fairly low degree of organisational and functional differentiation, such as the CA, for instance, similar examples of self-organising sub-groups were not observed.

ICT-applications such as discussion boards, list serves or chats, which are bound to be used for *conversation*, have been made available quite infrequently during the period of analysis. Within the political parties, only the NDP offered the discussion forum *mouseland*; however, this internal discussion group did not seem to unfold any broader impact on the party's policy debates. CAW and Council of Canadians were also offered a number of list serves to their members and supporters, but their function was primarily to coordinate daily business. Nevertheless, both interest groups started to plan and implement new ICT-systems with the objective to improve the internal network and better integrate the local associations. One of the main goals of the CAW and the Council was to facilitate internal debates by increasing the participation of the rank and file members:

We want to [...] build a place where the chapter activists can begin to develop collective strategy and develop a sense of being part of a broader community. Our chapter activists never really get much opportunity to inter-

connect. We have regional meetings where they gather, we have the general meeting once a year, but not everyone can go to that, so we are using the intranet as a means to build a chapter-activists-only-area. [...] Once we get that up and going, the intention is to use that feature for other people as well – for staff, for instance. (Interview Council of Canadians, National Office 2003)

Interestingly, particularly the Council invested considerable effort into designing an ICT-architecture with the intention to countervail oligarchic tendencies within the organisation.

Despite the obvious similarities between the eight case studies, particularly the dominance of the information traffic pattern *allocution* and the overall reluctance to offer more ICT-applications that could potentially contribute to feed additional views and perspectives into internal policy debates and facilitate deliberation, noteworthy differences between the organisations emerged with regard to their communication strategies. On a higher level of abstraction, these differences particularly come into view with respect to the relative importance of vertical and horizontal communication activities. The Alliance, the CFIB and to a lesser extent the Campaign Life Coalition focused nearly exclusively on direct, top-down communication between headquarters and the individual members. Horizontal information exchanges were not offered at all or to a negligible extent. The Liberals were also predominantly occupied with communication along the vertical axis, but due to the party's stronger organisational differentiation, autonomous horizontal communication was observed as well. Judging from the communication flows in the CCLA, one could add this organisation to the group mainly focusing on the vertical communication dimension as well. However, because the CCLA invested very little resources in its communication strategy, it seems justified to view this organisation as a deviating case. On the other side of this continuum, the CAW, the Council of Canadians and, not quite as obvious, the NDP were engaged in activities intended to revitalise and strengthen the internal life of their organisations. Apart from providing more substantial policy information, these groups also sought to encourage horizontal information exchange, debate and collective action among their members.

In the following section, the relationship between communication patterns and the democratic views held by political actors will be examined.

Models of Democracy and Modes of Communication

The upsurge of internet-based communication during the 1990s generated an impressive amount of literature dealing with the potential of the new media for democratic politics. Nevertheless, the amplified productivity in the field of 'digital democracy', which brought about both bright and dark predictions of a future

transformed by ICTs, did not succeed in establishing a sound and discrete conceptual status within general democratic theory (Lindner 2004: 394). At first sight this might be surprising given the at least partly new labels such as *electronic democracy*, *teledemocracy* or *cyberdemocracy* which had been introduced into the debate.⁴ However, from a theoretical point of view the different variants of ‘digital democracy’ do not represent distinct and coherent types, and are thus better characterised as hybrids (Schmalz-Bruns 2001: 110). Hence, a systematic analysis of the competing models of digital democracy is difficult because the central features of the different concepts tend to cut across the conventional classification criteria applied in democratic theory.

Thus, if one intends to develop a better understanding of the central ideological underpinnings of the different views and objectives of the democratic potentials of ICTs, drawing on well established typologies of democratic theory seems to be a more suitable approach than applying conceptual hybrids.

