Switzerland on the Internet: An overview of diffusion, usage, concerns and democratic implications

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ABSTRACT

This article gives multifaceted insights into the current status of Internet use in Switzerland and the related democratic implications. It shows the state of Internet diffusion, digital gaps and the usage patterns of Internet applications. It analyzes people's trust in Internet content and the concerns related to using the Internet. Finally, it explores the extent of political participation online and citizens' views on digital democratization. The results derive from the World Internet Project – Switzerland (WIP-CH), a representative national academic survey embedded in the wider framework of the World Internet Project (WIP).

The diffusion of technological innovations such as the Internet is generally accompanied by visions and expectations of social progress and democratization. Conceptions such as electronic democracy, digital democracy and network democracy refer to this potential of the Internet and attendant applications for democracy, e.g., by promising to increase the transparency of the political process, enhance the direct involvement and citizens' participation or improve the quality of opinion formation by opening new channels for information and deliberation (Saurwein, Just, Latzer, & Metreveli, 2013; Trechsel, Kies, Mendez, & Schmitter, 2003). In this context it is often argued that democracy could be promoted and strengthened by a broad diffusion of new information and communication technologies (ICTs) and by a proficient and skilled handling of its applications. This alone would provide new opportunities for political engagement and public debate, in essence it would create an easily accessible virtual common public sphere (Giannakoulopoulos, Oikonomou, Oikonomidou, & Meimaris, 2012; Neumayer & Raffl, 2008). Because of its long-standing concern with questions of the public sphere and with how the media fulfill important functions for society (e.g., political or democratic functions) communication science has increasingly moved its research interest to the Internet in order to uncover its feasibility for political participation and for assessing related democratic implications (Hacker & van Dijk, 2000; Weare, 2002). Many empirical examples underline the enabling potential of the Internet to enhance the quality of democracy, e.g., the role of social media for citizen empowerment in the "Arab Spring" (Khondker, 2011; Tufekci & Wilson, 2012). Dutton (2007, p. 12) argues that the Internet crucially enables individuals to network in new ways that reconfigure and enhance their communicative power – as a type of "Fifth Estate". Chadwick (2008) highlights the low threshold for co-production behavior characteristic of Web 2.0, which provides real new value in online consultation and public policymaking. Despite such promising conditions, visions and examples, several scholars point out that actual progress in exploiting the existing potential for democratization has so far not matched the high expectations. As Van Dijk (2009) puts it:

> Currently, scarcely any influence of e-Participation projects or experiments on institutional policy and politics can be observed. Few decisions of governments, political representatives and civil servants have changed on account of the input of citizens in e-Participation. Decision makers doubt the representativeness, surplus value and quality of the input of the new channels. (p. 36)

Optimistic views on the positive impact of the Internet somehow unreflectively consider democratization and political participation to be a direct result of the availability of technology as, for instance, widely proclaimed during the recent Facebook and Twitter "revolutions" of the "Arab Spring". Technology, however, is only an enabler, an opportunity structure (Dolata & Werle, 2007, p. 20) that allows for new socially created possibilities of action. In practice this means that several factors influence the realization of democratic expectations and visions, and that an overall nation-by-nation assessment of these factors is crucial for a better understanding of the real impact of the Internet on democracy.

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These factors include the specifics of diffusion and usage of the Internet by way of access disparities and usage differences, which indicate the extent of the first- and second-level digital divide as well as the attitudes that people show toward the Internet and its use, such as their level of trust in Internet content or their views and expectations on its potential for democratization.

Among the barriers likely to inhibit the democratic potential of the Internet is the so-called digital divide, which creates inequalities by differentiated access to the Internet and differentiated use of online applications and content (Papacharissi, 2002). If citizens do not have Internet access and cannot contribute to public-opinion formation, the democratic criterion of equal opportunities for public expression is not fulfilled (Habermas, 1994). Since even in advanced economies not everyone has an Internet connection, sections of society are excluded from the virtual public sphere. Moreover, even citizens who have an Internet connection still remain unequal in their Internet usage skills, the technical quality of access, the applications they use and content they access. These inequalities on the usage level are referred to as the problem of a second-level digital divide (DiMaggio, Hargittai, Celeste, & Shafer, 2004; Hargittai, 2002). It is argued that sophisticated Internet use serves the expression and enforcement of the interests of qualified users while lower qualification hampers active engagement as well as expression of interests and influence.