Political science has developed numerous typologies of normative theories of democracy. Among the most familiar are David Held’s (1996) differentiation of nine main models of democracy or C.B. Macpherson’s (1983) confrontation of three variants of the liberal model with the concept of participatory democracy. Others follow rather historic-descriptive than philosophical approaches and relate different models of democracy to different historical eras (Schmidt 2000). However, if historical contexts and constitutional developments are set aside in favour of a higher level of abstraction, the broad array of normative views of democracy can be traced back to three main models of democracy: the liberal, the republican and the deliberative model (Habermas 1992; Held 1996: 157-291; Schultze 2004b: 125).⁵ The three models are based on different understandings of the social condition, different ethical norms, different ideas with regard to the preferred method of creating legitimacy and the ideal balance of individualism and collectivism.

Heuristic Model

In order to make the concepts of digital democracy more accessible for empirical analysis, an approach is needed that fulfils at least three conditions: (1) the level of abstraction should reach a medium range in order to be applicable in other—

4 For overviews over the different models of ‘digital democracy’ see for instance Ferdinand (2000), Hacker (1996), Hacker/van Dijk (2000), Kamarck/Nye (2002) or Siedschlag (2003).

5 The models will not be portrayed in this paper as it can be assumed that their basic elements and fundamental principles are generally known to the readers. Nonetheless, it should be noted that the definitions and labels of the models are not coherently applied in the literature. Particularly in the Anglo-American context, the republican model is often called participatory (cf. Hagen 1997; Cunningham 2002), communitarian (cf. Dahlberg 2001b) or plebiscitary (cf. Barber 1998).

not only US-American—institutional and socio-political contexts, (2) the competing theoretical objectives of digital democracy as well as the numerous empirical application patterns of political communication based on ICTs should be reflected, and, closely related, (3) the criteria of distinction should allow for a connection between the ideal type of democracy and the specific elements of internet-based communication.

Drawing on Habermas (1992), van Dijk (2000) and Hoff et al. (2000b), the following two-dimensional heuristic model was developed in order to meet these three criteria:

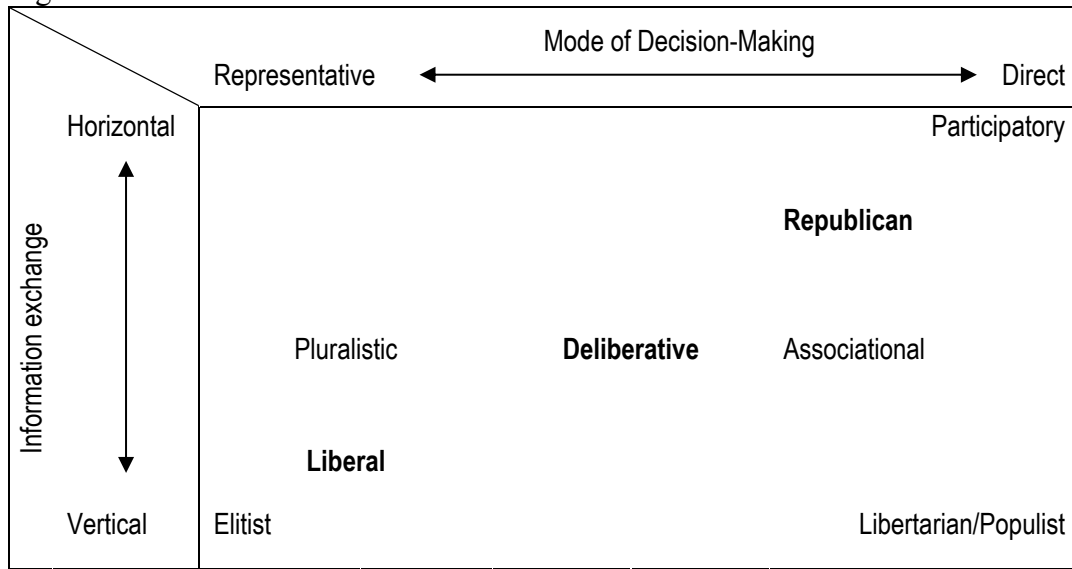
The different concepts of democracy are mapped on a two-dimensional space. One dimension differentiates between different modes of democratic decision-making: representative versus direct decision-making procedures. This dimension reflects the degree of direct or representative decision-making aimed at by the different concepts of digital democracy. The other dimension embraces two elements concurrently. Firstly, the chief aim of democratic governance is indicated. On this continuum, the objectives of efficient versus inclusive decision-making are represented. Secondly, the prevailing mode of information exchange—vertical versus horizontal communication—is indicated. From a communications perspective, these two elements are closely related as efficient governance tends to emphasise information exchanges in the vertical dimension, whereas decision-making procedures intending to reach a high degree of inclusiveness put particular weight on horizontal information exchanges. Thus, within this model, the central objectives of democratic governance on the one side and ICT's broad range of communicative capacities on the other can be merged into a joint analytical dimension. The concurrence of these two elements helps to systematically link and eventually operationalise the empirically identified patterns of political online-communication with the respective democratic models (see Figure 1).