In order to understand whether the Internet meets the high expectations attributed to it, an in-depth assessment of Internet access and usage data is necessary. Additionally, it is essential to explore peoples' opinions, expectations and concerns regarding the impact of the Internet on democracy. Only by putting all of these relevant aspects in a common perspective research can we assess the contribution of the Internet for democracy and develop a deeper understanding of the reasons for online political engagement or exclusion. Problems of exclusion and the digital divide are discussed in many countries worldwide, but Switzerland seems of special interest for research on questions regarding the impact of the Internet on democracy. The unique political system in Switzerland, with strong elements of direct democracy, builds on more frequent active involvement of the citizens in the decision-making process than is the case in countries with much stronger reliance representative models of democracy (e.g., Morris, 2000). Can technologies such as the Internet further promote people's participation and empowerment? What are the deficits displayed in divides on the levels of access and usage? How do Swiss citizens use the Internet for political participation? How do people assess the impact of the Internet on citizens' engagement and empowerment in politics?

In order to answer these questions this article investigates issues at the intersection of Internet diffusion and use as well as politics and democracy. It starts by giving comprehensive insights into the current status of Internet use in Switzerland. It shows that the state of Internet diffusion is high but that some significant socio-demographic digital gaps remain. It identifies the usage patterns of various Internet applications for digital information and recreation, e-commerce, digital socializing and content production on the Internet that indicate where second-level digital divide issues are likely to emerge. The article then continues to explore the people's trust in Internet content, the risks of being online and the concerns of the Swiss population related to using the Internet that have an impact on the general attitude of how people behave online. Finally, the last section of the article shows the extent of online political participation, attitudes toward freedom of speech online, and the citizens' view on digital democratization.

The results derive from the World Internet Project – Switzerland (WIP-CH), a representative national academic survey conducted for the first time in 2011 (Latzer, Just, Metreveli, & Saurwein, 2012a, 2012b, 2012c, 2012d). The survey is based on 1104

computer-assisted telephone interviews (CATI). The data is representative of the whole Swiss population by gender, age (14 years and above) and the three language regions. The sample has a confidence level of 95%, with a confidence interval of ±2.95%. The interviews were conducted between May and June of 2011. The advantage of the CATI method vis-à-vis exclusive online surveys is that it allows for a better representation of the population and also captures non- and ex-users.

The WIP-CH is embedded in the wider framework of the Word Internet Project (WIP), one of the leading international, collaborative academic Internet research projects. Since 1999 the WIP has investigated Internet use and its implications for societies and economies in more than 30 countries worldwide, based on a standardized questionnaire that is expandable on a country-by-country basis. For the 2011 Swiss survey, questions regarding Internet and politics, political participation and trust, among other things, were added, which in part are also asked in other WIP member countries. Accordingly, this paper also takes advantage of the data provided in this global collaborative research network. In order to put Swiss results into an international context, recent data from other WIP partner countries serve as points of reference for cross-national comparisons. International data derive from the World Internet Project International Reports (Cole et al., 2010, 2012) and from the recent WIP country reports conducted in Sweden (Findahl, 2011), New Zealand (Smith, Gibson, Crothers, Billot, & Bell, 2011), the United Kingdom (Dutton & Blank, 2011; Dutton, Helsper, & Gerber, 2009), Poland (Toczyski, Kustra, Rzeźnik, & Gerszewska, 2011) and the USA (Cole et al., 2011).

1. High Internet diffusion but no end to digital gaps

During the last two decades the Internet has seen a massive growth. The number of people using it has risen constantly and the impacts of Internet diffusion are evident in many sectors. Statistics on Internet diffusion in societies and economies, data on the availability of broadband connections, and numbers on the use of key Internet applications have become important indicators for understanding the preconditions for countries to exploit the social, economic and political opportunities that the Internet offers. In many Internet statistics, such as the ICT Development Index (ITU), the Networked Readiness Index (WEF) and the Digital Economy Rankings (EIU), north European countries, especially Sweden, Norway, Denmark and Iceland, often score best, along with the Netherlands and some well-developed Asian countries. Today, in some of these countries around nine out of ten people already have access to the Internet.

Digital democratization is a process that depends on support by the political system, citizens and technology. On the part of citizens it depends, among other things, on access to the Internet and readiness for active political participation. A look at these factors in Switzerland reveals that the basic conditions for digital democratization are good, due to high Internet penetration. There are, however, some noteworthy obstacles to full development.

In Switzerland, more than three-quarters (77%) of the population (14+) were using the Internet in 2011. With this *Internet penetration* rate Switzerland belongs to the upper third of countries when compared internationally, but it is not at the forefront. According to comparative data provided by the World Internet Project, Internet penetration is higher in Sweden (88%), New Zealand (86%) and in the USA (82%), for example. Britain (73%) and Poland (62%) rank behind Switzerland. On average, Swiss Internet users have been online for 10.5 years and the greatest diffusion took place around the turn of the millennium.

The penetration of private Internet connections in Switzerland is high. 97% of the Internet users access the Internet at home. 43%