The foundation of the different types of democracy displayed in Figure 1 is the three main models of democracy as they had been defined by Habermas (1992). With regard to the basic normative alignments, every concept of digital democracy is predominantly rooted in one of these three main models. Other related models or variants such as pluralist, elitist, libertarian or participatory democracy can be grouped around these three models according to their position with regard to the preferred mode of decision-making and the objective of democratic governance.

The main objective of the heuristic model is to provide orientation in the process of the empirical analysis of ICT application patterns in the realm of political communication. The dominance of a particular mode of information exchange should be indicative for underlying democratic values of an organisation offering these applications. For instance, if a political party or interest group uses ICTs for plebiscitary decision-making and aims to improve the information exchange among its members and followers, it can be assumed that the organisation is following a participatory model of democracy. And if an organisation puts special emphasis

on plebiscitary elements but combines them with ICT-applications designed to facilitate information exchanges in the vertical dimension (or between the organisation's elite on the one side and the rank-and-file on the other), an individualistic or libertarian model of democracy seems most likely.

Figure 1: Democratic Orientation and Communication Patterns



If the results of the empirical analysis of the intermediary organisations' communication patterns are applied to the heuristic model, the underlying assumption of a strong positive relationship between fundamental political values—represented by a favoured model of democracy—and specific communication patterns is largely confirmed. This can be illustrated with some examples: The CA, known for its affinity to right-wing populism and plebiscitary decision-making (Barney/Laycock 1999; Laycock 2002), primarily offered ICT-applications to its members and supporters in the vertical communication dimension. Arguably, one of the objectives of the party's communication strategy was to strengthen the hierarchy's influence and control within the party. Similarly, the CFIB, following an organisational model of a company rather than that of an interest group, concentrated its communication efforts within the vertical dimension. In terms of the small business association's favoured type of democracy, a strong tendency towards the elitist model can be assumed (Lindner 2007: 302ff.). In contrast, the democratic values championed by the CAW, the NDP and the Council of Canadians are located in the deliberative and republican camps (cf. Gindin 1995; Campbell/Christian 1996: 128ff.; Lindner 2007: 328ff.). Accordingly, within the communication strategies of these organisations, horizontal forms of communication played a significant role.

Conclusions

The result of the initial empirical test suggests that the underlying assumptions of the heuristic model, which was presented in this essay, are correct. The positive relationship between a preferred democratic model and a certain communication pattern was clearly confirmed by the case studies which had been selected for this analysis. These findings support the notion that ideological orientations are an important factor in the processes of adopting and setting up communication technologies for political purposes. Of course, this is not to deny other decisive factors such as interests, the availability of resources, path dependencies and political competition which shape the communication strategies ICT-application patterns of political intermediaries as well. By incorporating the ideological-normative dimension, however, the likelihood of technological determinism with regard to future adoption processes can be reduced.

Further research will be needed in order to examine whether and to what extent the observed linkage between democratic values and ICT-application patterns can be verified for other political and cultural contexts. Moreover, the model currently suffers from several theoretical “blind spots”. The challenge is to develop a better theoretical understanding of the causalities between ideology, the process of ICT-adoption by collective actors and specific communication patterns.

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